

*Mrs Mop Thinks Some
More*

or

*'I Couldn't Stay Away'
(Mrs Mop)*

by

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Mrs Mop Thinks Some More

INTRODUCTION

When I'd finished the three books of Mrs Mop I dusted off metaphoric hands and said 'that's that' but Mrs Mop, it seems, is like those Tibetan thought forms which refuse to go away. Only this morning she came and bothered me while I was lying peacefully in bed, debating on whether to get up now or give myself another twenty minutes, supine.

Possibly she sees that as her real role in life, to annoy me when I don't want to think about weighty issues. To be like those energetic small children who come and bounce on their parents' bed just when said parents are enjoying the thought that it is a holiday and they don't have to get up yet. They groan and say 'is it really seven o'clock' and the kids, who haven't learnt to tell the time let alone the significance of time in human lives, point to the sun shining and the birds singing and then they say they are hungry.

Of course I am referring to the children who expect to be given breakfast. I don't know if the children who don't get breakfast at home have developed a fatalistic attitude to the whole idea of breakfast; that you get up and you have a glass of water and that's it—until you get to school and some kind group has realized that there are a lot of hopeless parents out there who shouldn't be 'blessed' with children and therefore it is the responsibility of the school to front up with flavoured milk and toast and a piece of fruit. I always wonder how the kids who have to get a school breakfast feel when they think about the kids who accept breakfast at home as the natural way of things. Are schools now divided into the haves and have-nots and it all revolves around breakfast?

Mark Latham has been criticizing boarding schools, saying they should be done away with, but they do have one advantage: there, every child sits down to a thorough and well-supervised breakfast.

Anyway, Mrs Mop has more to talk about than breakfast so I'll hand over to her.

2018.

Mrs Mop Thinks Some More

CHANGE THE DATE: As Australia Day creeps into sight the country divides into those who want a more appropriate date for our national day and those who think a long weekend in January is a must. (Of course they may also be thinking of Phillip unloading filthy vermin-ridden syphilitic prisoners on to other people's pristine land and thinking this is something we should all celebrate—even though if anyone suggested putting same prisoners into their suburban backyard they would be yelling for the police to come around and would be referring to it as a 'home invasion').

Mark Latham (and there was a time when I thought he was a decent sensible bloke) has come up with the silly claim that those who want to Change The Date are a lot of political correctness wowsers gone mad. I feel sorry for Aboriginal people who find themselves caught in the middle. (I am never sure when people casually talk of PC whether they mean Personal Computer, Political Correctness, Police Constable, Parish Council ... or whether they might mean something's a bit piecey ... you know, we haven't yet managed to put all the pieces together and make a unified whole ...)

But the simple fact is that there is no point in having a National Day unless that day reflects the best of the nation and is a day everyone feels happy and comfortable with. Nobody made anything of it when I was a child, (and it was often referred to as Founders Day) probably because it usually fell in the school holidays anyway so unless your parents were passionate about it the kids didn't even hear it mentioned. And when I was a little kiddie we didn't have a radio and got a newspaper once a week so even if the rest of the nation was making a big thing of it we never knew ... it was very restful ...

I have seen people suggesting we have Australia Week. Start it on Sorry Day, go through the week with various functions and get-togethers and end with a day on which people pledge their allegiance, have a barbecue, make speeches. I think this is a good idea. But as it falls in the cooler weather I am sure people will want to keep their day when they can go out and add to the melanoma statistics. It really depends what we want from a National Day or even a National Week.

Personally speaking I don't want anything. I live in Australia every day of my life. I just want us all to care for it and stop seeing it merely as a place to cut and gouge and ship off to Asia.

‘A SHITHOLE PLACE’: So Mr Trump is in trouble. Again. This time for calling Haiti and several countries in Africa ‘shithole’ places. This, it seems, is racist rather than vulgar. Is it?

If Haiti was paradise on earth its people would not flee, often on leaky boats, in their hundreds of thousands. Haiti shares a border with the Dominican Republic and the Republic, apparently, keeps soldiers along the border, not to keep their own people from fleeing into Haiti but to stop Haitians fleeing into the Dominican Republic. And given that the Dominican Republic is not a model of enlightened democracy this seems to say something about Haiti.

I haven’t heard which African countries he singled out. But you had the Central African Republic where its self-styled leader Emperor Bokassa boasted of eating children. That might be one definition of a shithole place. Rwanda was a place of attempted genocide and still bears those deep scars. That could be another definition of a shithole place. Other nations, Somalia, Congo, Nigeria, are not exactly places to inspire as textbook examples of freedom and openness and safety for all their citizens. I suppose it depends on the exact definition of ‘shithole’.

I personally do not expect to hear public figures using bad language but as it is so common I suppose I just have to grin and wear it. The days when public figures dressed their criticisms up in flowery periods or elaborate euphemisms seem to be gone for good.

But my real issue with the whole furore is that it is distracting us from the huge issues facing us. Climate change. Indebtedness so enormous I am surprised any banker can sleep at night. Resource depletion. Overpopulation. Our reliance on little bits of metal skimming round in space. But the world is convulsed because of an infelicitous word. If he’d said rather prissily ‘there are some countries which don’t seem to be respecting human rights and don’t believe in fairness’ would people have got in a tizz? No. But he used an unpleasant word to refer to people’s dearly-beloved countries, the countries they can’t wait to leave, and so he is a racist. Now, I am sure Donald Trump is a racist but then I have never met anyone, myself included, who isn’t a racist.

FIRES: The California wildfires were immediately attributed to climate change, by some people, and I am sure global warming played a part. But all kinds of other things played a different part. Clearing of vegetation, taking too much underground water, lack of preparedness, lack of warning, underfunding of fire brigades, human stupidity if not venality. And when the rain came down people said there were no roots to hold the hillsides. Had they removed all the large trees? Had people built on steep slopes which were always a disaster waiting to happen (remembering that California is an earthquake zone), had people put down too

much concrete and bitumen which encouraged fast run-off, did people not get sufficient warning. When Mount Wellington/Kunanyi was crisped in the 1967 bushfires the dead trees were left in place so their roots would help keep the steep slopes stable. Did California rush to remove the unsightly sight of black trunks and charcoal stumps?

And people go on being irresponsible. They leave broken bottles to act as magnifying glasses. They hoj cigarettes. They are careless with barbecues and bonfires and burn-offs. Anyone would think they wanted to burn their houses and pets and all the rest. And then there are the arsonists and pyromaniacs.

But the world *is* getting warmer and if we don't like that simple fact then we are all going to have to live much more simply, not simply point the finger at coal miners and Trump clones and say 'tut tut'.

THE SYDNEY TRAIN STRIKE: I tend to be sympathetic to people striking, on the grounds that a more powerful entity is usually not listening. And that more powerful entity is usually run by people who are extremely well paid to run it and don't have to get their hands dirty. But I don't honestly know what a Sydney train driver earns or what kind of conditions he or she works under or whether their rostering system is unfair.

But as I watched people making various points with varying degrees of passion it struck me that there is now a third player in the room. The environment. This is harder to portray. But in the push to get better public transport with more people using it and fewer cars on the roads we have put a different expectation into the equation. Who is going to give up their car if they feel that the public transport network may at any moment 'grind to a halt', leaving them stranded.

A different dilemma is starting to grow around the date of Australia Day. Years ago it came down to whether our National Day should celebrate the invasion and conquest of one people by another people. But now as I hear people being told to stay indoors and drink lots of water on the 26th it strikes me that very soon it will become an untenable date simply because no government should be seen as presiding over wholesale heatstroke.

Australia Day has always been presented as a day to be outdoors. If nothing else the geeks can leave their screens behind on this one day of the year and go to the beach or light the barbecue. But if there is a total fire ban they cannot fire up the barbie and if people are being warned to stay indoors that rather puts the kybosh on a day at the beach.

THAT DANGER IN CYBERSPACE: When a 14-year-old girl took her life at a boarding school in Toowoomba apparently because of relentless on-line bullying the reaction was an immediate call to police cyberspace more closely. This is understandable. But I think it is mistaken. Not that there isn't a lot wrong with cyberspace but because we need to be honest and admit we cannot adequately police cyberspace. No one can. New accounts are set up daily. Millions of words and images swirl. People hide behind all kinds of names and identities. Criminals may be next door, as may bullies, but equally they may be in Bulgaria or Japan or Canada.

Children far from home may be lonely and homesick. This can be as powerful a reason for depression as bullying.

Children who have tasted fame at a very young age may have difficulty coping as just 'one of the crowd' after a lot of attention. It is hard to go back to being just a schoolkid when you've been posted on ads all around the country.

And I cannot help wondering how kids can do their schoolwork, their homework, their sport, their games and duties, if they are so constantly on-line that the bullying is 'relentless'.

And where were the people who had a duty of care as substitute parents or guardians? Had they noticed nothing? Were there no friends to notice anything? Was she an extremely secretive girl? Or were there other things going on in her cliques and classes we don't know about?

But no matter how many questions I might ask, and someone might answer in one form or another, I think we have to be honest and tell our children that there is no absolute way that society can protect them from all bullying. Rather we need to help our children understand that bullies are really weak ineffectual people with deep deep problems of their own.

We regularly were told 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.' Did we all take names in our stride? I'm not sure. I remember my teacher through primary school called me 'horseface'. My mother was very shocked when I told her this many years later. But the impact of this rudeness was blunted because I liked horses. If he had called me 'pigface' or 'goatface' I would have found it much more upsetting. And he called most of the kids rude names. It wasn't just me.

But bullying is more than being called names. In the old days it almost always contained some kind of physical abuse—or the threat of physical abuse. Perhaps it was a measure of our unsophistication. If someone had tried to undermine our identity or self-esteem it would not have had a great impact as we didn't know that our identities were precious and self-esteem was something we

had never heard of. Were we tougher minded? I don't think so. But bullying was mainly done at home or at school.

It could invade our private space at home or our public space at school. But cyber-bullying falls into an uneasy space between. It is a public act in that a stranger invades the space of someone they don't know and haven't met. But it is done in the privacy of someone's bedroom.

Cyber bullying may happen behind closed doors but we need to have it brought out in to the public domain. If people choose to keep it private then they have turned a public act into a private act. Which, of course, is what all cyber bullies want. The one thing they can least handle is to be publicly outed. So we should stop putting all our attention on to the victim and start focusing on the perpetrators. We do it in murder cases (how many people can even remember the names of all Martin Bryant's victims) but when it comes to cyber bullying we allow the perpetrators to keep their identities secret.

THAT TENNIS (AND THAT CYCLING, THAT CRICKET, THAT SOCCER and all the rest): Summer is the time for tennis—except that it will soon be too hot to play the Australian Open in Melbourne in January. Unless we want to see wan figures on the ground being fanned and cooled by paramedics while ball kids look on and think of icy poles. And there are those cyclists pushing themselves up hills in 40° heat and I think complacently 'better than me'. Of course they are doing it to win prizes, prove something to themselves, break records, get sponsorship deals—not to entertain me.

But we can't move Summer Sport any more than we can move Australia Day—because it is all hallowed by something, I'm not sure what. Tradition perhaps. But then we have left a lot of traditions behind and people mostly don't miss them. We used to let off firecrackers at home when I was young. Letting off fire crackers at home is now a No-No. Hardly anyone bothers with April Fools jokes now. Have we grown up, got more mature, or is it just that we are more likely to be on our smart phones rather than thinking up a clever way to fool friends or family?

There was a man who ran a marathon on a hot summer day and his muscles melted down. Now I don't want Roger Federer's muscles to melt down. But whose responsibility will it be if champion tennis players start to melt down? Who will be sued? Who will have to front up? Will spectators say 'I am sorry, we should have boycotted the whole silly thing'?

I have this image of a little greasy puddle on the court, people standing around, hats off, heads bowed, as they contemplate in sorrow and respect the last resting place of a tennis giant.

THE BARNABY SAGA: It has wound on with people seemingly ranged in two camps: The ‘His Private Life is His Own’ camp and the ‘He’s a Public Figure so there is no such thing as a Private Life’ camp.

Now that he has stepped down as Nationals’ leader perhaps we can look more clearly at what the real issues are. Now if he or any other public figure wants to make a mess of their private life that is essentially their business. But it becomes the public’s business if:

1. He has used public funds to carry on private business.
2. He has been distracted from public duties by private activities.
3. He has made it very clear, in his actions, ‘I am a hypocrite’. Important public issues do require us to make decisions, vote, respond in varying ways—and we have the right to believe that public *leaders* will lead in ways which are informed, honest, and have integrity.

In the Barnaby Saga there is another aspect lurking. Would people have voted for Tony Windsor if they had known that Barnaby was carrying on with a young staffer? I think people voted for him because of the perception that he was an honest decent family man whose focus was his electorate and rural people in general. Now they have the uneasy feeling that his focus was elsewhere and they might have received better service and better representation from their Independent candidate.

Postscript: On it goes. We now have Barnaby effectively saying the baby is not his. Are they afraid the baby may come out brown or stripey? And effectively he is saying his new girlfriend broke up his marriage, two-timed him while he was away, and has the media savvy of a chook. It is hard to see them building a happy trusting relationship if he believes she two-timed him the minute his back was turned—but for the sake of the bub I can only hope something worthwhile can be salvaged. And all those jumping up and down and saying ‘BARNABY! SHUT UP!’ undoubtedly have a point ...

THOSE GUNS: The USA faces a new thread in their gun debate, if debate is the right word—children, teenagers, young people. And here we’ve got a newly-elected government saying it is going to water down the gun control measures already in place. Why? Is our gun lobby really so powerful? Do they all live in marginal electorates? Do they pass bribes in dirty envelopes to Mr Hodgman? Or is he a secret gun enthusiast? Does he say as he looks in the mirror ‘I don’t like this milk-and-toast image, I think I’ll go out and shoot something, and I don’t want to be having to renew my gun licence every five years’, something along those lines.

Why shouldn't shooters have to renew their licences regularly. Other people have to get cards and licences and other documents re-done regularly. 'Oh, I thought my dog licence ran for five years ... and my dog is not nearly as dangerous as a gun.'

And it's not going too well in the USA either. Trump now thinks that arming and training teachers *is* a good idea. He must've gone to a very funny school. PE teacher: excuse me, kids, I'll show you how to vault that horse when I've put my gun down. Maths teacher: now I'll be busy writing this equation on the board, I just hope a shooter doesn't nip into the school while my back is turned. Any teacher: Oh damn, I've left my gun in the toilet ...

And when another shooter storms in, should any teacher be placed in the position of shooting another human being in front of small children? It isn't like police who, in American culture, are expected to shoot people then leave the premises. A deadly teacher will be there every day.

NEWS POLLS: Now we are to have leadership by news poll. Did we have news polls around when I was young? If we did, I never heard of them. So when did they acquire the power to change governments, influence party policies, and decide who sits in The Lodge? The idea when looked at coldly (and of course I always look at important issues 'coldly'—well, tepidly) seems bizarre. A thousand or two thousand people, mostly in Australia's capital cities, are asked a couple of questions—and on their answers hang the fate of nations, or at least prime ministers. What is democratic about that? The pollsters do not contact people in remote Australia, people who don't have phones, who are suffering our hospital systems, who are mentally ill, who don't speak English.

I personally think these sorts of polls are not only a waste of time and energy but are actually dangerous. We have a reasonably democratic system in which we vote at indeterminate times and the party room chooses its leader. So why skew the system in favour of a faceless two thousand?

Of course people are always being asked all kinds of questions so that not only their voting preferences but their eating preferences and their holiday preferences and their shopping preferences and all sorts of other preferences can be recorded somewhere. I had a man ask me once if I ever bought iced tea. I said no, if I wanted cold tea I would just let my cuppa sit until it got cold. I don't know how he recorded that.

That is one advantage of paying for things in cash. No one gets in to your private details. Not, I suppose, that it matters very much whether anyone knows whether I buy this brand or that brand of bread. But it is the principle. I want my privacy to be respected. I don't want my details sold on, passed on, stolen. I remember starting to get letters from charities which had obviously bought my details from somewhere because they all had the same spelling mistake in my

name. I threw them in the recycling bin. I found the whole experience tacky. I don't expect a lot from a lot of businesses but I did somehow expect a higher standard from charities ...

FREE TRADE: To have or not to have? The whole thing is odd. When the USA was pushing free trade many countries objected, particularly Canada and Mexico, but most nations saw it as a blatant push by the US to get into their markets and undermine their regulatory systems—which of course it was. Now when the US wants to put up tariffs and presumably respect other people's tariffs there is not only an outcry but dire warnings about trade wars and another recession.

So what has changed? I suppose the answer is China.

But there have always been trade wars. We keep tariffs and quotas on those agricultural products the US *doesn't* want so that we won't get swamped by cheap sugar from the Philippines and Fiji. And so on.

Tariffs have always been a way of protecting vulnerable industries and vulnerable markets—and keeping voters in marginal rural electorates sweet as needed ...

I have no problem with protecting certain products and industries. If it means paying a slightly higher price to keep local businesses and local employment going I have no problem with that. If it helps new products and new techniques to be developed I don't see a problem. Just as I don't object to paying a little more to get hens out of cages and sows out of crates. The egg industry says the poor won't be able to afford to buy free range eggs so they will have to miss out on eggs. Tell that reasoning to the tobacco growers.

And the suggestion that trade wars are good for 'nobody' does seem an exaggeration. I assume trade wars are quite good for consumers. I can't say I consume a lot of steel and aluminium (though there was a man going round country shows many years ago who was slowly eating a Holden car—I always wondered if he died young) but if it gets a bit more expensive maybe that will slow our rush to consume the planet.

Just a forlorn hope I suppose ...

TIT-FOR-TAT SPIES: So we send Russians home and the Russians send Aussies home. It hardly seems to matter. Another lot of spies, if spies is the right word, will soon move in because, as you know, nature abhors a vacuum. Although I think it is quite likely the Russians did poison that man and his daughter in the UK it isn't proven. So simply sending spies home rather than to prison might be seen as the best response to an unproven case. Perhaps we could expand the idea. Joe Blow probably bashed someone to death on a lonely country road but we can't

prove it. So what do we do? We send Joe off to Russia and we take a Russian who has probably bashed someone to death on a lonely country road but has a dodgy alibi or says he was taking the dog for a walk at that time. And dogs, as yet, cannot give alibis although we are working on it

Both are ducks out of water and easy to keep an eye on. If Jim Blow is eventually found to have done the deed, we bring Joe home and he can get on with his life and spend the rest of his days talking about his time in Russia and blinding his family and friends with the few bits of Russian he picked up. If we find Joe did actually do it ... ditto ... except he can do his talking to his fellow inmates.

BALL TAMPERING: Could someone explain in simple language exactly why ball tampering is such a heinous crime? What advantage does it actually give? Someone said it made the ball easier to hold and throw, that it won't slip out of your hand. Someone else said they thought it helped to give it spin.

When we played French cricket in the back yard when I was a kid we had dreadful old balls with bits hanging off them and which looked like small hedgehogs from a distance. I don't remember them ever doing anything to help anyone. So clearly ball tampering is a highly scientific exercise and it is hard to see how anyone could get it exactly right by furtively doing it behind his back. Has he put his tape in the exactly correct aero-dynamic position? Has he used his file on the right part of the ball to make it do something amazing?

I find it hard to believe that anything he might have done in such a hurried secretive manner could possibly have changed the outcome of anything.

But it is the principle of the thing. We are very strong on principles.

Aren't we?

COMMONWEALTH GAMES: Done. Finished. No more talk about Gold Medals! If I invite some friends over to play cards or Ludo I don't then do my best to win every game and boast endlessly about how many games I've won. I am delighted when my friends win. But not so when it comes to the Games, it seems. If we get a Silver or a Bronze we mostly don't even get to hear who won the Gold.

No wonder we spend large chunks of our time taking selfies. We have narcissism down to a fine art. From the personal to the national we are fixated on our dear little selves.

Of course I do not include myself in that. I have never taken a selfie in my life. After all, what are mirrors for but to make sure your hair is tidy and you don't have a dab of Promite on your chin before you go out?

And now they are going to beat up whatever was wrong with the closing ceremony. What was really wrong is that it used up a lot of money and at no time

did they engage with the question of Aboriginal Land. But then I think those protesters, bless their optimistic hearts, were always going to get short shrift. We don't want to engage with difficult awkward painful issues when we are out there winning gold medals. Heavens-to-Betsy NO!

And one little curiosity before I go. The protesters said it was never the Queen's Land. Well, of course it wasn't. Victoria never set foot on it. But she was the fallback position. The original idea was to call it Cooksland. On the grounds that although he did not own it he did put his little feet on it. Of course a lot of little black feet also got put on it for many thousands of years but those feet didn't count.

So instead of BananaBenders, had Cook got up, we would have CookieBenders. It seems a very good reason to re-name the whole state something interesting like Cundawalla or Liawoodji. In fact I think all our dreary state names would be all the better for some re-naming ...

TRUMP: LOCKED AND LOADED: It sounds like some sort of double entendre—unless I misheard what Trump and his minions were saying.

Now I am absolutely against chemical weapons. Inventing them, making them, storing them, playing with them, experimenting with them, wondering what to do with them as they degrade ... hunting for them when they get mislaid ...

But I am yet to be convinced that sending missiles into chemical weapons facilities is the right way to deal with them. Blowing them up seems to me a quick way to release a lot of nerve gas into the surrounding areas, let it loose on the wind, disperse it in unguarded and unregulated ways.

Or do the boffins believe that any gas released will carefully fly over to Assad's palace and settle on his prize roses along with his wife out there picking little posies and his kids playing nearby with their little war toys?

BLAND AND BORING: Have you ever noticed just how many people write about the late Forties, the early Fifties, and dwell on how boring Australia then was? People don't write about the Depression years and say how bland and boring life was. But come the end of the War and suddenly the country is steeped in bland and boring. It almost sounds like a particularly uninteresting type of tea that everyone drank. Of course a great many of such memoirs were written by new arrivals but we produce our share.

It is true that as children growing up in the country we had the vague idea that cities were hotbeds of mysterious unnamed excitements and if we could only pack up and leave the country behind these excitements would be ours too.

And of course the cities did have some excitements the country didn't have. You could go to night clubs. You could stay up all night without raising eyebrows. You could drink exciting concoctions, if you had the money, and look in expensive shop windows ... and meet all these unusual people with unusual names and unusual ways of treating the English language ...

And it took me a long time to discern that there were just as many bored and boring people in the cities as anywhere in the country. It took me even longer to come to the understanding that no life can be 'bland and boring' unless that is what you choose.

But when I look back I see very clearly that this period in Australia's history could best be described as 'getting the nation's breath back'. Almost every family had had fathers, sons, brothers, friends, relatives, neighbours away somewhere. People had lived through years of nail-biting anxiety. Sometimes it had ended with a letter of regret. Sometimes it ended with long hospitalization or undiagnosed trauma. Someone once said, 'To have all my family together round the table again—that is happiness.'

It was a compound of relief, hope, regret, re-establishment, anticipation. Sometimes, it also included acceptance that the missing would not be coming home, that certain illnesses and disabilities and traumas were going to be part of life from now on. But the togetherness of families was rooted in thankfulness. The worst was over. Things would get better.

Most men did not dwell on New Guinea mud and mosquitoes and leeches and crocodiles and lurking snipers any more than they dwelled upon North African sand and thirst and midges or time spent in camps or hiding from air attacks. They got on with life.

The people flooding in had also been through all kinds of loss and trauma but it was vaguely felt that they had been passive victims. Young Australians on the other hand had been proactive, they had responded out of a sense of duty. They had left home for the unknown not as victims but as determined players in the conflict. Their understanding might have been deficient. They were at the mercy of military discipline. But they were making their own choices to go ...

And it was nice to come home after four or five years of hardship and fear and malaria and diarrhoea to a home of routine and small safe pleasures and, as they often said, 'to get on with life'.

THE TERROR OF FLU: People used to just get, or not get, THE FLU. Now it hangs over us every year, a kind of fearful black cloud, more dangerous than traffic accidents, AIDS, heart attacks, or dog bites. People ask each other if they've

had THEIR JAB. Scary stories are run regularly. I just saw a sign saying it would soon be too late ... It makes the flu sound like a hungry wolf howling at the gates.

Now I can see that vaccinating little children has some benefit—so long as a new and superior kind of flu doesn't suddenly arrive by QANTAS. But is influenza really that terrible a threat? Yes, a couple of dozen elderly people died in nursing homes. They might have preferred to die of cancer, Alzheimers, diabetes, falls, or strokes. Nobody asked them. But is the flu a worse way to go?

Pneumonia used to be called 'the old person's friend', it was relatively quick, not hideously painful, not drawn out over months or years so that people came to feel themselves a burden on everyone. If I am given the choice between dying of the flu and dying of cancer I know which one I will take.

But strangely enough I have never had the flu. I have potted through more than sixty years of life without this important experience. Of course I may have had it so mildly I thought it was something else. But you may now be saying, well, who is Mrs Mop to be pronouncing on ways to die without any idea of what she is talking about? This is true.

But I still think that many elderly people, if given the choice, would take the flu as their way out. After all, the alternative of euthanasia requires the presence of a swag of doctors, hideous unbearable continuous pain, and life of an awful, usually bed-ridden and restricted nature.

And almost anything might seem a blessed release from all day every day of being parked in front of daytime TV in an Old Folks' Home ...

CYBER CRIME: Emergency lines in 4 states have just gone down. At first it sounded sinister: a break in lines in rural NSW. I immediately thought, Ah, the terrorists have found the way to take out emergency calls from 4 states by cutting a wire. It made those putative terrorists sound pretty clever. I didn't even *know* you could disable 4 states by cutting one line in rural NSW. Then they said a lightning strike had disabled emergency services to the 4 states.

Excuse me while I shake my head in disbelief. How could someone, I have no idea who, be so stupid as to make the emergency calls from 4 states dependent on one line in rural NSW! The mind boggles.

We don't need terrorists. We've got idiots putting all our lives at risk. And, usually, getting very highly paid for the privilege of putting all our lives at risk.

Of course there *are* cyber-terrorists out there. I've just heard that some country, probably Indonesia, has been carrying out high precision, massive strikes on West Papuan web-sites to make them crash. All those hackers, allied to the Indonesian military, are probably rubbing their hands in glee: Oh look! It works! What shall we try next? A major bank? The Australian Defence Force site? A few

prime ministers and presidents? Still, while we're deciding, we've made sure all those nasty people supporting West Papua have been 'neutralized'.

But instead of co-opting hundreds of hackers—why, we could have just cut a Telstra line! We'll try that next time.

TREATIES: THE TEARING UP OF: In general I am not in favour of tearing up treaties. There are some, such as the Timor Gap Treaty and the Lombok Treaty, which deserve to be reduced to confetti. But treaties are usually a sign of incipient peace and goodwill. If both sides respect the commitment they have just made. And tearing them up tends to create instability and uncertainty. Who, now, is supposed to do, or not do, what?

The tearing up, indeed destruction in general, tends to be easier than deciding what, if anything, to put in their place. Just ask any vandal.

And if Iran has been abiding by the treaty why do away with it? Iran probably isn't going to recognize Israel but then quite a lot of countries are reluctant to recognize the rights of other countries. Think of all those old colonial powers which took years, even generations, to recognize a change in the status quo. And Taiwan will be waiting till Kingdom Come for any nice words on its status to come out of Beijing.

Mr Trump wants something tougher. Not it would seem out of love for Israel but out of hatred of Iran. I don't think presidents and prime ministers should let hatred of other presidents and prime ministers be their guiding force. At some level it begins to sound like schoolyard politics. The only difference being—schoolkids rarely have their fingers anywhere near those Missile Launching Buttons.

ANOTHER MASSACRE: And in its wake we hear calls for tougher gun laws alongside people saying we have the toughest gun laws in the world. Of course this claim is a nonsense. We have tougher gun laws than the USA but that is hardly the right benchmark. Many countries do not even let private citizens own guns. Have these commentators actually *looked* at the gun laws of Samoa or Luxembourg?

So how can we make people safer from gun deaths? From murder, manslaughter, suicide, accidents. Guns exist to kill things. Yet many harmless cards and registrations have to be redone every few years even though most of us have continued on our harmless way. Think of the dog licence for your miniature poodle. So why not require that guns have to be re-registered every year in the way that vehicles have to be re-registered every year.

Of course, certain people will now be saying, cars can also kill people. So they can. But they are not manufactured to kill people. That is a by-product. Whereas guns are not made to dig your garden or stir your soup and their killing is

just a by-product. So why shouldn't these 'weapons of mass destruction' be re-registered every year. It may not pick up that their owners are suicidal or planning a murderous rampage but it would make more people think seriously as to whether they really need to own a gun.

I was in court several weeks ago and listened to the case of a man who had an argument with his teenage daughter. He then went off in a red rage and took down his gun. Fortunately a little cold breeze from somewhere, perhaps from God, blew gently on him and he discharged his weapon into the cat's bed. It did not set the bed alight and the cat wasn't in it. But the case made cold chills run up and down my spine. So simple and easy to reduce a person to just another statistic. And why did he have a gun in a suburban home? He wasn't a farmer, a professional shooter, someone who warred on clay pigeons. No, he just liked having a gun. And despite what people regularly say, a gun is more dangerous than a knife or a block of wood. Many people could not bring themselves to go up close and stab someone somewhere vulnerable. But a lot of people can discharge a gun because there is that aspect of detachment and impersonality in the action ... and they can always say, 'Sorry, Officer, I was just getting down my gun to clean it and it went off'; it is rather more difficult to say 'I thought I would give this knife an especial hand-clean rather than putting it in the dishwasher—and it somehow slipped.'

THE STORM TO END ALL STORMS: We just had one. It was like the war to end all wars. We know another storm will come by soon. We will just hope for something a little less sudden and dramatic.

But as you may have noticed—someone says we haven't had such a storm (or drought or snowfall or flood) since 1983 or 1972 or in 'more than fifty years' but then someone else blames it on climate change. Now if there was a similarly damaging storm fifty years ago then it is a bit hard to blame climate change.

On the other hand, are we sure the two events were identical? Every time there is a flood different things are blamed. Clogged waterways, too many trees cleared, too much building on low-lying land, inadequate flood control via water releases or dam heights, inadequate warnings from the Weather Bureau ...

I sometimes think it would be better to take a wide and all-embracing view of all natural disasters. Do all the sensible practical things possible to mitigate their severity. After all, any council which allows people to build on a flood plain is just being plain silly. And take action to slow climate change by leaving that car at home when you go to work or refrain from turning on every electrical device the minute you come in the door and say 'I'm home!'

TOO CLEAN? They have decided that kids are getting sick, getting nasty things like leukaemia, because they are too clean. Now there may be amazing disinfected children, babies scrubbed within an inch of their lives, children who never go anywhere without handwipes—but they are surprisingly hard to find.

When I see kids going off to school they are more likely to look as though they have leapt from bed to the schoolyard without detouring anywhere near a comb, face washer, shoe polish, toothpaste, or other small aids to cleanliness.

Ah but, you may be saying, they are still cleaner than the kids of yesteryear!

I am not sure. Certainly there were kids who came out of houses with no running water, from backyard dunnies, from a bit of water heated on an old wood stove. But there were also the perfect housewives of yesteryear. They didn't have to rush off to work in a bank or a shop and their houses were miracles of tidiness, O-Cedar polish, Bon Ami, and elbow grease. I knew a woman who always wiped round her washing machine, inside and out, with disinfectant after every load. And their wet clothes went out on the clothes-lines in the disinfecting blare of sunlight.

Not good enough, you may be saying. Being houseproud doesn't equate with the modern passion for cleanliness—and all the wonderful gadgets, wipes, cleaners, and other bits and bobs to keep the germs away.

So how good was their research and what other things did they take into account? For example, did they look at the myriads of chemicals now meeting and mingling in everything from our food to our clothes to the air we breathe and the water we drink? Or was that a no-no because it a) cannot be disentangled, b) cannot be quantified, and c) would upset their sponsors?

But I did wonder if parents would now, like the babies of yesteryear left out in the cold but fresh air, be encouraging their little ones to eat dirt? Except that dirt 70 years ago was dirt whereas dirt now is an uneasy cocktail of chemicals settling in the backyard. Nevertheless, once a new generation has eaten their pecks of dirt we will be able to see if it helped ...

THE ON/OFF BUTTON: President Trump was trumpeting his worthiness for a Nobel Peace Prize. Then he abruptly cancelled peace talks with North Korea. And then, next morning, they were on again. What happened between Off and On? I suspect Mr Trump suddenly realized that nobody gets a Nobel Peace Prize for canceling peace talks. In fact nobody gets anything for canceling peace talks—except a good night's sleep because they don't have to decide how to address those same peace talks.

Of course he may have come to this conclusion himself. Then again, Mrs Trump may have said, 'Darling, such a pity about that Nobel Prize. I had been thinking it was the one thing missing from our mantelpiece.' Or his minders may

have said, ‘Mr President, I don’t think we can expect a Nobel Peace Prize for saying nasty things about Iran. We think Korea really was your best chance.’

And then there was our PM. He queue-jumped in a Brisbane hotel. He didn’t queue-jump in a Brisbane hotel. Did. Didn’t.

We don’t like queue-jumpers if they come here by boat. It isn’t always quite clear where they were to find the queue to line up in. Given that successive Australian governments close embassies every so often. It is a bit like ‘The Butterfly that Stamped’. ‘I really thought I saw an Australian Embassy on this street corner/inside these railings/up on the third floor/in that nice old colonial house ... and now it’s disappeared. Whatever will we do?’

In fact we like to think that queue-jumpers in any situation are pretty much like the people who sneakily avoid buying when it’s their shout. Nasty un-Australian sods who need to be told in no uncertain terms that no red-blooded Aussie ever queue-jumps. It is strange, but when I was young queues were seen as a very English thing. We were much more informal. And of course men pushed in front of women. White people pushed in front of black people. Kids were ignored. I remember someone going to Alice Springs many years ago. When she came home she said ‘Never again’. She had been waiting in a shop to be served and an Aboriginal man was standing in front of her. The person behind the counter looked through this man as though he was invisible and asked her what she would like. She felt quite embarrassed to have to say ‘This man was here before me.’

Of course we are doing away with queues and replacing them with serving machines. I am surprised pubs do not have self-service beer. Think of all the staff they could sack.

Memo: Is sacking people better or worse than serving a queue-jumper? As businesses sacked a great many thousands last year, without column inches, and one lonely queue-jumper made the national news it seems that queue-jumping *is* worse. Except that he may not have queue-jumped after all ...

THERE WAS A ROYAL WEDDING: Oh, you didn’t notice?

One thing I DID notice in the aftermath was people saying ‘but why hasn’t anyone fixed homelessness or compensation for the Grenfell Towers victims?’ Now, I would certainly agree that the Royal Family has quite a lot of spare bedrooms.

But in fact they are two different issues—and should be treated as such.

Otherwise we get to the point where nobody can ever have any fun until we have fixed every social problem—which, given that some social problems are unfixable, means that no one ever again deserves to go to Saturday sport, the ballet,

a pop concert or a party at a friend's house. The people responsible for the Grenfell Towers debacle, insurance companies, local councils, emergency services, architects, builders and all the rest, are, I would hope, beaver away to make sure people are compensated and that it can't happen again. Telling Harry and Megan they can't have a fancy wedding isn't going to remove shonky builders, careless building surveyors, or tardy insurance assessors.

But there is another question in there and that is all the commentators who say this has set the Republican Movement back. They don't say how far back but certainly well back from pole position.

The admission in this is apparently that Republicanism is a thing of sentiment. The idea that anyone might coolly and calmly make choices based on what is best for a country and a community doesn't seem to get a look in. What does it matter if Megan looks cute in her white dress and virginal veil? She is not the arbiter of what is best for Australia any more than she is the arbiter of what is best for the USA, England, Scotland or Northern Ireland. She is simply a young woman becoming a duchess.

I always hope that every marriage, especially if there are children, will be happy. But that has absolutely nothing to do with Heads of State, Constitutions, or What-Should-We-Do-With-Our-Old-Pollies-When-They-Refuse-To-Eat-Grass.

TAX CUTS: I must state my position up front. I don't get tax cuts. I am an Old Age Pensioner. This doesn't mean I can't have an opinion. It just means my opinion doesn't count—in the Halls of Power, or Anywhere Else. And strictly speaking, any change to financial systems has a flow-on effect. Prices go up or down, usually up. Service charges change. People go into jobs and out of jobs.

The government is trumpeting two things: tax cuts for business mean more people get employed. Tax cuts for ordinary people mean they consume more.

At first both propositions sound sensible. But that isn't the same as saying they are backed up by hard evidence. And who would collect the hard evidence over the next couple of years anyway.

And then doubts about 'sensible' start to creep in. If you give me more money ('if' there being purely hypothetical) I don't go and consume more. I can't (or shouldn't) eat more. I don't need more clothes. I am not going to take more bus rides. I don't like traveling to faraway places because I am terrified of airports. I might be tempted to go to an extra movie or play or meal out or buy an extra book—but it isn't a given. I would more likely put the extra money aside and think 'it will help me leave a little next egg to my kids when I die'. Or I might make out a slightly larger cheque next time I'm sending a charitable donation. I don't know if other people would share my thinking. And I am sure a lot would simply see it as a way to pay off their mortgage a little bit faster.

Business is a different proposition. Do tax cuts make businesses take on more staff? I doubt it. They are more likely to put the extra into the pockets of CEOs and shareholders or buy new automated systems which enable them to do with less staff. So unless tax cuts come with a firm proviso that: **YOU MUST EMPLOY MORE PEOPLE AND WE WILL COME ROUND TO CHECK ...** forget it.

The other day I was chatting with a nurse who had a temp. position in an expensive aged care facility. She said she was shocked by what she saw going on there. And instead of putting on more, and more qualified, staff—they were constantly cutting back. Just some of the problems:

The majority of the unqualified staff were new arrivals from Africa and Asia with poor English. Some patients either couldn't understand them, because they were going deaf or couldn't understand the range of accents, or were avoiding trying to tell them anything because they were afraid they wouldn't understand the responses.

For lonely elderly people wanting to chat and reminisce they faced the problem they couldn't understand the staff and because of nursing cut-backs the few Australian nurses were simply too busy to sit and chat.

Hygiene issues were grossly negligent. This nurse said elderly people were sitting all day with their eyes gummed up, their teeth not cleaned, no access to mouth wash, and elderly women were deeply distressed at being toileted by large African men and were trying to avoid toilet calls until women came on shift. Families of patients, finding this level of neglect, were regularly making complaints which didn't get acted upon. And the few overworked nurses were bearing the brunt of the visitors' anger and finding this added to their stress.

She said she had never seen so many bed sores. I remember working in a country institution fifty years ago and I was horrified to see my first bed sore. But I naively thought that was then and this is now and people no longer suffer from bed sores because institutions understand exactly how bed sores are created, how they can be avoided, and if all else fails how they can be treated before they become painful gaping sores.

I remember a friend of mine going for respite care in a local facility which had about twenty beds. When she turned up to be shown to her room the only staff member there was a little Filipina who hadn't been told which room she was to have, what her medical needs were, or even that she would be arriving. A lot of time was wasted while this young staffer tried to track down someone who could tell her what to do. My thought was that if a simple arrival could be so badly handled what would happen if there was a medical emergency? Or a fire?

Every for-profit facility is similarly cutting corners. I cannot believe that tax-cuts will suddenly get patients' faces washed and find people able to have a few minutes chat before rushing on to their next duty.

Surely we should be looking at aged care facilities which have no profit motive. They are simply there for patients and staff. A Co-operative perhaps. I would like to think that Church-run facilities are automatically better but as soon as the institution needs to make a profit the bugbear of staff cuts, cheap meals, neglect, and poor service seems to rear its ugly head.

Is euthanasia *really* a worse fate than sitting all day with your eyes gummed up, your mouth full of phlegm and stale food, and your bum a painful expanse of bed sores? People who talk glibly about palliative care, and its wonders, don't know what they're talking about. Never mind. The wonders of our nursing homes are waiting for them too.

AIRBAGS: People have written poems and stories about all kinds of things, from fleas to chairs to knives to windows to old saddle blankets. But no one seems to have ever written about airbags. I wonder why not. There they are in their millions. And the other puzzling thing is that nobody ever managed to notice that millions of them were faulty.

Don't they do Quality Control in modern factories? Is it all a wing and a prayer?

Do faulty airbags save more people than they kill? And who is keeping count?

And why did it take so long for anyone to notice there was a problem?

Cars in the old days didn't have airbags. They didn't have a lot of things. I can remember having to crank our car when I was kid. (Well, not precisely a kid.) A self-starter, where you sat inside out of the sun and wind and rain, was a wonderful thing to have. Of course there were accidents. Lots of them. I won't say they were rarely fatal. But 'high speed' then was about 40 mph. If you hit a kangaroo, another vehicle, a tree, a power pole, it was usually a crunch rather than a splat. And I had never heard of a car driving off the road, through someone's fence, and into their front room. Cars just didn't seem to be able to get up enough speed to carry them through paling fences and brick walls.

I won't say people were better drivers because I don't think that was true. They just didn't have such a lethal creature to run wild with. And if they had wanted to drive off the road and in to a crowd of pedestrians there was a good chance most of the pedestrians except the extreme elderly could have taken evasive action.

SHOULD EDUCATION BE FREE? A lot of time and ink is expended on this question so here is my five minutes' worth. The answer seems simple. Where school is compulsory, ie. up to sixteen-years-old, then I think it should be free. Or as near as. Those things which need to be bought such as text books, uniforms, suitable shoes, bus fares, need to be looked at so as to make the paying as easy as possible. For a start, costs need to be spread, not a big whammy at the start of the school year, and schools need to be helping parents get good second-hand goods and incidental costs like excursions need to be kept to the bare minimum.

But when it comes to tertiary education it becomes optional. No one is forcing you to go to uni rather than slave at McDonalds or KFC. It is your choice. You can go straight on after finishing high school, you can take a gap year, you can go as a mature age student, you can change from one course to another, you can study part time or full time, you can, often, do part of it on-line, you can even drop out. All these are your choices. No one is standing over you with a big stick.

And with all the attention on whether universities should be free few people are looking at the whole question of post-high-school training. If you want to train as a beautician or a nanny or a jillaroo or a beekeeper or a florist you are pretty much on your own. You need to find a vocational college/a suitable employer/or an apprenticeship scheme. You usually need to pay for the privilege of training. And no one will jump up or down, march, protest, or say you're getting a tough deal. But if you want to be a lawyer then there are a lot of people willing to say university should be free.

As a lawyer, down the track, you will make ten times what the average beautician makes, you won't have to spend the day on your feet or use revolting chemicals that are only bearable if you put a mask over your face, and somewhere down the track you will probably be invited to try for parliament. I have never quite worked out why we want our parliaments stuffed with lawyers rather than beauticians ... but it seems we do.

Now we should be asking just why certain university courses are so expensive. Anyone would think every law student requires ten personal trainers (for trainers read tutors and lecturers), law books bound in gold, classrooms with million-dollar-views ... in other words, has anyone broken down the actual costs of giving students several lectures a week, sending them to the library to do some reading, pointing them towards some useful web-sites, and examining them in a bare room at the end of it?

Parents starting out with young children are often stretched for money. They are at the beginning of their own careers and often on low wages. One of them, usually the mother, has given up work to look after said young children. Whereas by the time the little darlings head off to uni their parents are usually well along in

their own careers. They have gone up the pay ladder. They may not want to pay up—and more so if their offspring wants to study something which they see as pointless, a waste of time, mere fiddle-faddling round. But on the other hand those offspring can put off uni until such time as they have a little in the bank. It's not like being told you must send your five-year-old to school and if you don't you will be in BIG TROUBLE.

THE BIG SELL-OFF: When the Anglican Church said it was going to sell huge amounts of property to pay compensation to victims of sexual abuse it at first sounded like an admirable effort to be both transparent and responsible. But now I think it was a mistake. All the argy-bargy over what could or should be sold will be played out in public. And as time goes on the Church sounds less and less caring, not least because most of the properties slated for sale are those in small rural communities, places which had the least responsibility for abusing children or covering up the abuse.

And the Church hasn't helped by saying only 25% of each sale will go to the redress scheme. Wouldn't it be better if all 100% of each sale went to redress so as to simplify and hasten the fund-raising? And the Church is planning to keep its most prosperous businesses in city areas so as to generate future funds.

I always have problems when churches are in the money-making business. It might be seen as an admirable effort to reduce the impost on parishioners, though it doesn't stop churches handing the plate around at every service, but it also implies a lack of trust in the faith and generosity of their members.

I know churches do sometimes die. Their stalwarts move, die, go to other denominations. But I don't think the hierarchy should ever be seen to be speeding that dying. Churches can come back from the brink. New industries in an area, a newly dynamic minister, new families moving in. But once a church is sold it leaves a gap and it is very hard to refill that gap.

It becomes even more hurtful when a country church is built on donated land and with donated funds. Don't those past benefactors deserve to have a better legacy than an empty paddock, its church hauled off or turned into salvage? And all the women who sewed altar cloths and ran Sunday Schools and played the organ, all those men who mowed grass and planted trees and fixed fences—in the end they are just fodder to the wrongdoings of city parishes and city personnel. Of course pedophiles can exist anywhere. I know of one country parish where both a father and son committed suicide when the son was abused by a church worker. And the church hierarchy was years late in acknowledging that a) they knew of the problem and b) they were very sorry.

But I think the thing which worries me most (after all, country parishioners can either fight to the death or vote with their feet; neither of which is particularly

good for the church or its future wellbeing) is that every victim who accepts a compensation package now knows it comes as the price of selling out a small rural community. That places an awkward burden on people who already carry awkward and painful burdens.

A WEDDING CAKE: I heard it said that a baker in the US refused to ice a cake for a same sex couple and it seems this is a no-no but the court found his Christian values had been treated with contempt and therefore he was within his rights. This seemed to make a simple question very complicated.

So can a business refuse to sell you goods or services? Yes, they can.

If kids want to buy cigarettes and their money is as good as yours or mine—the business still has to say no.

If a pub serves alcohol to someone who is clearly drunk and disorderly they may be in trouble—though they are allowed to let you walk out, well over the limit, and get in your car and drive away. You become a police problem when you get in your car although it is the pub which has taken your money.

Customers get turned away for all sorts of reasons. Stock has run out and the business doesn't want to be bothered to get in an extra one of that item. A car yard should not be letting you take a car out for a spin if you don't have a valid driver's licence. Doctors and dentists regularly say they cannot take on new patients. Entertainment venues turn people away, not because their money is fake but simply because they have run out of seats, just as buses are only licensed to carry X number of passengers. Businesses refuse to sell things to people who don't appear to have the right documentation, enough money, to be old enough or sane enough. Many products come with statements that they are 'not suitable for children under the age of—' though I have never actually seen a shop refuse to sell such products to people accompanied by children under the age of—. Should they? Some chemists are reluctant to sell over the counter treatments to people they think should go to a doctor for advice first. Children are not supposed to go to adults-only movies or borrow X-rated DVDs.

And there are difficult questions to do with businesses pressing products on people who clearly can't afford, won't be able to cope, won't be suited, or may actually be in danger from said products.

I remember a young woman who sold a pony to another young woman, an apparently nice young woman. Some months later the seller heard that the RSPCA had had to be called in. The buyer had not looked after the pony and the poor creature, down to skin and bone, had been removed. It isn't always possible to sum up the character or the nature of someone doing the buying. It is a hard question for pet shop owners to deal with. Presumably they have a pet shop because they like small creatures. But it isn't always possible to determine the nature of everyone

who comes in for a kitten or guinea pig or budgie and know whether or not it will be cared for. Though I think farmers selling animals to companies transporting animals to countries with appalling records of animal welfare should have asked some tough questions.

Should a business have the right to say, Sorry, no can do?

Yes.

And one business turning away business is usually another business's lucky day.

GENDER-NEUTRAL TOILETS: Well, of course they've always been around. Most small country churches could only run to one toilet out the back. I remember going to a two-teacher country school. Up the back paddock there was a boys' toilet, a girls' toilet and a teachers' toilet. As the headmaster was male and the junior teacher was female they had to share. At the time we were more concerned about the toilet tins swimming with maggots than wondering about how young women felt about sharing a toilet with a very unpleasant male colleague. Now my sympathies go out to them. Lots of places in the country had gender-neutral toilets simply because people couldn't afford to do anything else and the toilets didn't get very much use anyway.

But toilets at a big sporting event are obviously going to see long queues through the 'season'. Are people going to be looking at other people to see whether they are transgender? I doubt it. People are usually in a hurry to get in and a hurry to get out. I remember accidentally going into the Men's at a stadium because I couldn't see a sign anywhere. I hurriedly backed out. But ever since then I have taken the simple advice, go before you go, and don't drink anything during or before, and it has stood me in fairly good stead.

The bigger puzzle is how do you actually tell. A very obvious man in a woman's toilet is surely a no-no but I assume they are referring to the people who are in the in-between-stages of changing sex or people born neither one-thing-nor-the-other. But they are still going to present as 'something'. And if they are dressing as a woman but still have some dangly bits—who is going to know? And if people are obviously male (or female) and go in to the neutral convenience—will there be a gatekeeper to challenge them. I couldn't help thinking that more use could be made of the disabled facilities, after all, you don't usually see a long queue of wheelchairs waiting. In fact, if I end up in a wheelchair I think I would much rather stay home and watch the sport on TV than try to manoeuvre my chair through the milling crowds.

Still, a lot of venues never seem to have enough toilets so if it makes the management build some more toilets then that is probably a good thing.

And if I have a beef with venues it is usually because they have skimped on the cleaning, don't provide enough paper, or don't paint over the revolting graffiti some moron has put on the inside of the cubicle door.

So if you share my less-than-enthusiastic view of public toilets (of any gender) you too might like to engrave that golden rule somewhere:

Go before you go.

Don't drink during or before.

And if you are carted away mid-game suffering from dehydration and heat stroke you can blame me.

KIM AND DON: It sounds like a new duo, perhaps a comedy turn, like Abbot and Costello, but there they were in Singapore shaking hands and a lot of words being expended on the possible outcome.

Now, I have my fingers crossed. I *want* a good outcome for both Koreas, for the Korean people, for an enduring and peaceful peace.

But my thought was that the Singapore talks had a different importance.

They got Kim out of his safety zone.

Like many dictators he stays in his cave and only meets with 'friends and allies'. The rest of the world is that big terrifying space waiting to gobble him up or remind him of his unimportance.

Hitler could believe he was an amazing man while he went nowhere and met no one other than people like Mussolini and Franco. If he had visited London or Stockholm, Dublin or Athens, he might have seen the world through different glasses. He might even have realized that forming friendships with other world leaders would be more help to Germany than setting out on the course that inevitably reduced it to rubble.

In other words dictators tend to stay at home. They are afraid to go traveling. Occasionally, like Pinochet, they go elsewhere for medical care (which says something about the health care they have presided over at home) and risk getting arrested for human rights abuses, torture, genocide etc. And when dictators stay home it is so much easier for them to believe that either a) all the world is hostile and there to be trounced or b) all the world is pretty much like them and therefore there is no point in peering out from their 'cave'.

In the end, Kim's visit to Singapore might be of more significance than anything he and Don said or didn't say ...

DARK PARKS: The rape and murder of Eurydice Dixon has got things happening in the way that previous rapes and murders haven't. I hope the 'things' will have staying power. It has happened so many times before. I remember the Chinese girl who got raped and murdered only a few blocks from where I live.

Why didn't it bring out the flowers and candles and vigils? Is there a straw that breaks the camel's back?

Of course there are all kinds of things that municipal and state governments can do. There are things police, Neighbourhood Watch, and concerned citizens can do. But the depressing fact remains that they can't be everywhere, they can't second guess every possibility. So what can women do to keep themselves safe?

Mace or pepper or an aerosol. Remember those things we sprayed our hair with in the 1960s? Spray that on a rapist's face and he won't move an eyeball for the next twelve hours.

A whistle, a whoopee cushion, the recorded sound of a barking dog, a lot of loud shouting, screaming HELP at a hundred decibels.

Looking like a man when you walk through deserted streets, hoodies, balaclavas, heavy coats to disguise curves, a false beard.

Phones, pagers, cameras, a special app which says YOU'RE NOW RECORDED as you throw it as far as you can in to the bushes.

Engaging the creep by telling him you have a serious infectious disease, have lice, fleas, something he will catch and won't be able to get rid of.

Carrying a stink bomb, some skunk perfume, something that revolts him.

Going armed, a black belt in something, knives, pistols, handcuffs, nunchukkas, none of this is recommended (by police). Then there are long fingernails to scratch him, teeth to bite him, keys to scratch him, nail files to take out an eye, a head to butt him with. All this assumes you are not frozen with fear or such a gentle soul you can't bear to hurt another human being.

A state system that comes down so hard on rapists that men are too frightened to even consider such an action. Twenty years mandatory with no parole, that sort of thing. Mandatory castration. A requirement that he not approach any woman for the next ten years, even his mother, which means he will be required to live in an all-male environment for at least ten years.

I'm sure you can add to my list.

But there is one thing in there that isn't being talked about. It used to be said that prostitution prevents rape. The evidence wasn't provided. But it was assumed that if creeps could go and pay for sex they wouldn't rape. It was hard on the prostitutes, of course, who had to put up with these less-than-admirable human beings even if they were being paid something. But Victoria is brimming with legal and illegal brothels, streetwalkers, massage parlours, phone sex, any kind of paid sex. And sex crimes are on the rise. The simple fact is that paid sex doesn't prevent rape and we should never endorse prostitution on those grounds.

And the 'elephant in the room' is pornography. It is hard to find a rapist who has never looked at porn. We are told that boys as young as five are looking at

internet porn. It begs the question: what sort of men will they grow up to be? The sort of men who believe that women exist solely for their ‘entitlement’ to sex?

Isn’t it about time we start seeing sex as a precious gift shared between two people with affection for one another and not a tawdry commodity, not an entitlement, not a right?

Sorry, Mrs Mop, that horse has bolted and the only thing which might bring him back to his stable is a future in which oestrogen-riddled climate-change-damaged males are no long bucking and rearing to go ...

CLOBBER: Poor Mrs Trump. Poor any leader’s wife. If they wear dull and sober things in grey and brown and fade in to the shadows they are boring, mice, not suitable for women’s magazines. If they wear expensive things they lack the common touch. If they wear bright colours they are overshadowing their husbands. If they wear messages the messages are always seen as inappropriate—by someone.

I would say to Mrs Trump: wear what *you* like and be blown to anyone else. You are the one who will be on your feet all day, shaking hands, smiling at barrages of cameras, trying to keep your hair tidy on windy tarmacs, wondering if there is a handy toilet after you’ve had an unfamiliar luncheon and your insides are now protesting ...

None of the armchair critics have ever been in that position. So take no notice of them.

BREXIT BREXIN: The Brits seem determined to make things even more confusing and messy. Demanding another poll is fine if you can show the previous one was deeply flawed, that some skullduggery was going on behind the scenes, that people were threatened, bribed, intimidated into voting in a certain way—or of not voting at all. But no one has shown that the first poll did not meet the usual standards for a referendum.

What this march through London means is that some people feel guilty because they didn’t bother to go out and vote the first time.

If they couldn’t be bothered then ... why should they get a second chance?

And giving in to them would set a dangerous precedent. As soon as enough people don’t like the result of a ballot they know they just have to march and shout in large enough numbers.

TRUMP IN TROUBLE: This time it is for separating children. Now, I am not in favour of separating children in any situation. I know they have to be separated if they need to go to hospital, school, sometimes it is even good to let children and parents have a little rest from one another. But in general, no.

So it must be asked why Mexicans are arriving at the border, are sneaking over the border with all their children in tow. Do they really think the US is just going to say, welcome, come on in? Of course not. They hoped to sneak across and disappear into the melting pot.

The situation has been compared to Australia's tow-back policy, alongside statements such as 'we can't talk', but this is to conflate two different situations. The vast majority of people coming over the border in to the US are not refugees, they aren't claiming to be refugees, they wouldn't be accepted as refugees. The Central Americans fleeing persecution in Guatemala, for example, enter Mexico in search of asylum, but Mexico prefers to waft them on to the US rather than tackle nasty neighbours to its south. But such refugees are only a fraction of the thousands who enter the US every day, and they ask for asylum not secrecy.

(Though compassionate demands that Australia take children out of detention camps and leave their parents there suggests that we accept the separation of parents from children—unless we are using such children as the thin edge of the wedge to get their parents out—Machiavellian but understandable.)

The simple fact is that thousands of Mexicans leave a democratic potentially wealthy country every week. The world's richest man is said to be Mexican. Obviously he isn't spreading his money round poor Mexicans. But it could be asked why poor Mexicans sneak in to the US while poor Canadians don't. Canada has more land, yes, but much less sunshine. People do not enter Canada to sun themselves on lovely beaches. And while an American wall to keep poor Mexicans out may work, a Canadian wall to keep big American corporations out won't work. They can just fly over the top of it. The Americans could, of course. Americanize Mexico in the way they are Americanizing Canada and then Mexicans could say '*Home is just like being in the USA*' ...

I sympathize with the people who want the US to be seen as a humane and decent country but they still need to ask tough questions about illegal immigration. The US harbours almost the entire population of Australia as illegal immigrants. These shadowy people don't pay certain taxes, can't be conscripted, are a huge headache for law and order, present a pool of undiagnosed infection, are naturally drawn into drug dealing and other illegal activities. It is a problem which demands the deep thought of every American citizen.

Many people like to point to the massive inflow of poor Europeans into the US in the late 19th century but there is a key difference. These people a) came through legal and documented means and b) they sought to assimilate as quickly as they could.

I know we now put multiculturalism up there on a pedestal but there has to be assimilation behind the festivals and respect for other languages. If not, a country is in big big trouble. We have seen this in microcosm with the dual

citizenship saga. Australia is very unlikely to go to war with either NZ or the UK, the main places people are likely to retain citizenship of; nor are we very likely to go to war with Italy, Greece, or Germany. But the principle holds. People with divided loyalties should not be making major political decisions and voting on important legislation.

So what should Mr Trump be doing, if anything. And don't just say building a wall, though if he wants to spend money and provide jobs by building a wall, well, we set the unemployed to building roads eighty years ago, so I suppose there are precedents. And don't say illegal immigrants do the jobs legal immigrants don't want—because I just read that the US is sending prisoners out on day release schemes to do the nasty jobs poor immigrants don't want.

At some point everyone needs to pinpoint the reasons Mexico produces an inexhaustible stream of people who don't want to live in Mexico. My own thoughts would be to blame a) bad government, corrupt bureaucracy, and an unfair society, b) the Catholic Church which encouraged people to have more children than they could adequately care for, and c) the drug trade.

As people sneak across the border they are most likely to be driven by a) poverty, or b) drugs, the smuggling of. So all the kind and caring people marching through US cities need to be asking, and asking: how can we tackle these two fundamental issues which send Mexicans over our border, with or without children?

And I hope, I sincerely hope, that the children are with those who cross for reason a) ... not reason b) ...

WILLS: A man in St Helens left money for a scholarship to be provided every year to a local student provided he is male. A lot of people got upset about this. The State Government even wanted to challenge the will. A variety of people said the kind man who left the money was out of touch with 21st century reality and now we treat boys and girls the same.

Or we think we do.

But all this sound and fury missed the simple fact that this gentleman had made, saved, and bequeathed this money. He had an absolute right to do what he liked with it. If the school felt it was discriminatory they could have said they couldn't accept it and it would have remained part of the estate and presumably would have been eventually parceled out amongst his other legatees. Or, if there were no other legatees (which I would find hard to believe) then it could go in to Unclaimed Monies.

And why shouldn't he leave a scholarship to be granted to a boy? As a boy himself he may have struggled to get a good education. As a man he may have felt that a boy would appreciate the opportunity provided more. He may have been

tired of rude or lazy or promiscuous girls. A girl may have tried to compromise him. He may have had homosexual leanings. It doesn't really matter what his reasons were. They were his reasons and his choice.

And if his wishes in his will had been over-turned on the grounds that they were discriminatory—then can all wills be looked at from this point of view? If I leave my money to the Cat Centre can that be challenged by someone who says Poor People need my money more than Poor Pussies? If I leave it to a relative who deals drugs can it be over-turned because that person might use it ... unwisely?

Wills are in fact interesting but often contentious things. They used to be a fertile source of plots for whodunits. And there is always that lurking bit about 'being of sound mind'. How many of us are truly of 'sound mind'? Is there a precise definition of 'sound mind' and who is qualified to claim that I am not of 'sound mind' as I ponder on how to leave my millions ...

ANXIETY: I heard of a survey which said that 27% of schoolchildren were suffering from anxiety. I am not sure if this was only in NSW, whether it involved city and country schools, and how they determined anxiety wasn't spelled out.

My first thought was 'only 27%?' Back in the 1950s when I graced a primary school I think it would have been hard to find a schoolchild who *didn't* suffer from anxiety. Schools were anxious places.

I can remember seeing a schoolboy dragged crying on to the bus by the bus driver. Schools were places where parents didn't interfere and where teachers were only constrained by the once-a-year visits of school inspectors. You expected to be yelled at, criticized, be given lines, stood in the corner, have chalk thrown at you, be called rude names, get the cane. If you didn't do your homework you were in trouble. If you got sums or spelling wrong you were in trouble. If you whispered in class you were in trouble. Tests and exams were regular events and saying you found them terrifying was a waste of breath. They were meant to be terrifying.

The survey said that anxious children did less well than happy children. This sounds sensible and practical. But it wasn't happiness which got us reading and writing and through our exams. It was fear.

No one left school without being able to read and write and do basic arithmetic. But the problem was—most of us couldn't wait to leave school.

So the challenge for educators is how to reduce anxiety without lessening the standards children are expected to reach in their tests and exams. And doing away with tests and exams as a way to reduce anxiety isn't the answer. Life is full of all kinds of tests and exams—from going for a driving test to applying for jobs. Helping children learn how to deal with the tests and exams school throws at them

may well help them learn how to deal with the tests and exams a highly competitive rat race world will inevitably throw at them.

CEO BYO: I just heard that the highest paid CEO in Australia is the head of the Domino's Pizza chain on \$36 million. I had to take a minute to pull my jaw up. Why should he get around 72 times what the prime minister gets for running the country? Is it really easier to run a country than some pizza parlours? And are his decisions of more earth-shaking import than the prime minister's?

Whether to open another shop in x suburb. Whether to add more cheese to the toppings. Whether to trial a new recipe. Whether to pay more or less to your casuals. Whether to close a shop in y suburb. Major decisions certainly but worth the prime minister's salary x 72?

In fact, is any CEO salary worth it? If the CEO was a lone figure making life and death decisions—perhaps. But they aren't. They have boards. They have vice presidents and deputies and an array of managers and marketing departments and all the rest. And if they get a decision wrong income may dip but no one comes home in a body bag with marching soldiers and a lone bugler.

Perhaps CEOs suffer from such terrible anxiety that it takes twenty years off their life spans. Perhaps CEOs are riven by irritable bowels and alopecia and awful rashes and facial tics and terrible indigestion and endless heart attacks. But who says prime ministers aren't?

Surely no businessman (or woman) should get more than a prime minister minding over 23 million people rather than an array of pizzas?

Never mind. I won't be buying a Domino's pizza ever again. I don't see why millions of boobies like me should have to buy millions of pizzas just to keep one fat cat. Think on it. Say each pizza makes 50c after ingredients, labour, transport and premises have been covered. That means that 72 million pizzas have to be sold just to pay one CEO. And that doesn't take into account all those mums and dads who thought that buying some Domino's shares would be a nice pleasant way to provide themselves with a little nest egg.

Fat cats and eggs in nests aren't really compatible.

A CUNNING PLAN: The claim that Russia meddled in the US election seems to have staying power but I can't see that it is worth making a big fuss about. There are far more important reasons for taking Russia to task. After all, we know governments meddle in the affairs of other governments. We have just seen the business of Australia spying on the Timorese government back in the media. We know the USA via the CIA tried to stop Whitlam getting elected. We know that Chinese businessmen on behalf of the Chinese government have open purses

when it comes to our pollies. Do we really think that no meddling gets done by us, by our ‘friends’, by our enemies, by those we can’t decide how to classify ...

Of course we don’t.

Donald Trump’s private life is hardly attractive (and I am glad I’m not his wife) but he has a long way to go before he comes anywhere near the Kennedys. JFK with women supplied by the Mafia, Robert ditto, Ted leaving a young woman to drown ... No, I don’t think Democrats in the US should be looking too closely at Trump’s sex life ...

But the curious thing is: how do you meddle effectively? The US has brought down governments in Central and South America by brute force. So has Russia elsewhere. But when it comes to something a little more subtle ... how do you Win Friends and Influence Voters? Are voters really that easily influenced? After all, a large proportion of voters tend to vote the same way election after election. Does this mean they can’t be influenced? I think they probably can. But it is not only a matter of influencing voters away from Candidate X but influencing them towards Candidate Y. If you try to convince them Candidate X is a louse and a cheat and a wife-beater it doesn’t mean they will go in the direction you want. They may put in a protest vote. They may put in an invalid vote. In the US they may decide to stay home and do some gardening or go for a scenic drive. In the UK they may decide to sit in an armchair and read the paper. Influencing people to go in the direction you want them to go isn’t as easy as chasing cows into the milking yards.

Perhaps when Putin and Trump get to write their presidential memoirs they will give us some tips.

This morning someone asked me whether I thought Trump was an idiot or whether he has a hidden agenda. It reminded me of Baldrick in *Blackadder* saying ‘I have a cunning plan’. If Baldrick, not the sharpest knife in the drawer, can have a cunning plan then I don’t see why Donald Trump can’t have a cunning plan.

The cunning part is tricky. Cunning is not always a desirable trait in presidents. Or anyone else. But we can but hope that the Plan part is genuinely workable, usable, defensible, yes, and intelligent, decent, and worthwhile ...

WATER: And not a drop to drink. They say they have found underground water inside Mars. I have no problem with that. But I did begin to worry when they said they would drill down to it. We are making heavy weather of caring for Earth’s ecosystems. Should we be doing anything drastic on Mars, a planet of which we have only the vaguest idea of its ecology, if ecology is the right word for an apparently bare planet?

Can you imagine a great geyser of water being released by this drilling? Before we know where we are the water will be either vaporized, lost to a different

gravity, soaking in somewhere else, or gouging great ravines ... and all for what? It seems we want to know exactly what the water is like. Is it full of salt, minerals, sulphur, heavy metals, etc, and even more importantly—is there life in it? Little zooplankton things, tiny amoeba, little things to swim around and tell us we are not alone in the galaxy.

Is this a good idea? I am not immune to curiosity.

But equally I know what a mess human beings can make when you let them loose with technology and a cheque book.

And those little things flagellating their way round those underground lakes might like to be left in peace.

OOPS!: I just read that autistic children are being given puberty blockers because they might not actually be autistic but instead could be unhappy and withdrawn because they are transgender.

There were a number of things which worried me deeply about this.

1. We still don't know the causes of autism but the two most compelling I have come across are a) supersensitive hearing which makes the world an overwhelming place and encourages children to retreat into their own world, and b) gut problems; this at first seems odd but more and more mental health issues are being tentatively linked to gut problems. And gut problems are, I hope, more easily treatable than messing round with people's brains or genitals. (Supersensitive hearing has been found in some remote tribes, in the pampas of Argentina, in the Sahara Desert, so there seems no reason why some children in western countries might not have it. And such children have to live not with a desert silence but with the cacophony of cities.)

2. I am yet to be convinced that any child is mature enough, autistic or not, to make such profound decisions as to avoid puberty and change sex before they reach adulthood.

3. The puberty blockers are said to damage bone density leading to possibly severe problems later including osteoporosis and broken bones. Are teenagers sufficiently mature to weigh up the problems? The costs? The benefits? I certainly would not have been as a teenager but perhaps modern teens, autistic or not, have much greater wisdom and maturity. I can only hope so.

4. I am still not convinced that believing you are a female in a male body or vice versa is so profoundly terrible that it will destroy your life. It might even be rather fun. After all, people have been cross-dressing for a long time and they could have all the fun of it without needing expensive surgery or taking dangerous drugs. And how do you actually *feel* your gender? Most days I feel like a human being but I assume people, whatever their gender, have those

sorts of feelings; hunger, tiredness, boredom, anxiety, heat, cold, happiness, a need to find a toilet, a worry over missing the bus. How many people spend all day thinking 'I feel like a woman' or 'I feel like a man in a woman's body' ... I would rather children spend their days thinking less about their feelings and more about the things they are doing and saying and seeing and experiencing ...

5. I remember when everyone was convinced that if schoolchildren were given enough Ritalin problems with behaviour in the classroom would fade away. For a very small number of children this was probably helpful. But a great many children were given drugs, and strong habit-forming drugs at that, for no other reason than it was the fashion to believe that we were facing an epidemic of ADHD children. (Or because no one wanted to tackle more difficult problems like parental abuse or neglect.) The drug companies made a lot of money out of Attention Deficit, with the enthusiastic support of parents and teachers, just as they made a lot of money out of convincing women that HRT was the only way to go, and women including feminists started out believing they would no longer be seen as pathetic creatures at the whim of their mood swings and hot flushes. (Earlier on there was an epidemic of neurasthenia but now we are told there was no such disease.) So now the big companies are gearing up to make another little fortune out of 'puberty blockers', this time with the cheering support of the LGBTI community. A lifetime of needing to take hormones will be a goldmine for the drug companies. Ditto the plastic surgeons as the demand for nips-and-tucks was flattening out, not least because of stories about some very dodgy behaviour in the sector.

So it would be helpful to listen to some of the stories of children who became addicted to Ritalin without it solving deep underlying problems, just as it would be helpful to listen to women who came to see that the problems with HRT outweighed the benefits. And then of course there are old grumps like me who may believe in miracles but have become extremely sceptical about miracle cures—especially when someone somewhere stands to make money out of them.

And there is a more profound issue in there. If we are genuinely facing an epidemic of gender dysphoria then shouldn't we be trying to find the underlying cause or causes? And the most obvious cause is the huge number of chemicals in every part of the environment, in our water, our air, our food. In particular the amount of oestrogen in our environment has seen a massive increase, not only of oestrogen itself but the many chemicals which can mimic oestrogen and trick the body into taking it up. I haven't seen a break down of percentages but from my own observations I think more males are becoming females than the other way around. This might give weight to the possibility of an environmental cause ...

But I still don't think that children should be given 'puberty blockers'. After all, puberty is more than bodily change. It is intrinsic to the growth of awareness of the self.

STRAWS: Do you get the feeling that we are moving through a landscape in which we pick off plastic nasties one-by-one? First it was plastic bags, then the Hobart City Council had a look at one-use plastic containers for takeaway food and decided the issue was Too Hard, and now plastic straws are in the firing line.

I have no problem reverting to paper straws. We had them when I was young and we survived. I always carry a straw in my handbag—just in case.

In fact a lot of things which now come in plastic came in paper or cardboard sixty years ago. And as I say we survived. Of course we complained. 'Look Mum, my straw's gone all soggy! Waaahhhh!' To which she either said 'Bad luck', 'You'll survive' or 'Take another one'.

But now when I look around shops and supermarkets just about EVERYTHING comes in plastic. You want half a cabbage? It's wrapped in plastic. You want some orange juice? Nice plastic container. Even toilet paper comes wrapped in plastic. Goodness knows why. Lollies, bread, rice, pens, bikkies, you name it. Now for a very small number of things plastic probably is the way to go (and there will come a time when plastic willy-nilly has gone; I think it will coincide with Peak Oil and Decline) but for many things either paper, cardboard or cloth is an alternative. For others why shouldn't we re-use containers. And some things simply don't need containers at all.

Before people got milk bottles on their doorstep (remember them?) they put out a container and milk got ladled in to it. I suppose that was given up because the neighbourhood cats were having too good a time. But people could have gone for budgies or guinea pigs instead of cats. Nevertheless, a great many containers *are* still usable more than once.

And for plastics which aren't, that stuff that you struggle to pull off your new fridge or new scooter ... why couldn't it go into a giant boiler to be re-melted, extruded, and formed into something new? Oh, and the giant boiler could be powered by solar, cardboard, or methane from your handy sewerage ponds.

What goes around comes around. So why shouldn't plastic straws be washed and re-used like other items in cafes?

ARSON: Every time there is a raging wildfire, here or somewhere else, people creep up to that horrible word: arson. Was the fire deliberately lit? And the answer is very often a tentative yes. Unless there was some very obvious lightning around then the answer very probably should be yes. It is a simple fact of life.

Human beings like lighting fires. It seems to be something embedded in our DNA, like the ability to form words or want to have sex.

Most of us, of course, constrain ourselves. We fuss over the backyard barbecue. We think lighting campfires is SUCH FUN. We are sorry that little stoves are more messy than electric or gas fires so we have created heaters which mimic little wood fires.

But most of us stop right there.

Just a small minority of people, mostly male, mostly young, haven't learnt that constraint. They still think a box of matches or a cigarette lighter has all sorts of secret excitements beyond the sight of a little flame. And when the fire really catches—whee!—it beats flying kites, it beats eating hamburgers, it even beats sex! To see YOUR FIRE on the nighttime news and know that it is *your* creation—that is true fame, drama, excitement, secret glee. There is little to beat it.

So how can we undermine and counteract this rush of adrenalin?

Arsonists are suspected but they rarely get caught. So how can we come up with better ways of catching arsonists?

Dob in an Arsonist Reward?

After all, the other side of the excitement of starting fires is being able to boast about YOUR FIRE. And if you boast then someone must be there to hear your boast.

Just a thought.

DROUGHT: It is more than a century since Dorothea MacKellar called this a country of 'drought and flooding rains'. So we can't pretend that we hadn't noticed. But have we become any better at coping with drought? We have done something about flooding rains, like restricting building on flood plains and putting dams up-river. But we are still reluctant to say that droughts have to be prepared for.

But fundamental to our problems is that we treated the country like a European country. We surveyed, parceled out, fenced, stocked as individuals. We stocked as though the good years would roll along. We said Aboriginal people were stupid because they wandered from place to place chasing kangaroos and wallabies.

Now we can see that even if Black People had hunted and gathered in different ways in South-East Asia, Australia imposed nomadism on them. They had to recreate that flexibility in moving with the seasons, the fruits, the Bogong Moths, the Witchetty Grubs, the waterholes, the prey animals. Whether or not they wanted to be hunting and gathering nomads as soon as they moved away from coastal areas they had to become wanderers.

But farmers, graziers, pastoralists, squatters were not only profoundly limited by their European attitudes to the land and its animals—they were actually required, in many cases such as Land Grants, to fence, clear trees, plant crops, bring in sheep or cattle. They were being set up to suffer and sometimes to fail as soon as the rains failed.

Now, we have governments able and of varying degrees of willingness to step in. But we haven't been willing to look at the fundamental problem. Static farmers are not well placed to deal with drought. We could look at Scandinavia where every year farmers have to store enough feed to get their animals through the long frozen winters. We can look at transhumance in various European countries and adapt the idea. Up to a point we did this with the long droving trips in search of pasture. But as we are told that there is a plague of kangaroos why aren't we saying: why aren't we re-thinking not only how we parcel out the land but how we stock it.

'Farmers' is a nice collective noun but every farmer faces drought as an individual. So shouldn't we be doing more to help create 'farmers' as a genuinely collective noun. At the very least a collective response would do more to prevent suicide. Collective farms were seen as less productive than individual farmers in Russia. We could say that individual farmers here are more productive—until there is a drought. And that productivity often comes at the expense of the land itself; it is unwisely cleared, it is overstocked.

So can't we take the best of individual farming and the best of collective farming and see how we can use it to blunt the impacts of drought?

QUOTAS: I have just read that the Public Service is being asked to employ more women, ethnics, and disabled people. This sounds kindly. But I am a believer in employing the best qualified most suitable person for each position. If women or men in wheelchairs are better qualified then what are we waiting for?

But I remember a classic case where a deaf man was employed on a front desk in a department (which shall remain nameless). No doubt he ended up feeling a failure, the public was definitely peeved, and that office ended up as a laughing stock. Qualifications and skills need to be tailored to the job. There are already enough rude, incompetent, lazy, unhelpful people out there failing to give good service.

So what we should always remember is that the first requirement of Public Servants is to give the best Public Service possible. The race, the sex, even the number of legs of the Public Servant should not be the defining factor.

ENERGY: We are to have both Energy Security and Lower Prices. They are busy twittering on. But Barnaby Joyce has come out to say that the poor old

pensioners won't be able to afford power unless we put coal firmly back in the frame.

I like the way that pensioners are some sort of mysterious creatures you keep on the leash or hidden away somewhere until you can use them to make a political point.

So what behind the avalanche of words are the points?

We can have energy security from the sun for at least several more million years, the wind ditto. It gets problematical when we come to non-renewable resources. There is nothing secure about oil, gas, uranium, coal—unless we're only talking about security until next Wednesday, next year, perhaps even next decade. Then everyone, including pensioners, will have to face Energy Insecurity.

Wood is a tricky one. We can go on growing trees. But we are rather reluctant to do this because a) wood fires emit various things and b) we are rather reluctant to think in terms of a resource which takes twenty-five years to grow big enough to cut down.

So let's be honest. No finite resource can guarantee Energy Security. And no resource, no matter what, can guarantee lower prices. Because every source is not just a source. It has to take in changing labour costs, changing environmental pressures, changing government legislation, a changing insurance landscape, changing science, changing aspirations.

But before you feel unutterably gloomy—don't forget that you can buy an extra coat from an op-shop for about \$5 (if you don't want a brand name) and you can always sit watching your TV with your legs in a sleeping bag or, better still, you can turn off the TV and read a book or even have an early night, filled with lots of weird and wonderful dreams in which neither Energy Security nor Costs of Same ever intrude. Worth a try?

NEW SENATOR: Shock! Horror! The new senator for Bob Katter's Party used the words 'the Final Solution' and compounded it by wanting a return to Whites Only Immigration.

I am sure all the sound and fury vented on him is good for the venters. It expands their lungs, pushes implacable enemies into the same corner, and exercises their vocal chords. We are really very good at sound and fury providing we don't actually have to do anything difficult like confronting a bkie gang with Nazi insignia on their jackets.

But there are a couple of oddities in the response. Strictly speaking Hitler never used the words 'Final Solution' and if we heard what he had said in German we would not even know it (unless we speak German). It is a bit like people saying there can be no poetry after the Holocaust. Or people complaining about Buddhist monasteries which seem to have swastikas on their gates. We aren't nearly as

picky when it comes to other people being wiped out. When the Americans moved across the Philippines burning and killing and raping they were told to ‘burn and kill’ and they did just that. But no one says you must never say ‘burn and kill’. When Foreign Minister Gareth Evans likened the Timorese under Indonesia’s brutal occupation to a woman being raped and that she should just ‘lie back and enjoy it’—where were all the people to react with shock and horror at his insensitivity?

Never mind. This new senator will never use those words again or at least not in public. But what we should be looking at is immigration. And the simple fact is that there is never anything ‘final’ about it. It is always at the mercy of short-term political aims. But there is a general understanding, even if we are reluctant to admit it, that a country is better off with new immigrants who will assimilate well. The colour of their skins, to my mind, is irrelevant. It is what they think, do, believe in, how they behave, what they want from us, and what they are offering ...

And if he wanted to stop Muslim immigration—well, that horse has bolted.

I have just been reading a book about the Obeid family in NSW and the way they brought corruption to a fine art. You could say that we should not let any Lebanese in, perhaps, but turning Muslims back would not have prevented the Obeid family settling in—simply because they always paraded their Christianity ... in public anyway.

But perhaps that new senator was hunting round for a way to make a splash with his maiden speech? After all, he is always going to be a nobody in the Senate—unless the Bob Katter Party can somehow grow sufficiently to someday hold the ‘balance of power’. And there are three ways you can do this:

1. A speech of profoundly moving goodness and inspiration. Though as most politicians soon become immune to appeals to their better nature this is always going to be hard-going.
2. A speech which mainly confirms what most politicians are thinking and saying anyway—such as a focus on Energy Security and an appeal to help Old Age Pensioners. I can see that being worked up into a very moving speech, almost a tear-jerker. And it has the added advantage that it doesn’t actually require anyone to do anything.
3. A maiden speech which upsets everybody and gets you talked about for weeks afterwards. This is the way to go if you want to be seen as the new *enfant terrible*, the person everyone loves to hate. And you can always say to yourself, when the going gets tough and the insults get hurled, that *every Parliament needs one*.

TURMOIL FOR TURNBULL: I can never manage to get very excited by ‘spills’, changes of leadership, number-crunching and all that. After all the bureaucrats continue to beaver on. Well, we assume they do.

And I cannot get excited about the possibility of having Peter Dutton as our next PM. The poor man looks and sounds dumb. I’m sure this isn’t his fault. It’s just the way he comes over. But I have a bigger worry. He was not only a former policeman but a former member of a Drug Squad.

Now call me cynical but there never was a Drug Squad free of corruption. Hoover in the USA refused to let his FBI tackle drugs because he said the temptations were too great. Those temptations, easy money, or more rarely to feed an officer’s habit, are just as acute in Australia. Drug Squads around the country have been closed down, cleaned out, had to have new men brought in, seen members charged, been hotbeds of rumours and threats. It is the nature of the beast.

Peter Dutton is said to have resigned before Queensland had just such a clean-out. That is a big black mark in my book. The Opposition is running with the claim he unfairly benefited from childcare subsidies to the childcare centres his family owns. That is a second black mark. Pollies are wise to distance themselves from any kind of business before they enter parliament. After all, they *are* paid enough to live on, they are even paid enough to support a spouse and some children. Business on the side even if it is squeaky-clean and not creating a conflict of interest is a distraction and I think running a government is too important to be left to distracted people.

I won’t say ‘running a country’ because countries go on with or without pollies, indeed with or without people.

A number of people said on TV last night that we would be the ‘laughing stock’ of the world. Talk about national navel-gazing! Do we really think we are that important or that interesting? Do we actually know how many prime ministers or presidents most countries have had in the last decade? Can you tell me how many leaders have been recycled in Finland, Armenia, Belgium, or Argentina in the last 10 years? When the Italians seemed to have the ‘revolving door’ down to a fine art were we all falling round in guffaws or sniggering behind our hands? Did Italy cease to produce Fiat cars and Gucci bags and soccer players, did tourists cease visiting museums in Florence or lava flows on Mt Etna? We do need to keep things in perspective.

Maybe a bit of turmoil (so long as it is other people’s turmoil) is good for our health? It stops us thinking about more important issues. It stops us WORRYING about more important issues. *And worry is not good for our arteries.*

The only trouble is—the more important issues haven't gone away.

RUNNING OUT OF THIS AND THAT: The world *is* going to run out of this and that. It is as clear as night following day following night ...

We have two strategies it would seem:

a) we will continue hunting for new supplies. Oh goody, the Arctic ice has melted and it won't be long before the Antarctic ice melts and in which case it would be silly to leave a large continent un-mined. Of course these mines pushed into more remote places, deeper waters, dangerously unstable areas, ecologically sensitive places, good farmland, are only viable if prices keep rising (oh sorry, pollies, you were hoping to keep everything from gas prices to lithium for batteries DOWN?) or

b) we will continue hunting for alternatives. Now, in the case of things like gas there are viable alternatives. We could each have our own little powerhouses attached to our backsides for 'home-made heating' ... it is odd how good an advertising tool the words 'home-made' are. More seriously, the wind is going to continue to blow; indeed, with global warming it seems it will blow harder and stronger and faster and even, probably, more often. But there are a number of important substances which are getting very hard to find. Rare earths. Rare minerals. I just read that lithium sells for 10 times the price of gold. And there are even rarer minerals whose names I cannot even remember but which apparently are vital to modern life.

But in all the breast-beating and name-calling no one ever tackles the obvious. Rising populations require more mines in more difficult and sensitive environments. But what if we simply turned it around? Falling populations require less of everything.

Oh but, you may be saying, we need growth so we can look after our elderly!

Given that many places around Australia have around 25% youth unemployment I do not find this argument compelling.

Of course young people do not want to take old ladies to the toilet or change the bedclothes of old gentlemen who have wet themselves.

But as we all plan on getting old, except for a small number of generously self-sacrificial people, we might as well get used to looking after the elderly. Or we could shuffle jobs around. The unemployed young could do hard things like shoveling blue metal in to potholes thus freeing up the middle-aged to look after the elderly ... Just a thought.

FOREIGN INVESTMENT: Even thoughtful commentators seem to think foreign investment is good for Australia. Why? We are the wealthiest nation in our region. Why do we need foreigners to come in and do things for us—including driving big trucks to cart away our non-renewable resources. And telling us we need more high rise buildings in our cities. Do we?

And we should never forget that no foreigner ever invests in Australia out of the goodness of his or her heart. They do not say ‘those Aussies, they’re such great people, I must go there and make life better for them’. No. They say if we invest 1 million dollars into Australia we’ll be able to take 2 million dollars out of Australia. It is always about the benefit they can get *out* of Australia. And this is usually compounded by things hidden, differentials in foreign exchange, and other clever activities which are beyond my simple view of life.

And I have another question which rarely gets asked: why do we need to mine and build and exploit NOW? Why not leave minerals in the ground and Australian farmers on their land and our capital cities without yet another dreary concrete block?

Oh? You think more high rises will get the homeless off our streets and therefore foreign investment is good for Australia? No, I don’t think foreign investors are building for our poor ...

NEW PM: It seems we are to have a PM called Scomo and I must be very careful when I’m typing so I don’t hit a U instead of an O.

It is hard to think of anything to say about a PM called Scomo so I think I will go to bed instead.

WRONG NAME: Someone just pointed out to me, from something she had been reading, that we no longer have *Royal* Commissions. No, Royal is gradually being retired. Soon we won’t have Royal Societies, just unvarnished Societies. We have Commissions of Enquiry. Sometimes they are National Commissions, sometimes they are just Commissions. And Commissions are usually better than Omissions.

Then I came upon the statement, also in the printed word, that homosexuality used to be illegal in Tasmania. No. Homosexuality was never illegal. It was Homosexual Acts which were illegal. And even that is misleading. It was Homosexual Acts between men that were illegal. Homosexual Acts between women have never been illegal here. Homosexual as opposed to Heterosexual. Not, as it is often put, homosexual as opposed to lesbianism.

The island of Lesbos tried to stop the world using the name of their dearly loved island to express acts between women. But they found they were flogging a dead horse. And yet it has never been proved that the island of Lesbos was ever a

hotbed of Lesbians or Lesbian sex. Their famous poet Sappho ran some kind of 'school' for girls and had girls living in her home but that isn't the same as saying she was having sex with them. After all, I sometimes have women, even young women, come to stay with me. And so far no one has made any assumptions about what we do when we close the doors and turn out the lights.

And even if I was capable of writing beautiful poems about the loveliness of (some) women it wouldn't prove anything—except that I am occasionally observant.

CHILDCARE—HOW MUCH? I have no objection to childcare workers getting more money. 'A fair day's pay for a fair day's work' should be more than an empty slogan. But two things about the campaign gave me pause.

1. The childcare workers were saying they were only being paid \$3 an hour above the minimum wage and this was not enough to even buy groceries. For a 30-hour-week they would be getting \$90 above the minimum wage. So this begs the question: how do people on the minimum wage manage to buy groceries? Are the stoic people who clean our public toilets and pick up our public litter going hungry to bed every night? And if so, shouldn't our focus be on the minimum wage, the raising of same, rather than singling out childcare workers?

2. The childcare workers kept stressing that they were educating our little children not simply minding them. But they *are* childCARERS not childEDUCATORS. I have no objection to the carers showing a child how to tie a shoelace or eat lunch without putting it all down their t-shirt or play with other children without whacking them over the head with a plastic spade. But that doesn't seem to be what they meant.

I know there is a better understanding now that early childhood is the time when children learn faster and more easily than later childhood and that therefore we should be spooning knowledge into them at every opportunity. (And it begs the question: will childcare kids be ahead of non-childcare kids when they start school and is this a GOOD THING? And if there is no curriculum for such 'education' who decides what kids in childcare should be learning anyway?) But this is a very limited interpretation of 'knowledge'. Childhood is a time for building strong bones, strong lungs, strong bodies, a time for nurturing the imagination, a time for reveling in the world around us, a time for relishing fresh air and sunshine, a time for exercising the legs and developing better co-ordination, all the things which happen naturally but which need time and opportunity. When I come past a childcare centre and see kids riding round on dinkies or digging in a sand pit while an adult stands watching over them to make sure those plastic spades are used for their rightful purpose I feel happy. I don't want them inside being 'taught'. There

is time for naps, for sitting quietly to listen to a story, but I want children outside *playing*. They will spend 10 to 15 years of their childhoods inside being ‘taught’.

I can remember as a child lying on the grass and looking up to the clouds. Was that one an elephant? Was this one a sailing ship? Was that one behind it a determinedly amorphous blob? I don’t think I was ‘learning’ anything but I wouldn’t exchange that time for any amount of structured teaching and/or learning.

Our children need time to simply enjoy listening to birds, watching butterflies, smelling the scent of flowers, developing their sense of a self engaging with the world around them. All kinds of structured pressured learning will come later.

I *do* want childcare to be glorified ‘baby-sitting’ not the pressure to educate.

What we should pay for our toddlers being ‘sat’ is surely something which needs genuine community engagement. But in the long run I suspect it will come back to arguments over how much parents and how much taxpayers are willing to put in to the equation.

MORE DAMS? OH GOODY, SAID THE BUNYIP: The call for more dams in inland Australia allied to pipelines to bring water from flooding coastal rivers is now ringing throughout the land. It all sounds very sensible, doesn’t it?

Perhaps it is. But there are many problems, many big problems, which need to be engaged with. I will try to list the ones which immediately come to mind.

1. Salt. The soil of much of inland Australia contains salt. From Lake Eyre to the salty water we pump up there is the constant reminder that the salt is always waiting. And irrigation is a good way to bring it to the surface.

2. There are already many dams scattered throughout the countryside, from small weirs to supply country towns with water to the huge dams that cotton growers have put in. But they all evaporate at massively-accelerated rates—as compared to the natural creeks and lagoons, and they all tend to remove water upstream which impacts on ecosystems downstream, and a number of them because of agricultural chemicals have major problems with toxic blue-green algae. It isn’t just farms and towns downstream. It is wetlands, bushland, native animals. And by the time we realize we have a problem the problem has usually settled in firmly and refuses to shift—even when we manage to find some money to throw at it.

3. Would a pipeline from the Brisbane River to take water to Goondiwindi actually pay for itself? We don’t like paying for water. We think: it falls from the sky at no cost to us so why should we pay large amounts to have it delivered to our door. Are we prepared to pay the prices for our grain, meat, wool, or fruit which would truly reflect the cost of the water which has gone in to that same product?

4. Much of inland Queensland sits on artesian water. Generations of farmers and graziers have fallen on this water with glee. After all, it was just sitting there waiting for us to come along and bore down. For a long time it was believed that the huge underground reservoirs were constantly replenished. It was thought that water seeped southward from the Gulf of Carpentaria so it didn't matter how much we took, it would soon be refilled. Now, that idea has been dropped. Now we know that this is immensely ancient water, hundreds, thousands, perhaps even millions of years old. Yes, it does replenish very slowly as water percolates down and collects. But the replenishment cannot keep pace with the rate of removal. And if we remove the water the land slowly sinks. That, of course, is just the most obvious problem. Oh dear, my paddocks ... never mind, if they sink enough it will save me getting the bulldozers in to dig a dam ...

5. We have patted ourselves on our collective back because WE ARE FEEDING THE WORLD. Here we live on one of the oldest landmasses, ancient soil, deeply leached, tired, and old. But we got out our whips to stir it up and make it produce. It has sighed and done what we ask but only very reluctantly. And every so often it jacks up. More water we cry! More fertilizer we cry! More help, more subsidies. No one ever says the land might like a rest, a chance to recuperate at its own pace. And all this feeding of people requires that we remove millions of trees. For a while people believed that rain would 'follow the plough' but then they realized the rain follows the trees. Take away the trees, you get less rain. It is a very simple equation. Fewer trees = less rain. It makes sense. Trees let loose water vapour from their leaves. Water vapour, I assume, attracts water vapour. A sort of friendly mingling. So before we go any further with our dams and pipes we need to stop believing we can FEED THE WORLD, the world needs to take more responsibility for feeding itself, and we could also get serious about TREES.

In times gone by people did walk off properties. They abandoned homes, left land, gave up. Tumbledown shacks, rusting machinery, mouldering carts bear witness to those failures. Or perhaps those wise decisions. Now we, government and people, urge farmers and graziers to stay on, 'to fight on'—it has a dramatic ring to it implying courage and determination—therefore we do have a responsibility to help them.

SOCIAL MEDIA: It has a nice benign sound to it, doesn't it? Social conjures up images of 'bring a plate' and being nice and friendly. Media is that thing, from message sticks to tom-toms, from The Women's Weekly to Facebook, which just keeps us in touch with one another. Which is A GOOD THING, isn't it?

A while ago I heard people discussing the question: Are we now the most narcissistic society that has ever existed? I have no idea how we judge the societies

of different places and the far past but I think there is probably truth in the proposition. Kings and emperors may have wanted selfies, which they called statues or monuments, but most people were too busy surviving to worry about how they appeared to anyone else. And most of them didn't have mirrors, not even a nice reflecting pool.

I was reminded of this question when I heard someone say that the media did a lot to create the anorexia epidemic. I think this is true. I have never heard of anorexia in Tonga or Swaziland. Tongans have the good sense not to be self-obsessed. People in Swaziland are probably wanting more food, not less.

When I was at school the girls spent their spare time measuring their vital statistics. This had quite a lot to do with Hollywood and its female stars. I had problems with this because I was a peculiar shape. 30-26-30. Or something similar. And as I couldn't make some parts of me larger the only thing I could do was try to make other bits smaller. This became, briefly, an obsession.

I was saved from traveling further down this dangerous road by a simple 'intervention'. I left school.

I was reminded of this almost forgotten episode of my life when someone told me that a paper on how social media is fuelling Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria in Young Girls was prevented from being presented to a conference in the USA. I have no idea whether it was a well-written paper or not but it was pointing the finger at social media. It seems that social media is a tender beast. You can accuse it of bullying. You cannot accuse it of influencing. Interesting. And of course my thoughts went back to how close I had come to stepping out on to the road to anorexia, hustled along by women's magazines and celebrity news and other girls' obsession with body shape.

And then I was out in the big wide world looking for work and potential employers couldn't care less how I felt about my vital statistics. They just wanted to know: Can you type?

THE JUDGES' DECISION: Every one, it seems, is fussing over whether Serena Williams was out of order when she broke her racquet and abused the umpire. And then a cartoonist did an unflattering picture of her doing her tantrum.

All very juvenile, of course, but I was reminded of the requirements of various kinds of competitions. If you enter a writing competition, an art prize, plan to sing in an eisteddfod, you are usually asked to sign an agreement acknowledging that 'The Judges' decision is final and no correspondence will be entered in to' or something very similar. Now I don't know about international tennis but I assume people when they enter sign up to some sort of similar commitment.

Being a judge, an umpire, a referee, is a difficult, stressful and often exhausting and unpopular job. People aren't lining up. Yet take away judges, umpires, referees, and most competitions would have to be cancelled.

That umpire may have got it wrong. That umpire may have been sexist, racist, blind, incompetent, or biased. But competitors by the simple act of entering a competition give a commitment to respecting the umpire's call.

Racquet manufacturers may rub their hands in glee every time they see a star breaking a racquet. But it is rather hard to tell your children not to throw tantrums—when their idols regularly throw tantrums. So you can

- a) turn off the TV
- b) tell them these people are performing to a script written by the manufacturers
- c) help them find other idols, the kind who do not break things.

MORE OR LESS: Of what? Ants? No, tourists. The Lord Mayor said we need to keep numbers under control. The Premier said the more the better. And then he criticized the Lord Mayor in words which were not very Premier-like.

Tourism tends to be treated as a nicer kinder industry than mining or manufacturing. With luck it doesn't leave toxic waste behind. But that doesn't mean that tourists can't overwhelm and damage tourist destinations.

There is a fundamental conflict in the process. Tourists presumably want to see different places as they really are, an authentic experience, but tourists also want 'all the comforts of home'. And the two aims are in a constant struggle and the second usually wins. Because all kinds of things come in to play. You can't let tourists into an old building until you have put in stair rails, modern floor coverings, modern toilets, modern lighting—in other words tourists want an authentic experience which cannot be authentic because they don't really want what is genuinely authentic and might sue if it was authentic.

And there is a deeper problem. Even when tourists respect the places they come to, do not expect signs in their language, foods to fit their palate, and accept small simple rooms in small simple accommodation, their sheer numbers can overwhelm. Careful walkers on nature trails can still make it harder for delicate and rare plants to survive. Careful walkers on nature trails still create noise and disruption to nesting birds. Careful walkers still want huts and duckboards and cooking facilities and toilets and occasional Rescue Helicopters ...

Tiny Caribbean islands trying to cope with a million-plus tourists a year find that their people become progressively less friendly and helpful towards those same tourists. Tourism by its very nature demands change, even if it is only

minimal change per tourist. In the end the ‘unspoiled’ things people have come to see are spoiled and the gravy train moves on.

If we want tourism to underwrite the budget then we have to put a great deal more thought into how tourism is promoted, planned for, catered for, and how we protect the things most vulnerable to damage by wholesale tourism. Not wanting large highrise hotels is a start. But we need to stop thinking that tourism is an unalloyed good and start thinking and discussing and planning how to make sure tourism doesn’t spoil the things which make a place friendly, livable, and special.

After all, tourists have taken their snapshots and bought their souvenirs (often made somewhere else) and moved on. They shouldn’t be the defining factor in what we want of the place we will continue to live in.

OLD FOLK ON-LINE: I just read that a survey of Australia’s Oldies is going to be done on-line. Did they mean they would contact us all via the internet or did they mean they would put the results of their survey on-line?

If the first then they are off to a poor start. Not only are many oldies including me not on-line—though it is possible they are not the oldies who matter and their life experiences and needs are irrelevant—but many oldies who would like to be on-line can’t because of costs, ignorance, poor eyesight, living in places where reception is poor, you name it.

But perhaps they mean that only the results will go on-line. First ‘they’, whoever ‘they’ happens to be, will bail us up around the streets, in doctors’ surgeries, at bowls or croquet, at events put on for the elderly, in aged care, wherever we dare poke our noses outside the door, and they may even bail us up at home, and want to know what we think about certain things, and then they will put some numbers and graphs on-line. For example, x number of oldies can’t understand why everyone these days MUMBLES. Or y number of oldies are terrified at the thought of having to go into Aged Care. And the PM’s latest Royal Commission into Aged Care has done nothing to dampen *that* fear.

And then we will be told that this is the most comprehensive survey ever taken of our elderly and therefore we know now what all those elderly blighters are up to or would like to be up to—if they could afford to.

I can’t wait.

R U LONELY?: We are told more and more frequently how lonely most of us are. This puzzles me. And what is the precise definition of lonely everyone is apparently using? Are they thinking of a castaway on a desert island who has not spoken to another human being in 10 years or is it something much more subjective? Do people feel lonely while they’re reading a good book, watching a good TV program, cooking dinner, listening to Beethoven (or Lady Gaga), while

they revel in coffee and rich cake? I don't know. It is nice to eat out in company but as so many cafés and restaurants blast you with music all the while old Mrs Mops can't hear their counterparts speak—so they might as well eat out on their own anyway. Or stay home to eat. It is nice to go to a movie or a concert in company but if it is something which inspires and transports the company is not the vital part of the experience.

I was discussing this with a friend of a similar age. Did people talk about being lonely 60 or 70 years ago? We decided they didn't. Then we mulled over the reasons. Were people too stoical or too proud to admit to loneliness? Were people who had lost loved ones in the war well aware that that happiness and companionship was gone for ever and it was no good whingeing? Life had to be got on with. But we finally came to the conclusion that people had much more modest aspirations.

If you had a couple of good friends you counted yourself fortunate. But if you lived in a remote place you might only see your friends once or twice a year anyway. If you could afford it you might occasionally ring up. But most people simply wrote letters as a way of keeping in touch and sharing news and affection. Now I hear people saying they have a thousand friends on Facebook—so of course other people who have 10 friends on Facebook or aren't on Facebook at all start to feel that they are missing out on something. And keeping in touch with all those 'friends' obviously keeps people busy—and if you're busy you can't be lonely, now can you?

But I think there is something else there we are overlooking and that is that loneliness begins within. It is hard to be lonely if you are richly stocked with memories, imagination, ideas, interests. Of course you can feel bereft when a loved one goes away or dies. But your fundamental needs are met from within. Good company, happy company, loving company, uplifting company, inspiring company ... those are the bonus things that life can bring ... but they are the bonus not the fundamental ...

KIDS: I saw a sign 'KIDS OFF NAURU'. I assume this means kids of asylum seekers rather than the kids of Nauruans. In general I do not want to see any child held in a camp or prison. I know that children only know that they are in a terrible place because adults have told them so. Kids accept tiny tenements, dust-bowl farms, miserable shacks, life on junks or truck cabins with equanimity if adults do not say to them 'this is a terrible way to live'.

And I assume Nauruan kids have modest ways of staying happy there. So why shouldn't asylum seeker children share with Nauruan children in their schools, playgroups, playgrounds, playing on the beach (if Nauru has any beaches) and generally sharing their everyday ways of being happy.

But there is a different dilemma. To take children away from awful surroundings but loving parents to keep them in nicer surroundings but away from those loving parents ... which is better? Of course I am assuming their parents *are* loving. Surely those parents would not have brought children on small boats if they did not love those same children with a deep and abiding and unselfish love.

The solution to this dilemma is surely to close down such camps—I am sorry for the Nauruans losing a nice little earner but we could always send them some juvenile delinquents instead (I don't suppose they want our hardened criminals)—because except for time in quarantine and time to check stories and documents long detention serves no purpose and costs a lot of money.

We assume such camps are truly horrible because we compare them with nice homes and comfortable backgrounds and in this assumption is a recognition that boat people are not the truly poor, not peasants from mud huts without sanitation and running water. They are people a little up the ladder. Of course the much richer come by plane and have all kinds of ways of staying put once they're here. This is an interesting thing because it suggests that it is people in that middling area who are most likely to confront unjust governments, systems, constitutions, military actions—and thus put their lives in danger.

Is this a realistic summing-up?

And two things which have been said to me in the last week:

- a) The awfulness of Nauru is not that it is worse than refugee camps in Uganda or Thailand but that we are the richest country in our region and yet have created Third World conditions in the camps we are responsible for. And
- b) One of the stupidest things asylum seekers can do is throw away their documents—because it takes around 4 years for people's identities, country of origin, criminal records, and stories of persecution to be thoroughly checked when there are no documents to help immigration officials. And those 4 years are more likely to be spent in detention camps than pleasant suburbs with beach views.

KEEP ON KEEPING ON: I heard someone in the media say he hoped the Queen would continue until she was ninety-nine. (Why ninety-nine?) Then he said this showed the most remarkable sense of duty. Does it? It is eminently possible that the Queen has no wish to sit at home and listen to Philip grumbling. And there is also the possibility that the Queen enjoys her public life.

It does not appeal to me, living a life in the public arena with photographers popping up day and night and everything you say seen as reportable, but a lot of people do enjoy that kind of public exposure.

And there is the other side. The Queen will never have to worry about how to pay her mortgage, how to get her children into the best schools and pay their fees, she will never be faced with eviction or homelessness, she does not have to queue for anything let alone be told at the door that all the seats are taken. She does not have to hunt for a parking spot or take her groceries home with her on the bus. She does not have to cook or iron or vacuum or hang out the washing. If her car breaks down it isn't her worry. If she doesn't feel well the doctor will come to her. She won't wait three hours at an Emergency Department with the drunks and addicts and fight victims. I am sure you can add to my list.

Is opening some bazaars and christening some warships and attending some boring functions and reading some papers sent over from Westminster really a worse alternative to dealing with the 'neighbours from hell' or struggling on to public transport with a pram and a toddler?

Still, I do wish she would retire and let Charles have his chance to be king.

WHY WEST PAPUA?: Several people have asked me: why is Mrs Mop interested in West Papua? After all, most people aren't, most people live in blissful ignorance of the dreadful things happening there next door to us.

The answer is very simple. My father was in the RAAF in New Guinea. He spent time in what was then Dutch New Guinea. Some of his time was spent on a little dot called, then, Noemfoor Island and sharing this limited space with a lot of Yanks, quite a lot of Aussie airmen and ground crew, an unknown number of Japanese, and some Papuan villagers trying to go on with life with their fishing canoes and their vegie patches in between ducking bombs and finding unexploded ordinance in among their sweet potatoes, and picking up downed airmen in their dug-outs and explaining to their children that all these strangers had for some odd reason come to do some fighting, though not with bows and arrows and stone axes, and they needed to cover their ears when the fighting really got fierce.

He wasn't what is now called, in a lowered voice, political. But he had a simple question: why did we wreck our health, get killed, get nasty tropical diseases and bites, to chase the Japanese out of the country—just so that the United Nations could hand those simple Papuan villagers over to the very un-tender care of the Indonesians. What, he liked to say, had the Indonesians ever done to send the Japanese packing? His answer was a derisory 'NIL!' And he occasionally added on the rider: why the heck should we have colluded (I don't think he used the word 'colluded'; he had something ruder) in handing a Melanesian village society which loved pigs to a lot of non-Melanesians who hated pigs? Of course,

he said things like ‘fuzzy-wuzzies’ rather than the polite ‘Melanesian’. But his down-to-earth views have always stayed with me. And no one, no Aussie PM, no American PM, no Indonesian President, no UN Secretary-General has ever provided a convincing answer to his questions. In fact, none of them have provided any answers, full stop.

POOR LADY: So Mrs Trump and her wardrobe is back in the news. This time it was her HAT. She’s been taken to task for her SHOES, her JACKET, now her HAT. Or more specifically her pith helmet.

I remember two of my aunts always used to buy pith helmets for summer wear. They said they were light, comfortable, tough, practical, and kept the sun off. They had the added advantage that they could be used for other things. As a dipper if an animal needed water. To carry things found round the farm such as a naughty hen laying outside the chookyard and leaving a clutch of eggs to be carried home. For dumped kittens, and lost birds, and a sudden flush of paddock mushrooms.

But practicality, it seems, wasn’t on anyone’s mind. No. Pith helmets epitomized colonial rule and therefore should not be worn by First Ladies. Now colonizers also forced trousers, shirts, skirts, brassieres, and shoes (not to mention petticoats and bonnets) on to the colonized. Before the arrival of colonizers people in Africa, Asia, North America, the Pacific, happily went around in lap-laps, sarongs, bunches of grass, long robes, penis gourds, you-name-it. And some didn’t bother with anything except a bit of paint. But now they were going to have trousers foisted on them. Should the people of Africa, Asia, North America, the Pacific, all abandon trousers because of their colonial connections? People mostly went barefoot. A few, particularly in colder places, wore wooden clogs or moccasins, but most had shoes foisted on them. Should shoes be banned because of this connection to colonialism?

And if Mrs Trump should turn up in Kenya in bare feet as a way of respecting the pre-colonial past a whole lot of people would jump up and down and yell that she was not respecting the people of Kenya. The poor lady might as well wind herself in a blanket, throw a teatowel over her head and put her feet into fluffy slippers. Then all the people so consumed by her wardrobe would have enough to keep them busy for weeks.

BILLBOARDS: People are upset because the Opera House is being used as a giant billboard. People are upset because the manager of the OH was bullied into allowing this. We aren’t told how much the promoters of the Everest Stakes paid for this or whether the OH is desperate for money. (Though it probably is; most things to do with the Arts are desperate for money.) But the whole thing is tacky. It reminds us that nowhere is free of the power and ugliness of advertising.

But I have two different questions.

1. Do more people go to the races *because* they have seen a race advertised? I very much doubt it. I have never met someone who went to the races because of an advertisement. People go racing because they a) love horses or b) love gambling. I could add, for a few big Spring races, they see it as a chance to splurge on a new dress and a matching hat. If ten or twenty extra people go along because of this ad then Racing NSW or whoever paid for the ad has squandered its money.

2. Why is racing putting all this money into one race? Small country clubs are struggling. Why not spread the money round? Instead of one race with \$13 million attached why not hundreds of races with an extra \$1,000 attached? Otherwise racing increasingly becomes a sport for rich people *in cities*. And the country race clubs increasingly close their courses and cease being a nurturing ground for young horses and young riders.

TURNING AWAY STUDENTS: Is there a campaign to make Catholic schools, the Catholic Church, look like the last bastion of intolerance? It begins to look like it. Mind you, they have met their detractors half way. But the latest claim that Catholic schools are refusing entry to gay students is problematical.

Private schools can expel students. In theory public schools cannot. Students are expelled for various reasons. Disruptive behaviour, bullying, drug-dealing, stealing, intentionally hurting another student. And it would be naïve to believe that such expulsions always are done openly and fairly with warnings given to students and careful discussions carried out with parents. And then of course there is ‘The Naughtiest Girl in the School’ syndrome. Enid Blyton’s girl behaves as badly as she can in the hope that her parents will be asked to take her away from her school. This has its real life counterparts.

Every private school has a waiting list. Some of these waiting lists have hundreds of students on them. It would be naïve to believe that the sole criteria is the student’s place on the list. With so many parents clamouring to get their kids into private schools I am sure there is some picking and choosing going on behind the scenes.

But what of that particular claim about discrimination? I suppose I came out of the Ark but I simply do not believe that any child of 12, 13, 14, 15, is set in their sexuality. Legion are the youngsters who try out a lesbian relationship and then end up with a man—and vice versa. More importantly I do not think that any child should be parading their sexuality in school. Schools are there to teach the curriculum, not to hear about a child’s possible sexual orientation. That is the child’s and the family’s private business, not the school’s. Any child who is proclaiming ‘in your face’ to staff or students their possible sexual identity should

be firmly told that that is their private business. Any family or student trumpeting their possible sexual orientation before they even enter a school is proclaiming that they intend to be a disruptive and disrespectful presence in that school.

(When the Mop kids were entered in secondary school we filled in some forms, names, birthdates, that kind of thing, but no one asked us about the sexual orientation of our kids and we would have found it a gross invasion of privacy if they had—nor would we ever have dreamed of mentioning the sexual orientation of our kids—if they were even thinking of such things at 12 or 13.)

That students are leaving schools lacking basic literacy and numeracy is a reminder that schools are being so distracted by irrelevant issues that the core reason to have schools is being overlooked. Apart from the fact that under-age sex is a crime, regardless of whether the participants call themselves gay, I do not believe that any school should be asked to be aware of or condoning any student's sex life. That is private business for out-of-school hours. No school should even be required to take any stand on anything to do with a student's private sexual attitudes and aspirations.

Will other religious schools, Jewish, Muslim, Exclusive Brethren, etc, be put in the hot seat? And there is an even more puzzling question. If Catholic Schools *are* seen as bastions of discrimination and intolerance then why are so many families and teachers and students clamouring to get in?

HUNGRY: I heard that around four million Australians wonder each day where their next meal is coming from. Are these figures correct? Do people go out and survey Australians? Or is it based on the numbers of people who go to Food Bank, Loui's Van, free lunches, seek school breakfasts, etc? If that figure *is* correct then surely it should be a priority in all government discussions and allocations.

But it is hard to make broadly sweeping generalizations. Is one family hungry because of the high rent they are paying? Because they smoke or drink? Because the minimum wage is too low? Because there is chronic illness in the family? Because they have no idea how to budget?

I can't answer these questions. But there are practical things to be done. The sort of things families with many children and a very small income used to do. Grow some fruit and veg. Look for bargains, discounts, discontinued lines, barter and swop when the trees are loaded down. Various food places bring prices down before the weekend if they don't stay open. Various op-shops offer day-old bread for free. Even things like dock-weed and nettles are edible. I remember my mother was always on the look-out for cheap hail-damaged apples, over-ripe bananas, we were sent out to the paddocks with buckets to look for mushrooms after rain. Drink water from the tap, not cans and bottles of fizz. I remember being given bread and dripping, which is quite nice, but probably would not appeal to modern families ...

Then there are food vouchers and other forms of charitable help. Some churches and schools put on free sausage sizzles. Go fishing. Of course these aren't answers for long-term chronic hunger.

So if you haven't had a square meal in months try your local charities, draw up a list itemizing *absolutely everything* you have bought this week (down to a can of drink, packet of smokes, newspaper, bus fare) and see where changes can be made—and then go and park yourself in your local MP's office until you get the help you need.

I went away for some bread and dripping but didn't have any dripping so I had bread and cheese. And now I've come back to say: Four million! FOUR MILLION!

WEASEL WORDS?: With the Hobart City Council elections coming up I have noticed candidates tossing round words like 'Livable' and 'Sustainable' and I wonder exactly what they mean. If people live in a city then it must be livable. The slums of Mumbai have millions living there. Does this make the city livable? Ditto the slums of Lima or Harlem or Nairobi.

OK. Sustainable sounds a bit better. But most cities in one form or another are sustainable. There are a few which proved unsustainable like Angkor Wat and the ancient city of Zimbabwe. But, in general, places like Rome and Jerusalem and Cairo have been able to hang in there despite invasions and destruction and traffic chaos. So what precisely does sustainable mean when applied to Hobart?

I prefer candidates who don't mention words like 'growth' and 'development' because they almost always end up in things which are ugly, unsuitable ... and, yes, unsustainable. Buildings that get knocked down after forty years and cost taxpayers and ratepayers millions for the knocking down ...

Perhaps that is what they mean by 'livable' and 'sustainable'—this little-understood human passion for knocking down and building up and knocking down and ...

Koalas do not seem to have this passion any more than cows or kangaroos do ... It is just an odd thing about human beings and I don't think any city council should pander to it ...

UNSKILLED JOBS DISAPPEARING: I just read a snippet in the paper about low-skills jobs disappearing. Now they have been disappearing for fifty years. Have people only just noticed? I think people have been well aware that we are sending jobs overseas, replacing people with automated factories and computerized systems. I believe even doctors and lawyers are worrying about being replaced. Which is why they urge people to see their GP not go on-line and

get some possibly iffy advice. Of course this suggests that no GP ever gives iffy advice.

But what do we do with unskilled youngsters? The desire to keep them at school longer, to give them skills, to encourage them to do more with their potential, is understandable. But apart from young people who aren't going to gain anything much from extra schooling there is also the problem that even moderately skilled jobs are on the line. I know there are endless coffee shops and restaurants wanting 'wait staff', I see their ads in their windows. But these are ephemeral jobs. A slight downturn and many such places will put people off. There are jobs in the building trade but these depend on a ongoing frenzy of building, something which cannot be counted on. So how can we get young people into permanent jobs with prospects?

There is a newish habit of telling young people they will go through at least five different careers in their working lifetime. This seems to me to be extremely damaging. Why bother to work to get a skill and experience if that job is going to evaporate? You might as well just mess around on the dole. The only people who really are able to ignore that negative advice are those whose passion for doing something outruns the possibility that that career will evaporate.

So what to do with those unskilled youngsters? We could of course produce fewer unskilled youngsters. But that is a long term idea. You can't very well tell parents who produced three unskilled youngsters twenty years ago that they should have given the matter deeper thought.

But when I hear of farmers, vegetable growers, orchardists, crying out for help and bringing in overseas kids I always find myself thinking "But why not OUR kids—" The pay is poor, the work is dull, but it is a START. Once you've got one good reference the next step is just that little bit easier.

It is something that greater minds should be giving greater attention to. Any nation which is content to let 25% of its youth face permanent unemployment is asking for trouble and doing its young people *no favours at all*.

YOUNG SOLDIERS: We've just seen the Invictus Games with all the pleasant hoo-hah of Prince Harry and wife, brave young men and women, missing bits, winning medals. But surely any nation which is happy to permanently damage its young men and women needs its collective head read.

These youngsters were sent off to Afghanistan and after 14 years what had they achieved? They had killed a number of Afghanis, a few of them had got killed or maimed. But the reasons for going in—to destroy the Taliban and establish democracy—were not achieved and realistically cannot be achieved. Apart from the fact that democracy is rarely established at the point of a gun, or not permanently, I wonder how many Aussies in politics, in positions of military

leadership, really understood the attraction of jihad. Most of our pollies when they discuss things with Muslims discuss those things with moderate Westernized Muslims. The same could be said of Iraq. How many Aussie pollies really understood Iraq, rather than a Western take on the country? We managed to kill and maim some Iraqis, kill and maim some young Aussies—and all for what?

Surely if we have the sense God gave geese we will make sure that we have thoroughly done our homework and explored every possible non-military solution before we even *think* of sending young men and women off to die or to come home permanently damaged.

I have just noticed *The Mercury* describing the Anzacs as ‘honest’. Now you can call them brave, stoic, determined—but quite a few of them weren’t honest. They lied about their ages. They lied about their family responsibilities. In the case of the ‘khaki crims’ they lied to escape charges, avoid arrest, break bail or parole, and sometimes it had the added benefit of abandoning wives, children, bills, and problematical aspects of their lives. It didn’t stop them being brave, but honest? No.

THOSE SHARKS: We’d better cull the blighters, hadn’t we?

Mind you, only a half-dozen people per year, out of 24 million, get bitten by sharks each year. But they get bitten in places where people want to swim and surf and dive. We can’t have that. Definitely not.

But the trouble with culls is that we don’t know whether it is one shark which has acquired a taste for human flesh (as some man-eating tigers are said to) or whether it has to do with human incursions into popular shark feeding spots or whether it is to do with the clarity or cloudiness of the water, or whether some people smell fishy ...

So if we cull (i.e. kill) 999 sharks it doesn’t mean that the 1000th shark will not bite someone’s leg. Should we therefore kill every shark in the sea?

When a lot of little creatures with stinging tentacles are floating around in the sea people are warned to stay out. I assume this is because it is not realistic to cull sea wasps, jellyfish, stingrays, stonefish, and other such critters. So why pick on sharks?

We do not destroy the cars which mangle people to death. We do not insist that every supermarket take every nut off its shelves. And yet to die in a car crash, a house fire, due to an allergic reaction, you name it—these are horrible ways to die too.

There is just something about sharks which makes them into villains. Perhaps if they were cuter, cuddlier, better-looking ...

ANOTHER SHOOTING: You notice the weariness in ‘another’? And again people here point out the need for gun control in the USA. Good as that would be (unless you are actually a manufacturer of guns) it still doesn’t get to the heart of the matter. And unless it is linked to a massive gun buy-back it is hard to see it making much difference. The guns in their billions are already OUT THERE.

I can understand people wanting to get back at people who have hurt them, cheated them, humiliated them, hurt family members, abducted their child, stolen their belongings ... that is eminently understandable. But to go out and kill people who are complete strangers raises some puzzling questions. And most of them end up shooting themselves or being shot by police. This suggests a profound death wish. But it doesn’t explain why anyone would want to shoot people they have never met. Is it envy? That other people have the sort of lives they don’t, that other people have friends, fun, faith, the things that seem to make life worthwhile. Is it a desire for a brief moment of fame? But that fame is invariably limited. And not something you can enjoy when you are dead.

Surely it is that impersonal aspect to these mass shootings which deserves the closest investigation?

FOUR CUTS TOO MANY: I see the jockey who has just won the Melbourne Cup has been fined for giving his horse four more than the allowable number of whacks. It begs the question: should that horse be seen as the legitimate winner if it took four too many whacks to get him over the line first? And if he would have won without all those extra whacks then why did his jockey keep beating him? If he had won by three lengths then it begs the question of why any jockey would hit the poor beast. If he won by a head then a few extra whacks may well have been the key factor in that win. It is surely a question which needs thorough investigation. Fining the jockey begins to seem like a cop-out.

Trotting officials are going to ban whips for the trots. So why can’t racing officials do the same? Any kind of artificial stimulant is a no-no. All those furtive little men using batteries, all those secret things trainers used to sneak into their horse’s mouth ... all of this is a no-no. So why is a physical stimulant, ie. a whip, okay and a chemical stimulant is not?

EMPTY SPACES: I see the Lower House has just passed legislation which would allow people to both change their sex on their birth certificate twenty, thirty, forty years after the event—and it will also allow parents to ask that their baby’s sex not be placed on the birth certificate in the first place. This presupposes that

new parents will assume that their new baby will prove to be transsexual and therefore this will make life easier for him/her. That is a very strange supposition.

But I had a different thought. Fathers' names are often left off birth certificates. Now the sex will be left off. And why stop there? Don't put down the date of the baby's birth so it won't embarrass parents whose baby turns up four months after the wedding. And the mother might be planning to change sex once the baby is here so we better leave her name off. After all, if she is planning to change from Jenny Jones to Jimmy Jones this will save a lot of hoo-hah later. We could have a birth certificate with nothing on it except an address which hardly seems worth the bother of having a birth certificate.

And what about marriage certificates? A lot of people don't bother about the marriage part but if you do and you want to change sex ten years after your BIG DAY then it would be a good idea to leave your name off the marriage certificate. And there is death. Of course doctors whack down 'Cause of Death' without more than the casual 'He had high blood pressure so it must be heart'. You have to have an unattended death or a crime to get your dead self properly looked at. So this space could be left blank to save time and money for investigations. After all, if you're dead, you're dead so does it matter why and how? Then there is your name. Your doctor, your friends, your family, only know the name you've given them. It mightn't be your true one. So going on the possibility that it might be fake, or perhaps you've been an identity thief, it might be a good idea to leave that space empty. Your address might be right but then again if you are some sort of fly-by-night the address becomes meaningless. So I think we can scrap death certificates as well.

Now that we've got lives lived without all these picky little bureaucratic requirements—we can all run wild. Wheeeee!

It is a new take on the unlived life.

DRUG MULES: Ms Lawrence, home from prison in Bali, was a major news story. I wondered why. Did the media feel sorry for her? Were they trying to warn people off offering to carry drugs? Were they saying that Bali behind the pleasant tropical façade is a pretty nasty place? Did they find her very attractive and therefore a good focus for a human interest story? I don't know.

Lots of young people are silly enough or desperate enough to carry drugs for the big pushers. They probably always will be. And no amount of warnings, media stories, or pleas from desperate parents will change that. But it is worth pondering on the simple fact that if the 'mules' get long sentences and sometimes execution—than what do you give the Mr Bigs? Long sentences and sometimes

execution? If you can catch them. But why should the small fry be treated the same as the big fry?

And the trouble for Bali is that it becomes ever more of a police state.

It needs to come up with more innovative responses than the current heavy-handed, expensive, and corrupting measures.

I was pondering on this after reading *Snowing in Bali* by Kathryn Bonella. This has the subtitle 'The Incredible inside account of Bali's Hidden Drug World'. Curiously many of the successful drug importers appeared to be Brazilian. The implication in this was that it is harder to corrupt Brazilian officialdom than it is to corrupt Balinese (Indonesian) officialdom. This is probably true. Indonesia still hovers round the top of the table as the World's Most Corrupt Country. The trouble for young 'mules' is that they can't afford to hand out bribes and wouldn't know who is bribable anyway.

So my advice is the age-old: Don't.

NEW GOVERNMENT PLAN: So we are going to render terrorism idiots stateless and send them back to the countries of their ancestors? This assumes that they were influenced, 'radicalized', caught up in particular ideologies in the countries of their ancestors. This gets Australia off the hook. We were the blank slate on which they grew up.

What nonsense!

If they were influenced here to go out and attack people, blow up people, run them down with cars or skateboards—then we are responsible.

So how about Australia looking deeply into our collective and individual responsibilities and looking for helpful and innovative ways of getting young men out of unemployment, out of cities, out of a particular mind-set, and developing healthier ways of looking at their fellow citizens?

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY: In the wake of the Victorian elections I see people trying to pin down whose fault it was, State or Federal, that the Liberal Opposition failed by a large margin. I don't see how any one can answer that question without going out and talking to thousands of people. Still, it keeps commentators in employment, so I suppose they can ramble on all they like. Though without me as listener.

But my own thought is that voters *do* understand that State elections are about State issues and Federal elections are about Federal issues. It doesn't matter how Canberra is behaving if the real issues are local jobs, local destruction of the environment or whether or not to have another freeway. Canberra can be in all the

chaos it wants—but it won't change the awfulness of having more traffic thunder past your house.

FUDGING: Fudge used to be that nice rich sweet stuff you cooked up for parties. Now it refers to the silly way in which pollies fail to properly define what they mean. And if they can't say with great precision what they mean—they shouldn't be voting on anything.

The House of Assembly has just shoved through legislation put up by the Greens and Labor and aided and abetted by 'Joh Bjelke-Petersen' Hickey—which among other stupidities like allowing people to change their birth certificates on their own cognizance contained things like 'gender expression'. What on earth is 'gender expression'? I have no idea. But it seems it has something to do with the way you walk, among other curiosities. The trouble is—the way you walk has more to do with your parents than your gender or your sex. (Sex, I might add, is now being treated as synonymous with gender. My dictionary says "The words **gender** and **sex** both have the sense 'the state of being male or female', but they are used in different ways: **sex** usually refers to biological differences, while **gender** tends to refer to cultural or social ones." Ah, but not in the Tasmanian parliament. There, it seems, they mean only what the pollies want them to mean.) If you had the sort of parents who made sure you stood up straight rather than slouching, then you have probably kept on standing up straight rather than slouching ever since. Girls were required to walk around with heavy books on their heads in my grandmother's day. (And sit with their ankles crossed and walk with their feet neatly pointing forwards not like a duck's waddle.) After years of that, did it somehow make your walk a 'gender expression'—and of what. Or is it to do with those famous 'limp wrists'? Effeminate men were supposed to have limp wrists—even though no one ever talks about women having limp wrists. And of course you can't have limp ankles or you couldn't walk at all.

So even before any of those highly-paid sillies in state parliament voted surely they would have required an incisive definition of 'gender expression'. Otherwise, how can police or lawyers or courts respond to the claim that someone's 'gender expression' has not been respected?

It seems they just thought it was a nice-sounding expression and the sooner it got whipped through the better. Heaven help us!

And there is also 'gender diverse'. This is another puzzle. Are we now like Planet X where they have 20 genders and no one quite knows why evolution led them into that muddle? But in fact we still only have 2 genders. Just two. L is for women who prefer women. G is for men who prefer men. B is for those who waver between the two sexes trying to decide which is more fun. T is for those who are

changing from one gender to the other. I is for those having medical treatment so they can become one gender rather than two. And Q sums up L and G. Now even with a magnifying glass I can't find another gender in there. So I do hope our Legislative Councillors can find these other genders before they actually vote.

WHOSE JOB?: I heard someone on TV ask: is it okay to discipline someone else's child?

A friend of mine was on a long-distance bus and there was a mother and a girl of about two sitting behind her. The child screamed non-stop. Finally my friend could take it no more and turned round and said 'You must stop that screaming'. The child, possibly out of surprise, immediately stopped screaming. But the mother was annoyed that a stranger had intervened and said her child was allowed to do whatever she wanted and it was nobody else's business.

When the passengers disembarked several of them thanked my friend. They said they didn't think they could have taken much more.

I remember living on a moderately busy road and a little boy of two or three up the road had found he could open his front gate and run out on to the road. This nearly gave me heart failure seeing him standing in the middle of the road with a car coming. No matter how fast I ran out I could not have reached him in time. But one day he did it again and the vehicle stopped, the driver got out, walked over to the kid and spanked him.

Not politically correct, and I don't know if the mother knew or what she thought—but to my great relief the little boy never again ran out on to the road.

You could say that the parents could have avoided a stranger's intervention and discipline by putting a child-proof lock on the gate or by keeping a closer eye on him. But it isn't possible to avoid every possible problem.

The discipline of others isn't a perfect answer. But problems left unattended often end up with the ultimate stranger's discipline: police and courts. And that kind of discipline leaves a mark on a record for life.

And there is that other view: should strangers discipline the parents? When two terrible parents made their little four-year-old girl ride round and round the yard on a motorbike, she crying, they laughing, until the bike fell on the child and killed her—were there neighbours who could have intervened? Did family members know what was going on? If those parents had been disciplined as soon as they started mistreating a child ... they might not know be serving long prison sentences ... and the little girl might still be alive.

So perhaps the answer is—yes. But the how, why, and when are important.

HOW MUCH AID: The question is regularly asked: how much should nations give? I always find articles and reports giving amounts and percentages

pretty pointless. Impressive figures do not tell us whether the aid is being precision-targeted. It doesn't tell us whether there are strings attached or requirements to reciprocate in some way.

I much prefer aid provided through NGOs. It too may have some kind of quid pro quo but it is far more likely to get to the people who really need it and it is less likely to be spent on bureaucracy.

So why not stop asking what percentage of a nation's GDP is going in aid and really look to see how better private aid can be promoted.

Yes, there is room for government aid when a nation suffers a major disaster. But helping a village set up small scale industries comes better from a knowledgeable NGO.

And there is the deeper issue. Is endless aid the best way to make a nation self-sufficient? Nations do need to make tough decisions about the things which keep people poor.

Corruption.

Discrimination.

Over-population.

Unfair trading arrangements.

Destruction of the environment.

Massive spending on the military.

Oh, and greed and stupidity.

CRYPT-CRYPT-Oh, and KRYPTONITE: No, no. encryption is a *quite* different matter. Now, the government has rushed through legislation which will allow them to look at people's e-mails and apps and what-have-you. Apart from the fact that rushed legislation is rarely good legislation and that I thought people could already read your e-mails and apps and what-have-you it raises the possibility that people will no longer let their nastiest thoughts wing through cyberspace.

Now I am not on e-mail, I don't know what an app is, and those what-have-yous remain a mystery. So I think I would make a very good spy. I would not give away secret information through my e-mails. And when any official person receives the tip: 'I saw an old biddy behaving in a *very* suspicious manner'—those official people will dismiss it. No, no, it can't be that old bag. Someone's been taking the mickey. After all, *she isn't wearing a beard*—

People spy because

- a) they believe passionately in a particular ideology, a particular place or way of life or person. All those men sneaking off to Moscow, all those mysterious attachés in embassies, all those cloak-and-dagger exchanges in dark parks and drop-points under bridges. You'd have

to believe passionately in something to want to live in a small flat in a grim concrete Moscow tenement. Or—

- b) there's some money involved. All those stories about people who sold their soul or their country. But I don't think you get rich by spying. Which is why it is usually nobodies who photocopy documents, sneak information out in their shoes, furtively meet in dim coffee shops ... Nobody ever writes a memoir to say 'I Made My First Million By Spying' ...
- c) and then there is the excitement. All those sweaty palms and racing hearts. But you know things other people don't know. And you are going to change history. And you're getting your own back against 'the establishment'. And you walk down the street and think 'I am a spy and none of these hundreds of people have the slightest inkling that they are in the presence of A SPY.' Is that a buzz or isn't it?

Strangely enough, none of those reasons grip me so I don't think I will become a spy after all. And if I change my mind it will be because I am striking a blow for all those old biddies who aren't on e-mail and therefore are seen as unimportant, unconnected, unnoticeable, unremarkable. I can probably think of more un-s if I try. I will see if I can get a nice dark coat next time I'm in Vinnies.

DO UNTO OTHERS: This used to be quite straightforward. People did not necessarily take it to heart but they did understand what it meant. But now the waters have been muddied. How do you respond to a committed sado-masochist? You don't want to be beaten up even if they do.

I notice that people are now rallying for Kindness rather than Human Rights. Is this because Human Rights are just too difficult—or is that another water which has been muddied? You can tell the Indonesian military until you are blue in the face that kindness is all that matters but you will have wasted your breath. They will still go on doing nasty things.

It is not that I object to kindness, far from it, but we do need to tackle some very difficult issues. And there are no perfect answers.

How do you change some of the worst HR abusing regimes? One of the international community's responses has been sanctions. The problem with sanctions is that they hurt the poor more than the rich. Yet targeted sanctions such as in South Africa where they were designed to end apartheid certainly hurt the poor but poor South Africans accepted that short term pain would end apartheid and therefore was worth the pain. But in Iraq there was no such clarity because there was no clear consensus on what the sanctions were supposed to achieve and there was confusion over whether Iraq actually had Weapons of Mass Destruction,

whether those WMDs would work, and who was in the firing line for Mass Destruction. In the end it just hurt the poor ...

And should we be kind to our ideas, our ancestors, our history ... should we be kind to ourselves ...

One aspect of our lives is now treated with derision. The nuclear family. If I had ten quid for every person who has laid the blame for something on the nuclear family I would be very comfortably off.

But stop and think before you laud the values of the extended family over the nuclear one and take a close look at our last two centuries.

The majority of people arriving in the 19th century were single men. As convicts, settlers, officials, military, deserters off whaling ships. If they managed to find a woman and have a family they were (mostly) grateful for the little nuclear family they had created. It took generations before it could be described as an extended family. And then the first war came along and those little nuclear families became single parent families for years on end. With luck they got back to being nuclear and then the Depression came along and men took to the roads and people who had a home and a nuclear family were the exception. Families moved in with relatives, friends, neighbours, they moved into squatter camps, they slept under bridges. And they were just re-establishing their nuclear families when along came another war and off went their menfolk. By the fifties they were thanking God that mum, dad and the kids were all together and there was room for a dog and a swing and a Hills Hoist. And then lots of people came flooding in from Europe and they were very often young single men and they too were (mostly) grateful to find a woman and start a family.

Now I lived in a nuclear family in the fifties but we had my grandparents and two aunts on one side of us and an aunt and uncle and three cousins on another side. When people aspired to a home of their own they usually sought one in the suburb, even the street, where they had family living. They didn't pick out an unknown dot on the map and say 'We'll go there where we don't know anyone.' They didn't need childcare because Grandma was just down the road. As people went out more they started to look for teenage girls who could baby-sit—and these girls were often family members, neighbours, the daughters of friends. But the nuclear family was never a little oasis of inward-looking alienation. And when people say 'Good riddance' as it is replaced by single-parent-families, nomadic families, feuding families, huge refugee families who can't find houses to fit them, gated communities, you name it, I am not sure if we really have made children safer and more secure and their childhoods more stable.

I have lost count of the number of times I have heard people say Christmas is all about families. No, it isn't. Families are the bonus, especially loving, caring, supportive families. Christmas is about the birth of Jesus. The birth of Jesus changed the world, changed the way we look at the world, gave hope and joy and confidence.

So what might we specially take from the birth, life, and death of Jesus?

It provided us with the profound idea that there is life beyond this life, that death is not an end, but rather a re-birth into a different dimension. Jesus was born into a human body and scholars and clerics have argued ever since over the question of his Divinity and his Humanity. I don't see that it matters. But it does provide us with the knowledge that we too share Divinity and Humanity. Each one of us is more than human. We share this planet with the ants we unthinkingly step upon and the gnats we unthinkingly swallow. But we all have the understanding that we are more than planet-bound. We wing free each time we think of Jesus, each time we think about Christmas, each time we sing a carol ... we are more than evolved furry creatures, we are Children of the Divine ...

So HAPPY CHRISTMAS even if you are minus your family on an Antarctic base or a space station or your yacht is somewhere south of Kerguelen or your vehicle is broken down west of Birdsville ...

THE END