



Reactionary policies enacted behind sensationalism

Tom Pearson

Last week must go down as one of the most appalling for some years in parliamentary mud-slinging, regressive legislation and lack of real debate on the burning issues of the day. Opposition leader Tony Abbott sank to new lows. The Coalition and Labor Party joined forces to sentence thousands more innocent refugees to indefinite incarceration on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. The two major parties also closed ranks to pass legislation cutting payments to single parents by up to \$100 per week.

The House of Representatives descended into a personal slanging match, with the swapping of insults and counter claims of misogyny and sexism (no one mentioned that the pay gap for women is still 17 percent on an hourly rate). The media had a field day covering Parliament and spraying far and wide Slipper's sleazy text messages. Ashby's allegations of sexual harassment against Slipper are being heard in the Federal Court.

The hypocrisy, the personal attacks and the rank opportunism that pervaded Parliament last week is not new. But it marks a trend, especially since the right-wing gained a tight grip on Labor and unquestioningly adopted neo-liberal policies. The shift to the right by Labor and the effective gagging of the few dissenting voices within its ranks have left little ground for serious policy debate.

The mud-slinging, the personal insults and language all serve as serious diversion from the real issues. They provide quick grabs for corporate media hungry for sensational reportage.

The important issues before Parliament, the cruel, reactionary, backward policies being pushed through Parliament by the major parties, received very little publicity. Instead the media feasted on "the misogyny wars", the "gender debate", the "Slipper affair", etc. The only shining light, the only principled voices, attempting to debate the issues were the Greens.

Impoverishment of single parents

Labor and the Opposition parties voted through the misnamed *Social Security Legislation Amendment (Fair Incentives to Work) Bill 2012*. The legislation will see more than 100,000 single parents lose their parenting payments and be forced onto Newstart payments.

The Greens strongly opposed the bill which the government not only claims will create an incentive for single parents to work, but that the savings will contribute \$700 million towards a budget surplus.

"How can we claim that we have a surplus if we have just thrust over 100,000 single-parent families and their children into poverty? How can we then claim that there is a surplus when it is on the backs of the most vulnerable in our community?" Greens Senator Rachel Siewert asked the Senate.

Under the bill, recipients' parenting payments will cease when their children turn six if they are partnered parents and eight if they are single parents. They will then have to rely on Newstart and charity to survive.

Senator Siewert pointed out that recent data from the OECD shows that around two-thirds of the children of single parents who rely on income support are living below the poverty line and 90 percent of that particular group are women.

"Sole parent families on income support already struggle to meet essential living costs and 85 percent of parenting payment recipients experience multiple deprivation," said Senator Siewert. "Multiple deprivation is when you lack three items that are vital for an adequate standard of living – for example, medical treatment, warm clothes, a decent and secure home, schoolbooks for children. Those are things that we consider essential items.

"I reiterate: over half of the parenting payment recipients are already living in what we would term serious poverty. Now we are talking about cutting their payments further... this is not about incentives; this is about the government saving money on the backs of the most vulnerable."

Nick Xenophon and the Greens were the only Senators to oppose the bill.

The lower Newstart rate will make it harder for people to find a secure job as they struggle to pay their rent, utilities, fuel and car registration. It is not an incentive to work. It is punitive with an implied moral judgement as though its victims are in some way responsible for their situation – not the system which fails to provide family-friendly, secure employment and affordable childcare.

If the government were serious about incentives to work, then it would be putting more money into childcare to make it affordable and taking measures to create secure employment with family-friendly working hours.

The few dollars the government will save from the cuts will not make a big difference to the budget outcome but they will make a huge difference to single parents struggling to put food on their heads. The Greens pointed to other means of raising the \$700 million such as removing the fossil fuel subsidy or not repaying to the big miners the royalty increases that states make.



Tony Abbott.

Dental scheme cut

The bill to close the chronic diseases dental scheme at the end of next month is just as cruel. Eighty percent of dental patients benefiting from the scheme hold concession cards. They are amongst the most economically disadvantaged, as well as having chronic illness. (See *Guardian*, No 1568, 10-10-2012)

Many of them cannot afford private dental care without access to Medicare benefits. They will have to join the 650,000 on waiting lists for public dental services and hope that government promises of additional funding from July 2014 will reduce those waiting lists.

This bill received little public debate. Likewise the motion supporting regulations for the establishment of a processing centre for asylum seekers on Manus Island. It was rushed through both Houses with the support of the Coalition. Only the Greens spoke out against it. The government plans to incarcerate 600 asylum seekers there with the first group being sent within a few weeks.

Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young pointed out that "... there is no detail in this

designation of how those children are going to be protected, who looks after them, who will be their guardian, what their rights are. They are the most vulnerable refugees, and this agreement is silent. Yet this parliament is expected to sign off on it," Senator Hanson-Young said.

"Manus Island has one of the world's highest malaria rates, but we are about to dump refugees, people who already have a fragile state of mental health and physical health, in tents in a place which has a massive rate of malaria..."

"The facilities, as outlined in the documents put forward by the government today, show that they are not ready to be housing refugees. We know that they were not ready in Nauru either. We also know that we started sending refugees to Nauru before the Australian government had even signed the contracts with the service providers. This chamber has demanded that the government table the contract with Transfield Services and they are still refusing to do it."

The health contract does not allow for adequate mental health services on Manus Island. Counselling on Manus Island and Nauru will be provided by phone from Sydney!

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The Guardian

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Killer blow for wheat regulation

Legislation before the federal parliament could spell the end for what remains of the regulation of Australia's wheat crop. It has also highlighted divisions within the Coalition as the Nationals fight the move and the Liberals put forward a compromise two-year phase out of the role of Wheat Exports Australia (WEA). Rebel Libs in WA are urging their federal colleagues to cross the floor to vote with Labor which is, once again, trying to cover itself with neo-liberal glory with another deregulating "breakthrough".

Labor deregulated domestic wheat sales in 1989 when John Kerrin was Minister for Primary Industries. The Australian Wheat Board was then restricted to regulating and marketing exports from its "single desk". It was corporatised under Howard in 1998 and finally privatised in 1999. Figures within the AWB went on to become embroiled in sanctions-busting kickbacks from the government of Saddam Hussein just prior to the US invasion in 2003. The scandal dragged on in the media and strengthened the hand of "free" market zealots to further reduce its role.

The AWB then became one of several (mostly foreign owned) wheat exporting companies. It is owned by transnational food producing and marketing company Cargill. The scant remainder of the former AWB's functions such as quality control, accreditation of new suppliers and ensuring of access to grain ports fell to a new body, Wheat Exports Australia.

Divisions among the Coalition arise from their differing rural support bases. Pressure for the Libs to deal the killer blow to the WEA comes from big agribusinesses in Western Australia whose operators believe dog-eat-dog market conditions would bring them bigger profits. They wouldn't have to pay the 22 cents a tonne levy on wheat to WEA to maintain its functions. Smaller producers, largely concentrated in the eastern states, want the body to stay and continue to protect them from the monopolies waiting to pounce. Big growers dismiss protests from smaller producers who are portrayed as hobbyists or even xenophobes who are overly concerned about increased foreign ownership in Australian agriculture.

Victorian Farmers Federation president Andrew Weidemann heads up a coalition of growers from Victoria, NSW, SA and Queensland which is campaigning to keep WEA. The group also wants it to have an ombudsman capacity to investigate complaints about operators in the industry.

"It is easy to see the impact on the small player when markets do not operate under appropriate rules. You simply need to look at the effect of supermarket power on farming families," Mr Weidemann told *The Australian* recently.

"The market power held by the bulk handlers is not dissimilar to the supermarkets, favouring their own trading entities in the operation of the supply chain infrastructure, like the placement of a homebrand product.

"They also gain an advantage from the information they gain by knowing the location, quality and movement of the grain owned by others within the supply chain."

Opposition leader Tony Abbott recognises the problems. The potential for mischief is obvious – exporting corporations generally run the grain handling ports, as well. The ACCC will have to add access to ports to its workload under Labor's bill. The two-year wind down of the WEA is Abbott's way of trying to placate small growers while still embracing the supposed superiority of "free" markets. He has fended off suggestions for state-based regulatory systems.

The AWB came into being in the 1930s when monopoly-dominated "free" markets had their most spectacular failure. To overcome this disaster a system was devised where farmers sold to a government-run marketing agency, stored the grain in government owned bulk-handling facilities, transported the harvests on government-owned railways to government-owned ports. The system thrived for the next several decades until it fell victim to whiteanting attacks by Labor and Coalition governments.

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There won't even be a full-time psychiatrist to assist refugees on Manus Island.

"All of the evidence we have is that detaining vulnerable refugees – who have suffered the consequences of having to flee war, torture and persecution – indefinitely, remotely, out of sight and out of mind just compounds their suffering and compounds their traumatic experiences. Yet this government just wants to blindly follow in John Howard's footsteps.

"This is all about competing with the heartless, callous policies of Tony Abbott's coalition. It is a race to the bottom. They are scraping the bottom of the barrel and there is no forethought for what impact indefinite detention will have on the children whom we send to Manus Island," Senator Hanson-Young warned the Senate.

Cutting of parenting payments, closure of a dental scheme and Manus

Island were just three of the important issues facing Parliament where the Coalition and Labor collaborated. There were a number of other serious issues on the agenda. Yet the public were subjected to a sideshow, a circus that covered up the reactionary, inhumane policies being pushed through. The major parties avoided exposure and accountability for their actions.

There is little public support for those policies. Nor is there widespread support for Australia's huge military budget, our war preparations and involvement in Afghanistan. The majority of Australians support increased funding for public education and health, and oppose the sacking of public servants, privatisation, cuts to social welfare, and other austerity measures.

Opposing the cuts to single parents' payments, Greens leader Christine Milne said: "We will not be supporting this bill and nor will we be listening to the excuses of people

who say, 'We voted for it because it was the party line.' This is actually a matter of true and core value. What do you value as a person? What sort of society do you want in this country?"

"This is really a moral issue. It is a totally moral issue and it is a matter of choice about what sort of country we want to live in. The Greens are very clear about the direction we want to see the country go in – and this is totally the wrong direction," Senator Milne said. The Communist Party of Australia agrees it is the wrong direction. It is also clear on the direction it wants society to go in.

The gutter politics and measures rammed through parliament last week show just how urgent the task of building a left and progressive alternative movement is. The fundamental changes required in policy direction and in the parliamentary process will only come through the building of a broad movement, uniting left and progressive forces. ☺

BEYOND THE LAST SKY CONTEMPORARY PALESTINIAN PHOTOGRAPHY AND VIDEO



Beyond the Last Sky takes its name from a verse in Mahmoud Darwish's poem *The Earth is Closing on Us*, and Edward Said's 1986 book *After the Last Sky* which used documentary modes as a verification of Palestinian experience.

Curated by Chrisoula Lionis as an evolution of Said's book, *Beyond the Last Sky* is the first exhibition of its kind in Australia to showcase contemporary Palestinian photographic and video work. Focusing on the work of artists who look beyond the documentary, and turn to critical humour as a subversive tool, *Beyond the Last Sky* encourages laughter that challenges us to break representational deadlocks and to rethink the past, present and future of Palestine.

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PRESS FUND

Double standards were plentiful last week. Tony Abbot and friends spent most of Tuesday attacking the former Speaker, Peter Slipper, over sexist emails. Apparently they were shocking, but perhaps no worse than those made periodically by other Liberal MPs. The Libs hoped to force Slipper to quit parliament, prompting a by-election and maybe a general election, but he stayed on as an independent. Realising they needed his vote, the Libs then told him what a good fellow he was! But enough about that. What's not plentiful, alas, is a rush of contributors to the Press Fund. We really need your help, so please send us in something for the next issue. Many thanks to this week's contributors, as follows:

In memory of Mick Power: Kevin Manski \$50, Joan Silk \$10
JR Allen \$5, Mark Mannion \$5, "Round Figure" \$10

This week's total: \$80 Progressive total: \$9,015

Guardian Special Appeal

The Guardian has been running a special appeal during September. This is to supplement our income to meet ongoing costs and improvements to the paper. We would like to thank all who have contributed this week to the appeal and over past weeks for their generous support. It is only with the support of our readers and Party members that we can continue to publish the workers' weekly which has such an important role to play in the class struggle in Australia.

This week's generous contributor:

D Corbett \$20.

Cummulative total: \$2,950.

Hopes raised over asylum seeker court judgement

Peter Mac

Two weeks ago the High Court of Australia decided in favour of a 36-year old Sri Lankan asylum seeker who had challenged his continued detention. He is one of 50 people who have been recognised as refugees because they would be in danger if returned to their country of origin, but who have also been classified as a security risk by ASIO, and have therefore been detained – in effect, imprisoned – indefinitely.

The Court found that the regulation which effectively vests in ASIO the power to refuse a visa is inconsistent with the Migration Act, and that the case in question should be reviewed.

However, the decision will not necessarily force the government to end indefinite detention. It is certainly great news for the detainee in question, but the government has said it will continue to detain him until his case has been reviewed, and will not accept the decision as a precedent for other detainees in similar circumstances.

The Attorney-General Nicola Roxon declared: "...the consequences for others will depend on the individual circumstances for each of those". In other words, each case will have to be fought individually.

The asylum seeker's barrister David Manne indicated he may become involved in further legal action if the government does not review all 50 cases, but the cost of arguing each case separately would be prohibitively expensive, and even if the money could be found the court action might take years to resolve.

"Fireproofing"

Meanwhile, the federal opposition wants the government to "fireproof" its immigration policies with legislation "against any further action these taxpayer-funded lawyers may want to bring".

It's difficult to see how this could do be done without renouncing the UN Refugee Convention,

which obliges Australia to deal with appeals for asylum fairly, and to treat applicants humanely while their refugee status and visa entitlements are determined.

Weighing in against the decision, opposition spokesman on immigration, Scott Morrison, thundered: "The High Court today found that the government has no power to keep known security risks out of our community." That is nonsense, because there are plenty of laws to deal with genuine threats to national security.

The detainee in question had been a soldier in the former "Tamil Tigers" guerrilla army, which fought a bloody war for Tamil independence over decades. It now seems that the Sri Lankan government is routinely treating all such former combatants as terrorists, and that ASIO is accepting Sri Lanka's advice to this effect and classifying them as a threat to Australia's national security.

That's another non-sequiter. Many people were swept up in that conflict, a civil war with no direct relevance to other nations, including Australia. There was little alternative to armed struggle, and the Sri Lankan government's repression of the Tamil minority was brutal, especially in the closing stages of the war, when many Tamils were slaughtered on suspicion of being having been supporters of the "tigers".

Moreover, the secrecy surrounding ASIO's activities means that no evidence can be made available about its decisions, which cannot be challenged.

"Economic refugees"

The federal opposition is arguing that most if not all Sri Lankan asylum seekers should be forcibly returned to Sri Lanka because they are "economic refugees", i.e. people who leave their country in order to improve their economic position, not because of fear of persecution.

In fact, most Sri Lankan asylum seekers are Tamils, who have plenty to worry about, as far as their treatment by the Sri Lankan government is concerned.

Undoubtedly some people flee their countries for economic reasons, but this does not automatically invalidate their claim for asylum. If they are starving, they can hardly be blamed for boarding a boat in the hope of finding a safe haven, nor should we forcibly return them to the same fate. They deserve humane treatment and fair consideration of their cases, just like other asylum seekers.

Nevertheless, the Murdoch press is now backing the call to expel Sri Lankan asylum seekers. Last week Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* ran an article based on information supplied by the Sri Lankan Navy, which claimed

that "most of the 2,279 people arrested leaving on 52 boats this year ... were 'economic migrants' looking for a better life in Australia".

The implication was that these people were comfortably off, and had taken a devious way to an easy life by entering Australian territory on asylum seeker boats. The article claimed that the group included 100 businessmen, 179 fishermen, 27 government workers, 87 drivers, 158 labourers, 15 electricians, 87 farmers and 43 masons. It seemed to assume that people in these employment groups were comfortably off, and were not refugees.

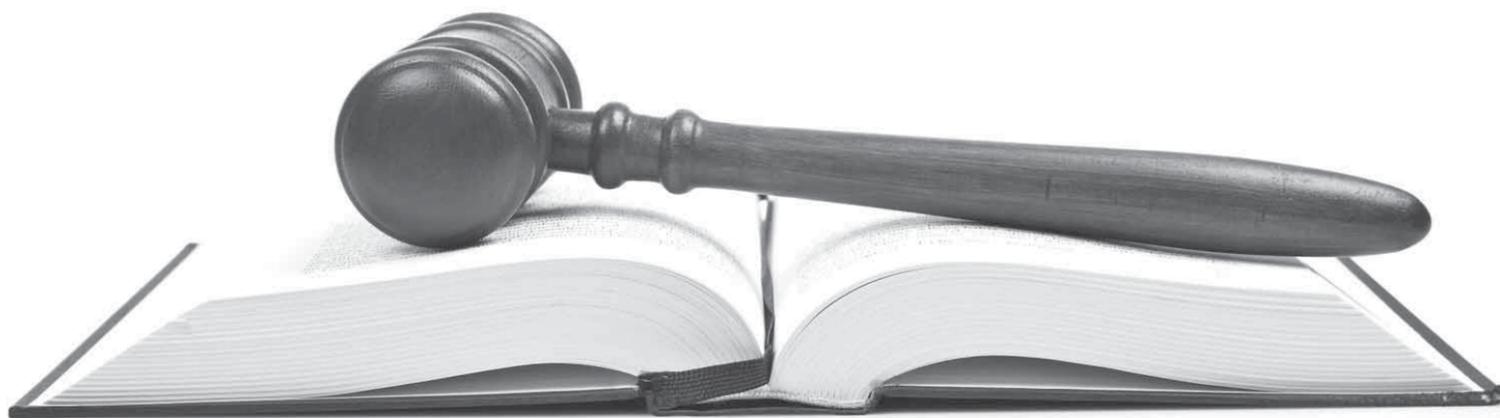
Apart from the fact that a total of 696 out of 2,279 is hardly a majority, anyone in those occupations could have been a genuine refugee for safety and/or economic reasons. The article also accepted without question the Sri Lankan Navy's ridiculous claim that they boarded asylum seeker boats because of the "success rates" of Australia's asylum processing claim system.

It failed to explain why anyone

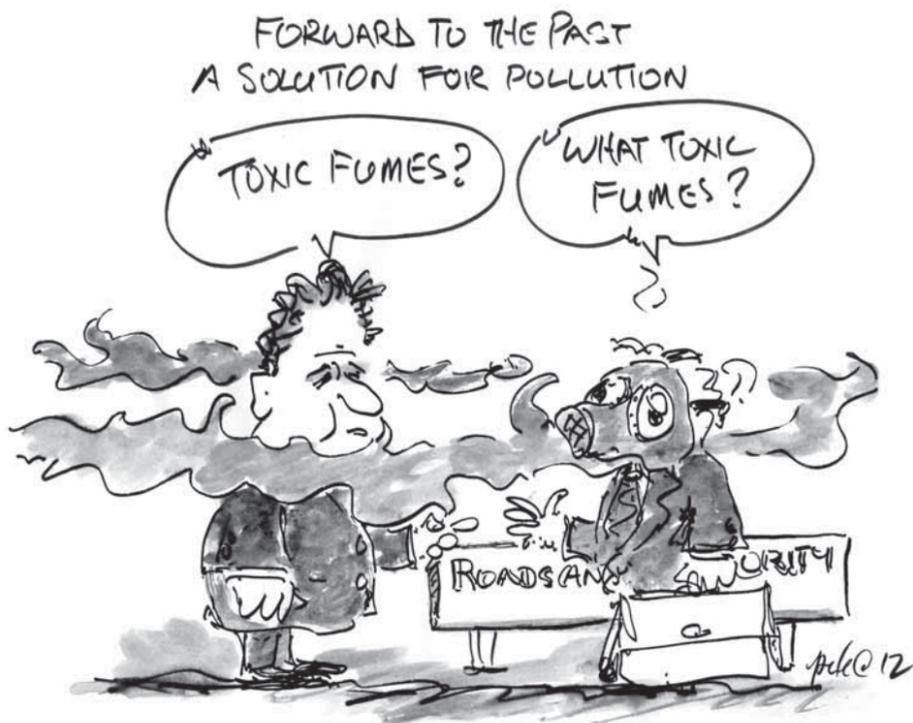
who is well off and not classified as a security risk would risk their life on a leaky boat, instead of just applying for a visa and catching a plane, with the prospect of being released into the Australian community after minimal delays for processing.

Moreover, there is now evidence that the Sri Lankan government is classifying anyone who leaves by boat, including anyone who does so for economic reasons, as a potential security threat. Asylum seekers classified as economic refugees in Australia and forcibly returned to Sri Lanka in the past have been routinely subjected to prolonged interrogation. Some have been tortured and imprisoned.

One wouldn't wish to be a wet blanket as far as the High court judgement is concerned. It was a great day for the asylum seeker concerned, and the case has important implications for others in a similar predicament. But it's just a small step in the long, difficult but vitally important struggle to obtain justice for a desperate and long-suffering people who seek our help. ☺



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Authorised by Mary Blott, AEU Victorian branch president, 112 Tenney Crescent, Altona North 3087

The life and death of Arthur Murray

John Pilger

Arthur Murray died the other day. I turned to Google Australia for tributes, and there was a 1991 obituary of a US ballroom instructor of the same name.

There was nothing in the Australian media. *The Australian* newspaper published a large, ritual image of its proprietor Rupert Murdoch handing out awards to his employees. Arthur would have understood the silence.

I first met him a generation ago and knew he was the best kind of trouble.

He objected to the cruelty and hypocrisy of white society in a country where his people had lived longer than human beings had lived anywhere else.

In 1969 he and Leila had brought their family to the town of Wee Waa in outback New South Wales and camped beside the Namoi River.

Arthur worked in the cotton fields for a flat rate of \$1.12 an hour.

Only "itinerant blackfellas" were recruited for such a pittance. Only white people had unions in the land of "fair go."

Having not long been granted the vote, the First Australians were still not counted in the national census – unlike the sheep.

Working conditions in the cotton fields were primitive and dangerous.

"The crop-sprayers used to fly so low," Arthur told me, "we had to lie face down in the mud or our heads would've been chopped off. The insecticide was dumped on us, and for days we'd be coughing and chugging it up."

In 1973 a Sydney University study reported its "astounded" finding of fish floating dead on the surface of the Namoi, poisoned by the "utterly mad, uncontrolled" level of spraying, which continued.

Arthur and the cotton-chippers made history. In 1973 they went on strike, and more than 500 of them marched through Wee Waa.

The *Wee Waa Echo* called them "radicals and professional troublemakers," adding that "it is not fanciful to see the Aboriginal problem as the powder keg for communist aggression in Australia."

They were abused as "boongs" and "niggers." The Murrays' riverside camp was attacked and the workers' tents smashed or burned down.

Although food was collected for the strikers, hunger united their families.

Leila would wake before sunrise to light a wood fire that cooked the little food they had and to heat a 44-gallon drum, cut in half lengthways and filled with water that the children brought in buckets from the river for their morning bath.

With her ancient flat iron she pressed their clothes, so that they went to school "spotless," as she would say.

The enemies Arthur and his comrades made were the Australian equivalent of those who had stood in the way of Martin Luther King's civil rights campaigners in the United States.

They were the police, local politicians, the media.

"Who in the town was with you?" I asked Arthur.

He thought for a while. "There was a chemist," he said, "who was kind to Aboriginal people. Mostly we were on our own."

Soon after the cotton workers won an hourly rate of \$1.45, Arthur was arrested for trespassing in the grounds of the Returned Servicemen's Club. His defence shocked the town – it was land rights. All of Australia was Aboriginal land, he said.

On June 12, 1981 Arthur and Leila's son Eddie, aged 21, was drinking with some friends in a park in Wee Waa. Eddie was soon to leave

Long, hard struggle: A march from the ANU to protest police action against the Tent Embassy, 1972.



Photo: John Van Der Lende

for Sydney, where he was confident he would be selected to play for the Redfern All Blacks Rugby League team to tour New Zealand.

At 1.45pm he was picked up by the police for nothing but drunkenness. Within an hour he was dead in a cell, with a blanket tied round his neck.

At the inquest the coroner described police evidence as "highly suspicious" and records were found to have been falsified. Eddie, he said, had died "by his own hand or by the hand of a person or persons unknown."

It was a craven finding familiar to Aboriginal Australians. Everyone knew Eddie had too much to live for. Arthur and Leila set out on an extraordinary journey for justice for their son and their people.

They endured the ignorance and indifference of white society and its multilayered political and judicial bureaucracies.

They finally won a royal commissioner only to see the royal commissioner, a judge, suddenly appointed

to a top government job in the critical final stages of the hearing.

They eventually secured the right to exhume Eddie's body, and suffered terribly in the process, in order to prove the true cause of death. And they proved it – his sternum had been crushed by a blow while he was alive. And they reaffirmed how common their story was.

"They're killing Aboriginal people," Leila told me, "... just killing us."

Today Aborigines are incarcerated at five times the rate of black people in apartheid South Africa and their suffering in custody is widespread.

In 2000 the then New South Wales Police Minister Paul Whelan met Arthur and Leila at his office in Sydney and ordered a special investigation.

He promised them that this "would not be the end of the road."

There was no serious inquiry and the minister retired to his stud farm. He has returned none of my calls.

Leila could not read, yet this remarkable woman memorised almost

every document and judgement. She died in 2004, broken-hearted. Incredibly, Arthur reached the age of 70 when most Aboriginal men are dead by the age of 59.

In a typical case this year, CCTV footage of Alice Springs police station showed a policewoman cleaning blood off the floor while a stricken Aboriginal man was left to die. Australia, said Prime Minister Julia Gillard on September 26, deserves a seat at the top table of the United Nations because it "embraces the high ideals" of the UN.

No country since apartheid South Africa has been more condemned by the UN for its racism than Australia.

When I last saw Arthur, we walked down to the Namoi riverbank and he told me how the police in Wee Waa were still frightened to go into the cell where Eddie had died and had pleaded with him to "smoke out" Eddie's spirit.

"No bloody way!" Arthur told them. Peace to all their spirits – justice to all their people.

Morning Star ☼

MARIELA CASTRO

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Undue haste on Defence Trade Controls Bill

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has urged the federal government to pause and fully consider the consequences of rushing through the Defence Trade Controls Bill 2011. The haste to push the bill through the Senate in time for the US Secretary of State's visit next month could be at the cost of intellectual freedom and the important relationship between the Department of Defence and universities, NTEU national president Jeannie Rea said.

"This time last year, Parliament legislated intellectual freedom for Australian university researchers. This was a very significant decision which recognised that freedom of intellectual inquiry was critical to Australia's higher education and research," said Rea.

"Unfortunately the current bill would subject Australian researchers to levels of control and bureaucratic surveillance that work against the pursuit of knowledge and development of breakthrough research and innovation."

Rea said that the NTEU appreciated the careful consideration of the concerns of the research community by the members of the Senate Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Legislation Committee and the amendments proposed in the committee's report.

"However, while some of the recommendations for amendment would improve the bill, we are yet to see it in its redrafted form. Other proposed amendments apparently criminalise the dissemination of research," she said.

In a dissenting report, Liberal and Green Senators on the Committee commented that they had not had time to consult the legal advice received from a US law firm that argues that the control of Australian academic institutions enabled by the bill would be broader than that in the US.

Rea said, "It would be most unfortunate if, in implementing the 2007 Australia United States Defence Trade Cooperation Treaty, we undermined Australia's research

effort. University of Sydney Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor Jill Trehwella has argued that tying up researchers with more superfluous bureaucracy and the threat of criminal prosecution could send some of our best researchers off shore."

Rea said that the NTEU's membership of higher education workers across all universities includes thousands of academic researchers and research administrators.

"They would be stunned at the prospect of research communication being held up in the Defence Department, and question the expertise to consider and make decisions on not just military applications of technologies, but also civilian use," she said.

"There is ample evidence within universities of the expertise and track record in establishing research codes of conduct and processes for the approval and monitoring of sensitive research. There is time to continue talking about this important trade and security matter and to get it right." ☼

Congress leaders look to the future

Kirstie Parker

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples has a strong future but must grow its membership base, firm up future funding arrangements, and garner more broad community support. That was the assessment of the two-year-old representative body by its leaders two weeks ago.

About 80 delegates drawn from three Congress "chambers" joined the organisation's board and its ethics council in Alice Springs for a second annual national policy meeting dubbed "NC12". Discussions centred on engagement and advocacy with government and the community around the priority areas of health, country, sovereignty, justice and education.

The opening ceremony began with a performance by girls from local youth drumming outfit Drum Atweme, followed by a welcome to country by Arrernte traditional owner Marie Ellis. Ms Ellis pleaded for the scrapping of the ongoing Northern Territory Intervention (rebadged by the federal government as "Stronger Futures") and NT super-shires. She said such measures had caused "nothing but suffering" and injustice for Aboriginal Territorians, especially those living in remote communities.

Director of Norway's Sami Parliament, Rune Fjellheim, was the keynote speaker. He outlined the groundbreaking Indigenous

parliament's history, spoke proudly of the gender equality achieved amongst its membership, and urged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be proud of their political representatives.

Congress co-chair Jody Broun said the organisation had built an active membership base of 4,500 individual members and 146 organisation members – themselves representing more than 50,000 people.

"Membership is growing, our public and political profile is increasing," she said. But she queried how many delegates had met the challenge thrown out at last year's annual meeting to recruit 100 other members. Ms Broun said she would focus during the next year on extending the influence and authority of the Congress, including through the new National Health Leadership Forum.

"Supporters accord"

And she announced the establishment of a "supporters accord"; a signed agreement that would enable non-Aboriginal organisations to demonstrate their support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Congress and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The first such agreement was signed the preceding week by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils, Ms Broun said.

Co-chair Les Malezer said the Congress board had worked hard to



NC12 delegates with National Congress directors and staff and local representatives. Photo by Joseph Mayers (Courtesy of the National Congress) and Kirstie Parker.

build a credible organisation, forming partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and networks "without creating any threat to their autonomous existence".

But he said key challenges during 2013 would be preparing for any transitions that might result from the next federal election, lobbying for funding for Aboriginal languages and other initiatives in the next federal budget, and attracting the financial support necessary for continued functioning of the company, given that the federal government's initial three-year commitment ends next financial year.

Congress was likely to be

dependent upon government for a further grant to continue its operations, Mr Malezer said. The three-day NC12 also saw two members of the inaugural National Congress Youth Lobbying Committee, Brisbane business student Jared Hutchison and Perth arts and journalism student Kimberley Benjamin, present to delegates. They said the fact that more than 20 percent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population was aged from 15 to 25 made it important for youth to have a greater role and influence in policy direction.

"With such a large youth population, it makes sense for those youth to have input into policies that not only impact on your lives, but our

lives as well, for we have a shared future," said Mr Hutchison.

Ms Benjamin said the youth committee's members recognised that they needed to work alongside their Elders and respect past challenges and achievements as well as cultural protocols.

On the final day, Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue and Professor Mick Dodson became the first recipients of the "Congress Medal", which acknowledges individuals who "further the purpose, vision and principles of Congress" around representation, the protection of rights, leadership, relationship building and identifying solutions.

Koori Mail ☘

Film Review by Blake Deppe

Looper: a neo-noir mind bender

Despite the current influx of "all form and no content" movies, it seems that, once or twice a year, a cerebral sci-fi film comes along, bursting with originality and innovation. In *Time* did it in 2011, and *Inception* wowed audiences the year before. This year brought us *Looper* – a brooding time-travel story that is uncommonly smart and subtle.

Letting your loop run

The story is set in the year 2044, where we learn that time travel (which won't be invented until 2074) is used by future mobsters to send victims into the present. Young hired guns called loopers then execute them on the spot in exchange for handsome fees. When the crime syndicate that hired them wants to close their contract, they send the looper's older version back in time to be killed by his younger self. This is referred to as "closing your loop." But looper Joe Simmons (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) fails to terminate his older self (played by Bruce Willis) – this is called "letting your loop run." What happens next sets the pace for the rest of the film.

Young Joe soon learns about the Rainmaker, a crime lord who is purposely closing everyone's loops. Young Joe is determined to kill his older self and fulfil his contract, but his boss Abe (Jeff Daniels) sends a group of hit men to dispose of them both, forcing the two Joes to flee.

Young Joe learns that Old Joe wants to find and kill the

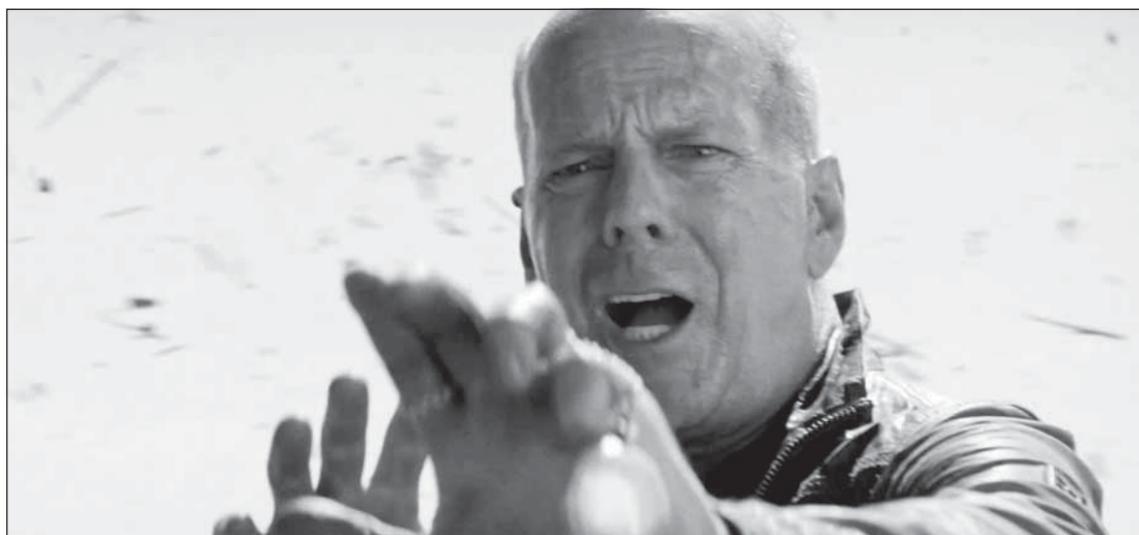
Rainmaker as a child – before he can grow up to become a vicious criminal. After stealing a map from Old Joe, Young Joe follows its coordinates to a farm owned by Sara (Emily Blunt) and her son Cid – the kid Rainmaker. Though Young Joe learns what Cid is capable of, his perspective on things changes as he attempts to protect Sara and her son.

A very possible, if unpleasant, future

The US depicted in *Looper* has a definite neo-noir look and feel, but it also portrays a very possible, if unpleasant, future, in which the country has experienced unprecedented economic collapse, and ghettos and strip clubs intersperse a wasted cityscape. Naturally, the rich one-percenters have all the fun toys, like futuristic flying vehicles and cannon-like guns used by loopers.

Some people have developed a mutation that allows them to use telekinesis (fear not – the story never wanders into superhero territory). Though initially a head-scratching element thrown into the story seemingly haphazardly, telekinesis goes on to become an important part of the film.

As far as the cast is concerned, Gordon-Levitt was phenomenal; he deserves more lead roles like this, but luckily, he seems to have a penchant for taking part in original, entertaining films (see *Inception* and the recent *Premium Rush*). Willis was great, giving Old Joe



Bruce Willis.

equal parts wistfulness and attitude. Daniels played the part of the villain immensely well – a real calculating creep with a sense of humour to boot. It's a bit sad that his screen time was limited.

Provoking deeper questions

Time travel stories are risky business. Many come off as bouncing tumbleweeds of cliché and stagnation, or else are overly complicated to the point of becoming self-contradicting, chronological nightmares. *Looper* broke stereotypes, got the theoretical science right (to a point, anyway), and even took a step back to laugh at

itself ("I don't want to talk about time travel shit," says Willis at one point. "Because if we start, we're gonna be here all day, making diagrams with straws").

Speeding along as an action-packed time crisis thriller, *Looper* takes sharp left turns, where it deals surprisingly well with human emotions and metaphors for real-world issues.

Perhaps the most interesting thing to think about is that, by closing their loops, these mobsters are committing suicide by proxy, and the bottom line is money. That's an interesting way to sum up the real world problem of gangs, where youth are convinced they'll "have it all" and are slowly thrown into the

proverbial gutter by the capitalist system. It's a zero-sum game, with the sacrifice being one's own life. *Loopers* seem to represent that in full, and provoke deeper questions about the value of human life and hope in the face of desperation.

The film, especially toward the end, also deals with inevitability, and the pragmatism that ought to be exercised for the good of the many.

As for the multi-layered ideas of "closed loops" and "repetitive time loops," don't worry if the brainy chrono-science is a little confusing. You can always diagram these things with straws after the movie.

People's World ☘

The culpability of mining capital's drive for super-profits

South African Communist Party 13th Congress

Chris Matlhako

If we are to make sense of the unfortunate and tragic events that occurred at Lonmin-Marikana Platinum Mines and the subsequent developments thereafter, including the diverse and wide media coverage (national and international) the events received – an honest analysis of the South African mining capital's drive for super profits, is an important point of and for serious and thoughtful contemplation. This has become even more urgent with the potential spread of wildcat "strikes" and unprotected actions of workers across the sector, coupled with the inflammatory rhetoric of sorts, making this a time bomb waiting to explode.

These events also occur against the backdrop of the ongoing deepening, persistent and grinding poverty, high levels of unemployment and inequality, almost 17 years of the democratisation process.

Notwithstanding the political grandstanding that has accompanied these matters – mining capitalists' drive for super profit and its ancillary tactics, have clearly demonstrate the urgent need for a profound reflection in the sector in order to ensure its sustainability and primary role in our socio-economic and political trajectory as a nascent democratising and transforming nation.

Indeed, there are also important international developments worthy of paying attention to which can be useful in the important national debate that must be undertaken to ensure it (mineral resources sector) plays its particular role in the process of democratisation and transformation.

There are many facets of mining that must be tackled to ensure fundamental transformation of the sector, but SA mining capital dealings with labour-related matters (in post-apartheid democratic SA), are also matters requiring urgent attention. In fact this is the basis of the labour structure that has characterised the sector over many years. That mining capital still relies on a discredited method of dealing with labour and recruitment, boggles the mind. As Wessel Visser notes in his paper, "Racially divided class: strikes in South Africa, 1973-2004", "... history of industrial relations in South Africa, especially pertaining to strikes, is to a great extent also a reflection of the country's racially divided past".

Mining labour structure

The events that preceded and finally culminated in the fateful day of shootings and deaths on the August 16, are amongst others, a direct outcome of the untransformed labour structure of the mining sector. Its corollaries of a primitive and untransformed recruitment strategy (which still has its basis in the colonial-apartheid heydays of mining capital's consolidation and industrialisation of South Africa – that of the abundant but controlled availability of cheap labour) and its racial and exploitative basis, are still intact. The very basis for the establishment of the association of the Chamber of Mines back then was to ensure whatever competition existed between the mining companies was limited to other factors, but as it relates to labour and reducing costs, there was unanimous agreement and collaboration on this front, which still persistent even today.

At the heart of this is recruitment tactics and labour engagement in the sector, which

continues to reproduce the historic (colonialism of a special type) features which are deep and intractable social and economic phenomena in our country.

This (primitive super-profit drive) which was played out much more visibly these past few weeks and culminating in the tragic deaths of workers and police, begs the question: to what extent is South African mining capital willing to go in their pursuit of super-profits and at what price?

Not much has been made of and about the (e.g. the strike) events that led to the divergences between AMCU (Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union) and NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) and the historic basis. It has fuelled this so-called "rivalry", including the methods of intimidation, vigilantism and war-lordism and downright lumpenism that has characterised the existence of AMCU over time. Since those who facilitated its formation (AMCU) had really wanted it to be an instrument to undercut the power of NUM to ensure the one element which they have control over is manipulated to realise the profit margins.

Its [mining capital] dealings with strikes, use of primitive recruitment whose basis is ethnicity and festering rivalry between workers through tribalism, ultimately sponsoring rival unions to try and break the power of NUM, lie at the heart of the strategies employed by mining capital over time including into democratic South Africa.

Importantly, in the untransformed labour structure, the Weihahn Commission in the early 1970s allowed black trade unions to exist but essentially maintained a hostile posture towards them.

The Lonmin-Marikana Platinum Mines events are a further toxin in a complex and dynamic situation, both on the home-front (nationalisation debate) and internationally (financial and capitalist crisis where commodity-prices are in downward spiral. The much vaunted Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies and its implications on the socio-economic and political terrain are all impacting to varying degrees on much of the South African polity. That the violent character of mining in South Africa has continued into the democratic dispensation unabated, is a serious cause for concern and indictment on the part of the democratic forces (progressive trade unions), the state and mining capitalists.

Judicial Commission of Inquiry

It is in this context, that we must welcome President Zuma's Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the circumstances of the tragic events, and its wide-scope of investigation – for this is an important starting point. The Judicial Commission Inquiry also demonstrates, in our view, the critical nature of the events and an endeavour on the part of the South African democratic state, to leave nothing uncovered and to find sustainable solutions to the issue by covering a wider-scope of interrelated issues. Indeed these matters are interrelated and this has not necessarily been accurately reported on by the mainstream media and other sources.

Through a wide-scope investigation, we believe, is a suggestion to seriously probe much deeper these and other related elements

of the tragic events, which relate for example, to amongst others, a backward warlordism and lumpenism continuing to manifest in the recruitment networks of mineworkers and has become such an endemic phenomenon in the informal settlements in close proximity to the mining operations.

This was an experience in former mine compounds and now the reality of many informal settlement close to mining operations, where networks of criminal gangs control recruitment from rural areas and violently intimidate local communities and tribal chiefs in the vicinity. This, coupled with tribalism and ethnicity have been actively festering and used by the mining bosses to drive a wedge between workers as a useful tool to try and break the back of powerful NUM.

Failure to take a much wider and deeper examination of this matter, will not allow democratic South Africa to deal with underlying characteristics of the mining sector, its contradictory role including its crucial economic role as an important pillar for transformation.

Historic character of mining

The historic relationship in South Africa between mining capital and the colonial-apartheid nexus is well recorded. It is sufficiently detailed that among others, South Africa's mining capitalists did not just benefit from the racist system, they helped design it. In the late 1890s, Genmin's owner George Albu proposed that legislation be passed to force black South Africans to become cheap labourers. "The law is not the same for the kaffir as for the white man," Albu is reported to have stated. Albu's views were generally shared by all the country's mining bosses, and permeate sections of the white management establishment that still treat black mineworkers with disdain.

In fact, becoming a mineworker (in South Africa) has been a violent, dehumanising process and this violence continues even today.

In its submission to the 1997 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings into business and apartheid, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) explained: "Capitalism in South Africa was built and sustained precisely on the basis of the systematic racial oppression of the majority of our people ... Employers collaborated with the apartheid regime from the outset, supported apartheid in all its manifestations and benefited from apartheid capitalism with its exploitative and oppressive nature ... Far from being innocent of racial oppression, it was precisely the captains of industry – particularly those associated with the diamond and gold-mining industry – who pioneered many of the core features of what later came to be known as apartheid."

It is widely known that historically, mining capital has consistently earned high profits, though traditionally they have kept expenses to a minimum by paying low wages. Mining has become synonymous with exploitative labour policies, including the use of migrant workers on limited contracts, strict worker control in company compounds, and difficult working conditions. Generally, labour costs were (and continue) to be especially important in determining profits, because the price of commodities, though set throughout the 1960s, are today at the mercy of international market-prices.

It is also a fact that mining capital has had no regard for black lives in and on the mines. The scale of South African mining capitalists' disregard for workers' lives is breathtaking: approximately 69,000 mineworkers died in accidents between 1900 and 1993, and more than 1 million were seriously injured.

The most chilling example of how South Africa's mining capitalists put profits before workers' safety occurred on September 15, 1986, at Gencor's Kinross gold mine. In what was one of the worst accidents in South African mining history. One hundred and seventy seven



The fateful day of shootings and deaths on the August 16

mineworkers were killed in an underground polyurethane fire. Shortly after the disaster, the names of white miners were released, but their black co-workers were only identified by their ethnic groups only. Gencor management subsequently obstructed and sabotaged the investigation of the tragedy and a poorly prosecuted case, the company was acquitted of culpable homicide.

Further, on New Year's Day 1986, 30,000 workers at Impala Platinum (Implats) mines in former Bophuthatswana (Phokeng) went on strike for higher pay and other improvements. Implats refused to recognise the workers' union because it chose to abide by the "independent" apartheid-created Bophuthatswana's anti-union laws (while continuing to recognise the South African-based whites-only union). Six days after the strike began, 25,000 workers were dismissed. Implats permitted Bophuthatswana riot police to attack workers with teargas and dogs.

Similarly, mass dismissals and repression took place during strikes at Gencor's mines in Bophuthatswana in 1991 and these were used as tools to breaking the back of strikes and the use of scab labour always led to violent clashes between workers.

Mining capital in democratic South Africa

Fast-forward to post-apartheid democratic South Africa, where that symbiotic relationship (apartheid capitalism) was somewhat disturbed, but not entirely disrupted, mining capitalists re-organised their "strategies", within the framework of the new freedoms (new labour regime), but essentially retained the racist, demeaning and arrogant posture. This further contaminated the labour relations system in the mining sector. The deeply entrenched system of racially steeped employment in the hierarchy of mines still persist even today, where the top echelons are still held by skilled white males and the predominantly lower unskilled labour-intensive menial work done by blacks.

The value system that underpinned mining capitalists then remains intact despite the changes enacted.

It is also in this context, and founded on

The scale of South African mining capitalists' disregard for workers' lives is breathtaking: approximately 69,000 mineworkers died in accidents between 1900 and 1993, and more than 1 million were seriously injured.

Police face massive Hillsborough probe



occur against the backdrop of grinding poverty, high levels of unemployment and inequality.

the fact that the large base of labour (unskilled, less education, migrant, rural and recruited from vast dispersed areas of the southern African region) in the sector with desperate sociological, cultural and economic backgrounds, has been viewed just as a mere instrument of profit-making – a cheap pool of labour. This is the basis and premise of strategies employed by mining capitalists to try and deal with strikes, and in particular to try and weaken a dominant progressive and leftwing trade union – the NUM.

In the recent period, mining capitalists' "strategies" have shifted to much more innovative methods to try an undercut the power NUM. "Rival" (since scab labour has been outlawed) unionism in the workplace, has found favour with management, as a direct tactic to divide and counter the bargaining power of the NUM.

This has been a major aspect of post-apartheid South Africa's labour relations regime. Whereas the labour regime has changed significantly from the British-induced labour ethos – the "adversary system" to the "conciliatory system" of the European continent.

Historically the working class and thus labour relations, in particular pertaining to strikes in South Africa, have been racially divided, and the strategies and tactics of mining capitalists also followed these patterns over the years. Whereas the white working class (even in the mining industry) found accommodation with colonial and racist policies of the authorities, the black working class has had to endure the unleashing of the brute force of the police to break up strikes, mass dismissals, festering of tribalism and cultivating "rival unions".

It is in this period, that we also witness the emergence of the phenomenon where NUM's structures and leadership become a turf-battle for control of the union. The mining capitalist's hand is all but visible as these divisions among others led to the formation of the AMCU in the Witbank area. This has led to a sustained and cultivated program to further deepen the "rivalry" through tribalist and ethnic-inclined recruitment.

Many workers come from the rural-hinterland with very little formal education if any, and are recruited through a tribal and ethnic affiliation and brought to the proximity of the

mine, where they would stay in an informal settlement until a "job" arises. This pool of workers is also a source of scab labour which in many instances results in violent clashes and organised along tribal and ethnic lines. Therein the power of the criminal warlords manifests as they seek through intimidation to maintain hegemony in the area (informal settlement) and also enforce strikes and others.

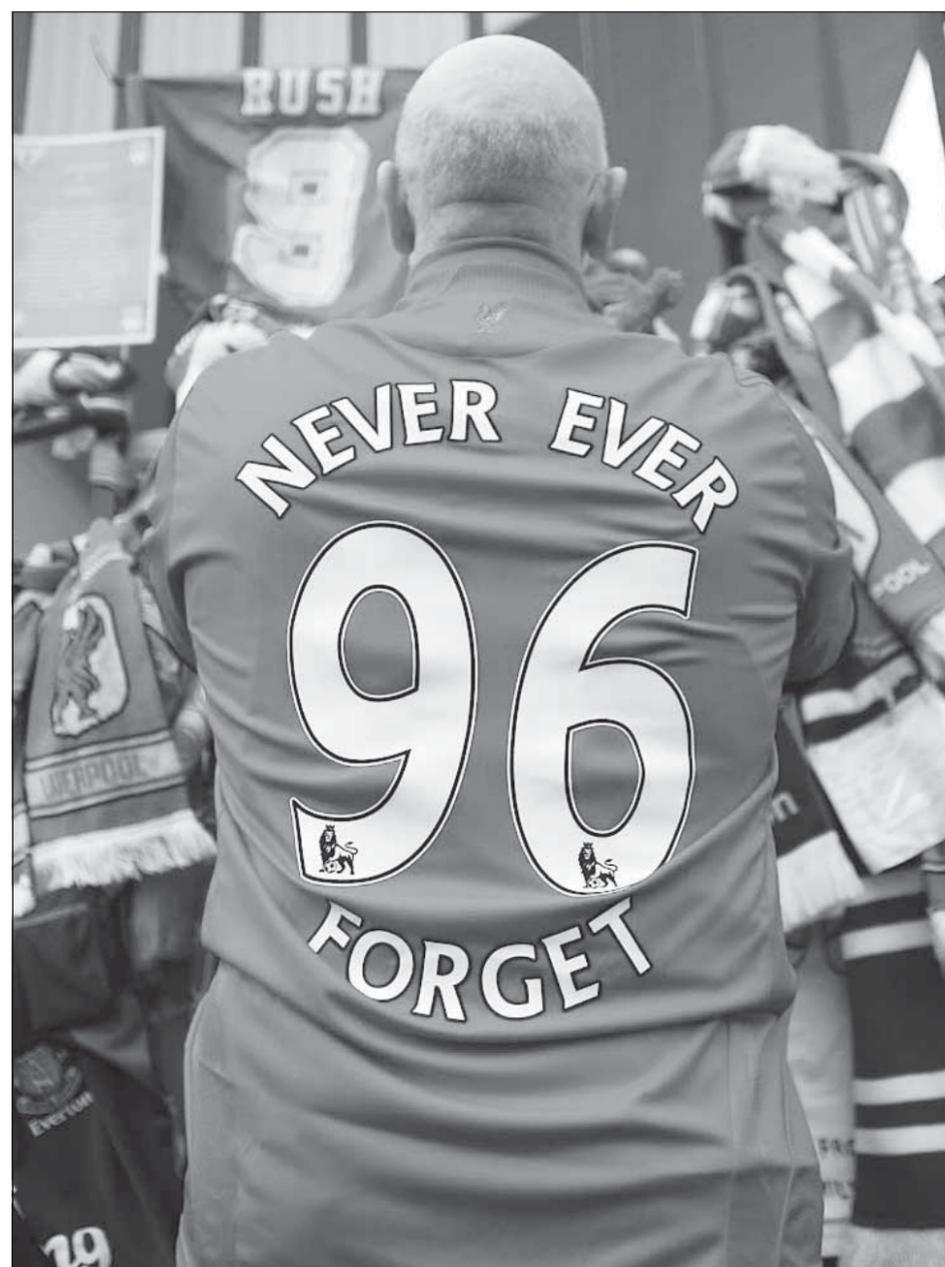
Lately the phenomenon of "business unionism" has evolved as an active endeavour to oppose the dominant unions (generally) in the sector – the NUM. "Business unionism" can be observed through the manifestation of the increasing frequency and intensity to challenge for leadership positions in the unions, based on the belief that once leadership has been supplanted, a new outlook can be imposed by those who "paid" for such a campaign and victory.

Conclusion

Though the democratic state has endeavoured to bring about transformation in many areas of the South African socio-economic and political terrain, the single most important sector in many respects has escaped this process and has continued to reproduce colonialism of a special type, a legacy from the past.

Lack of development and employment opportunities for locals also play into the tribalism and ethnic categories which would at different periods also result in violent clashes in the communities. Mine operators and their dismissive attitude towards local development, fundamentally altering the employment and recruitment processes, will continue to yield tensions.

The review of the labour structure and appropriate legislative frameworks are required to ensure that the mining capitalists conform to the transformation goals set in a profound and fundamental manner. That almost 20 years into the democracy, mining labour structure remains and continues to produce racial and tribal-festering elements is total unacceptable and irresponsible. Part of this will also have to deal with the culpability of mining bosses and their continued efforts to try and undercut trade unions where they organise. ✚



Paddy McGuffin

Serving and former police officers could face manslaughter and gross misconduct charges over the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, Director of Public Prosecutions Keir Starmer said last week.

The Crown Prosecution Service and the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) will investigate what happened on the day of the tragedy and during the cover-up afterwards. Ninety-six people were killed by the crush at the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield on April 15 1989 during a match between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest.

The damning report published by the independent Hillsborough panel last month found that South Yorkshire Police doctored statements to remove criticism of the policing operation that day and attempted to shift the blame for the tragedy onto those who died.

IPCC deputy chairwoman Deborah Glass said: "I think I can confidently say this will be the largest independent inquiry that has been launched into the actions of the police in the United Kingdom." She said it would focus on what happened at the stadium and the cover-up afterwards.

West Midlands Police, who investigated

how South Yorkshire handled the disaster, will also come under scrutiny. Ms Glass said: "A large number of current and former officers will be under investigation, including Sir Norman Bettison, whose conduct was referred by the West Yorkshire Police Authority."

Sir Norman, currently Chief Constable of West Yorkshire, has been referred to the IPCC over allegations that he provided misleading information after the tragedy.

He is also under investigation for allegations that he "attempted to influence the decision-making process of the West Yorkshire Police Authority in connection with the referral that they had made."

Mr Starmer said prosecutors "should consider all the material now available in relation to the tragic events on April 15, 1989," including material from the Hillsborough panel.

"All potential offences that may have been committed and all potential defendants will be considered," he said. Hillsborough Family Support Group chairwoman Margaret Aspinall welcomed the announcement.

She said it was important to get to the bottom of the matter "because I think the country has been shamed by what has gone on over Hillsborough" over the past 23 years.

Morning Star ✚

Wall Street Journal wailing over Chávez victory

Emile Schepers

The re-election, for a third term, of Venezuela's left wing president, Hugo Chávez of the Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), has set off wails of anguish in the right-wing media and political circles in the United States. In fact, it is a supremely important development with profound implications for the hemisphere and the world.

The *Wall Street Journal* outdid itself by comparing the people who voted for Chávez with the 47 per cent in the United States who Mitt Romney claimed were hopelessly dependent on government handouts. According to the *Journal*, by vastly improving Venezuela's public services in health and education, and by helping millions of Venezuelans out of poverty, Chávez has created massive dependency on government on an unprecedented scale.

No silver lining here, helping people to improve their incomes is all bad, unless they are already rich. The way the right and the ruling class see the functions of government is reflected in such statements with crystal clarity.

The actual implication of the Venezuelan election is that Latin America may now finally escape from its dependency on, and subordination to, the United States and US-based corporations. In his famous 1823 "Doctrine," US President James Monroe asserted the right of the United States to take action to prevent interference in the Western Hemisphere. But Monroe did not promise that the United States itself would not do some interfering.

This was manifested by the US war with Mexico from 1846-1848, and by the 1904 (Theodore) Roosevelt corollary whereby the US government awarded itself the role of "enforcer" over the internal and external affairs of the other hemispheric states.

Since then, the United States has interfered in almost every single Latin American country. After the Cuban Revolution triumphed on January 1, 1959, this interference developed a special focus on overthrowing the Cuban government and preventing leftists, broadly defined, from

triumphing anywhere in the Americas. It led to bloody incidents such as the overthrow of the progressive government of President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1954, the intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1964, the overthrow of socialist President Salvador Allende of Chile in 1973, the "Contra Wars" against progressives in Central America during the 1980s and 1990s, the overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras in 2009, and others too numerous to mention.

But gradually, the nations of the hemisphere have been forging internal and external bonds which promise to break the pattern. The ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for Our America), consisting mostly of countries whose governments proudly announce their socialist orientation (Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Venezuela and some small island nations) is the most left-leaning of a series of structures that serve this purpose. Venezuela, with its oil wealth, is the key player in ALBA and also in Petrocaribe, an 18-nation bloc through which Venezuelan oil is marketed regionally on very easy credit terms.

Beyond these, there are UNASUR and MERCOSUR, in which left, centre and right-wing governed countries all participate. Finally, there is CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States), which includes 33 countries, that is, all the area's independent states except the United States and Canada. CELAC may soon displace the venerable Organisation of American States, which, ceding to US demands, has excluded active Cuban participation since the revolution. As if to highlight the change, Cuba has just been chosen to preside over CELAC for the coming period, including in economic negotiations with the European Union starting in January of next year.

Not least because of Venezuela's efforts, the Free Trade Area of the Americas died an unmourned death.

Partly because of the economic impact of its oil wealth, Venezuela has played a key role in the entire "Bolivarian" process of integrating the Latin American economies while reducing the role of the United States in the region. This is why the *Wall Street Journal*, and a whole



Hugo Chávez.

lot of other people, are wailing and gnashing their teeth. The right-wing opposition presidential candidate in the Venezuelan elections, Enrique Capriles Rodonski, had promised to end Venezuelan petroleum aid to Cuba and the other poorer countries in the hemisphere. Had he been elected, and had he kept his word, this "Bolivarian Project" would have been severely jeopardised.

And what of the United States? The Obama administration pointedly congratulated the Venezuelan people, and not Chávez, for the elections. Romney claimed that the current administration has been "soft" on Venezuela, and that he would somehow do something different. As usual, he gave no specifics whatsoever.

Last year, one of Mexico's most prominent left-wing politicians, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador sent an open letter to Hillary Clinton suggesting that the United States should return to the "Good Neighbour" policy of Franklin Roosevelt, i.e. of non-interference in other countries' affairs.

It is not too late, and there are no other options.

People's World ✪

Iraq abuse probe "a whitewash", says investigator

Paddy McGuffin

The inquiry into the alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoners by British troops has become "little more than a whitewash," a former investigator has claimed.

Former Royal Navy and police officer Louise Thomas spent six months with the Iraq Historical Allegations Team (IHAT) before resigning due to lack of progress.

She said that she had seen around 1,600 videos of interrogation sessions showing prisoners being abused and humiliated, including being subjected to sleep deprivation and beatings between interrogations.

Ms Thomas accused investigators of being ineffective and showing little concern for what they were seeing.

"I saw a really dark side of the British army," she said. "The videos showed really quite terrible abuses. But some of the IHAT investigators just weren't interested."

IHAT is going through 128 complaints from Iraqis alleging that the British armed forces were guilty of the systemic abuse of detainees between March 2003 and December 2008 when they controlled the Basra area of southern Iraq.

In March this year the Royal Military Police element was removed from IHAT after the Court of Appeal found that it lacked "the requisite independence." Its role was given to the Royal Navy Police under the command of the Provost Marshal (Navy).

A MoD spokesman said: "All of these allegations of abuse are known to the Ministry of Defence and IHAT, which is why the independent IHAT is already investigating them. The MoD has co-operated fully, including the provision of all known evidence."

He added: "Any criticisms about IHAT itself are for the organisation to answer." *Morning Star* ✪

EU've got to be kidding

Fed "a continent of war to a continent of peace" line, the Nobel Peace Prize goes to the European Union. But Stop the War Coalition convener Lindsey German couldn't believe it. "This is one of the biggest military organisations in the world," she said. "It intervened in Afghanistan and interferes in the Middle East."

She noted that the committee had a habit of picking absurd recipients.

"Four years ago it was US President Barack Obama," she said, "now the EU. "This is the elite of the world rewarding the rulers of the world who have brought us war, not peace."

Campaign Against Arms Trade also expressed surprise that the bloc had received the award, with five of the world's top 10 arms

exporters being EU states. Many of those weapons are sold to tyrannies including Saudi Arabia and Bahrain."

Spokeswoman Kaye Stearman said the EU "had done nothing to limit or restrain" such sales by member states. It's a dubious decision in the circumstances," she said.

Democratic coalition No2EU chairman Bob Crow said awarding the prize to an organisation behaving like a colonial overlord in Greece, Spain, Portugal and elsewhere was "ludicrous and deeply cynical".

"EU austerity policies, which even the IMF is now baulking at, are causing mass unemployment, record suicide rates and permanent economic decline in order to shore up a dying currency – the euro," he charged.

And convener Brian Denny said that not only was the EU creating "an economic desert for millions of workers" but its claim to have preserved peace in Europe was highly suspect.

"EU institutions sparked the war in Yugoslavia in 1992," he recalled. "John Major agreed to illegally recognise Croatia following massive German pressure in return for an opt-out of the euro."

Former Tory foreign secretary Malcolm Rifkind added to the farce by suggesting that the EU ought to share the peace prize with the NATO military alliance – which accounts for 70 percent of world military spending and has bombed and invaded sovereign states including Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. *Morning Star* ✪

Sydney

Bougainville Film Night Fundraiser

6pm, Thursday October 18

Sydney UTS main building
Level 3 the Theatre Lounge

Film: *Bougainville after the war*

Interviews with people looking at their lives now.

Followed by a new AIDWATCH production about Melanesian Customary Land: *Portions of Paradise*.

Presented by Bougainville Freedom Movement

Financial warfare: Destabilising Iran's monetary system

Nile Bowie

Dramatic fluctuations of the Iranian rial triggered small protests among merchants in Tehran's grand bazaar on October 3. In an attempt by authorities to prevent further devaluation, Iran's central bank recently issued new limits on the amount of US dollars available for purchase at a subsidised rate, leading many to panic as the rial fell 40 percent against the dollar since the start of October.

Although the demonstrations were economic in nature, many took advantage of the moment to voice their grievances against the political system, with many crediting President Ahmadinejad with overseeing fiscal mismanagement that has exacerbated Washington's unceasing barrage of economic sanctions. Ahmadinejad's political opponents also blame his administration for economic mismanagement, a sentiment that is appearing more frequently among Iranian society.

While combating the challenges that economic sanctions represent is an arduous task for any government, it is important to recognise that these sanctions are not aimed against Iran's government, but at its poor and merchant population. An unnamed US intelligence source cited by the *Washington Post* claims:

"In addition to the direct pressure sanctions exert on the regime's ability to finance its priorities, another option here is that they will create hate and discontent at the street level so that

the Iranian leaders realise that they need to change their ways."

Washington has long engaged in psychological operations that aim to foment the kind of "hate and discontent" among Iran's factory workers, merchants, shopkeepers, students, and manufacturers – as part of a series of measures taken to coax widespread social discontent and unrest throughout the country to topple the government.

For the average Iranian business owner and worker, US-led sanctions and currency devaluation have affected everyday transactions that provide paycheques and economic viability for millions of people. From urban shopkeepers to rural restaurant owners, many have been forced to close their businesses because they are unable to profit from reselling imported goods purchased with dollars.

Isolation from the global banking system has made it increasingly more difficult for Iranian students studying abroad to receive money from their families. Sanctions targeting Iran's central bank aim to devastate the Iranian export economy, affecting everyone from oil exporters to carpet weavers and pistachio cultivators. By crippling people's livelihoods and hindering their ability to pursue education and afford necessities such as food and medication, the Obama administration believes such measures will erode public confidence in the government and challenge its legitimacy.

Such policy is not only immoral, but exhibits the fraudulence and dishonesty of the United States toward



Iranian police officers blocking a street as garbage cans are set on fire, in central Tehran, near Tehran's old main bazaar, October 3.

the values of liberty and the pursuit of happiness it claims to represent. Although western media has gone to great lengths to depict Obama as being reluctant to endorse a tough stance on Iran, it is clear that Washington is quietly pursuing a belligerent policy against Tehran – one that has alienated Iranians that seek reconciliation with the United States and greatly escalated tensions and the possibility of war.

As demonstrated by the covert measures being taken against Tehran – including sabotage, cyber warfare, and targeted assassinations – Washington is fully committed to preventing Tehran's independent technological, economic and political development. While US-led sanctions are intended to target all mechanisms necessary for international oil transactions, Iran continues to show defiance by pursuing diplomacy and mutually beneficial economic development with its energy hungry allies across Asia.

China has continued to purchase larger amounts of Iranian oil despite the sanctions regime. While the

fledgling European Union cuts its ties with Tehran, Beijing has moved closer with Iran to provide credit lines and consumer goods. Additionally, nations such as India, Malaysia and Japan have continued their energy imports from Iran – making efforts to internationally isolate Tehran increasingly more difficult. Iran has actively engaged in the modernization of its energy infrastructure, including the construction of 15 domestic pipelines throughout the country. Furthermore, Iranian firms are planning to construct an electrical power plant and a pipeline to provide energy to Pakistan. In the interest of pursuing mutually beneficial economic development, Tehran has sought further cooperation with its neighbours in Pakistan and Turkmenistan. Iran's domestic investments emphasise the importance of developing the kind of trade and energy infrastructure needed to continue resistance to hegemony without being internationally isolated.

Tehran has pledged US\$25 billion to develop its Chabahar port, and an additional US\$4 billion of investment

into several different ports around the country. The expanded trade and energy capabilities that would result from such investment would solidify Iran's place in the global economy, and its seat among world powers. It is for this reason that "the threat of Iran developing nuclear weapons" is used as a stale pretext to enforce economic sanctions, despite a complete lack of evidence to implicate Iran with weaponising its nuclear energy program.

Tehran must be diligent in finding ways to manage its currency devaluation and economic growth – because of its natural resources and abundant energy wealth, the country is in a unique position to deflect international sanctions and use them to its advantage. By partnering with its international allies, Iran can bolster its domestic manufacturing industries and secure international markets for its products. Policy makers in Washington and Tel Aviv should remember that chess is an Iranian game.

Information Clearing House ♣

Cameron "playing with workers lives"

Peter Lazenby

Families of people killed at work have reacted furiously to Prime Minister David Cameron's callous wish to see "less nonsense about health and safety" in his Tory Party conference speech. Pressure group Families Against Corporate Killers (Fack) slammed Mr Cameron's latest belittling of the importance of such regulations, saying: "Among the many exhortations to us all to work hard in David Cameron's speech, he said he wanted 'less nonsense about health and safety."

"As the families of people who went to work hard to provide for their families but never came home, we know that treating health and safety as 'nonsense' is deadly. People we loved were killed because their employers, as Cameron wants, treated their health and safety as nonsense. We are horrified that he can be so cavalier with the lives of workers."

The statement went on: "Demanding people go to work and work harder but removing the regulation and its enforcement to make all workplaces safe, is criminal,

callous and cynical exploitation, treating workers as acceptable collateral damage of the enterprise culture."

Fack was formed in 2006 by members of the Bereaved by Work north-west support group and Greater Manchester Hazards Centre. It was founded by six families who lost relatives in work incidents between 1998 and 2002 and it's fighting for legislation so that bosses can be prosecuted when lax safety standards lead to workers' deaths.

In January Mr Cameron declared his New Year's resolution was to "kill off health and safety culture," claiming good health and safety is a "burden on business." Fack dismissed his statement as a lie, saying: "The evidence shows that it saves lives and employers' money."

The group added that health and safety failures costs Britain up to £40 billion a year. "We do not want any more families to pay the human price for the lack of good workplace safety, and we condemn the government for allowing employers to risk workers' lives," it said.

Morning Star ♣

Child starves to death in Westminster

Rory MacKinnon

Officers at a flagship Tory council pleaded with ministers for more joined-up government after an asylum-seeker's child starved to death. In a letter seen by the *Morning Star*, Westminster Council's Safeguarding Children Board begged Home Secretary Theresa May and Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith to fix Britain's broken support system for asylum-seekers following the death of "child EG."

The 10-month-old boy was discovered dead in the family's flat in north-west London in March, with a leaked post-mortem report showing "no food in his gut at all and so [he] had not eaten for several days at least" – with evidence of "a long period of malnourishment."

The child's mother had already won her asylum case, granting her

access to state benefits, but officers had not yet filed the paperwork. In the letter sent in March but obtained by Inside Housing this week the board's chairman cites similar cases in Birmingham and Westminster.

Backlogs had left young children with serious medical conditions and no access to public funds – forcing health and social care agencies to give families cash handouts to tide them over.

"Safeguarding vulnerable children is a priority for public services. Joined-up government should be able to manage the transition from one form of public support to another without households having to face the additional stress of uncertainty and insecurity," Mr Bamford wrote.

The death came just a year after the government axed funding for the national Refugee Integration and Employment Service, forcing it

to close. Refugee Action chief executive Dave Garratt, whose charity helped run the service, said it had been "a lifeline to refugees."

Those who had been granted the right to remain still had no knowledge of how to access Britain's complex web of social and housing services, he said – and the "savagery" of spending cuts to the refugee charity sector had only compounded the problem.

"We have an international obligation to protect people who are fleeing persecution or conflict and not to abandon them in their hour of need."

A Border Agency spokesperson said they had "already made several improvements" to transitional arrangements, allowing refugees to remain in agency accommodation for the month following their decision.

Morning Star ♣

Letters to the Editor
The Guardian
74 Buckingham Street
Surry Hills NSW 2010



email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

responsibilities to “inform”, “educate”, “encourage and promote drama and other performing arts”, and to “reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community”.

Friends of the ABC
(Vic)

Continuous war

I was browsing through an atlas the other day. I noticed that Syria lies almost half way between Israel and Iran. I thought this is the reason America needs a compliant government in Syria.

Once they have grabbed Iran's oil it's a relatively small step to the goal of containing China. This is in fact the policy of continuous war that was initiated by President George W Bush at the time of 9/11.

With this in mind it is clear what Australia's foreign and military policies should be. There must be a complete break with the American alliance. All American military bases in Australia must be closed. We must declare complete opposition to any aggressive moves against Iran by America and Israel.

Most importantly we must declare complete neutrality in any planned future conflict between America and China.

Ron Barrett
Sydney

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Culture & Life

by

Rob Gowland

An inconvenient politician

I used to work (in my 9-5 job) with a young woman who was active in various political struggles in Sydney. The anti-Apartheid campaign against the Springboks' tour was one she was very active in, I remember. She had a habit that drove me up the wall: while at work she listened to talk-back radio.

When I asked her why she chose to endure that non-stop tirade of ignorance, racism and general malevolence she said it was because for the rest of her time she mixed with left-wing people who were generally well-informed about current events. The only way she could get a feel for what average citizens felt (or were brainwashed into thinking) was to listen to talk-back.

It made sense, but wasn't any easier to endure for all that. However, for much the same reason, I used to subscribe to an Australian internet site for a right-wing political party that thought campaigns in defence of the environment were a Communist plot. They would have nothing to do with such notions as global warming which they wrote off as insignificant, claimed it was caused by sunspot activity (and certainly not by human activity), and cherry-picked little bits of scientific evidence to support their counter-claim that in fact the Earth is getting cooler, even entering a new Ice Age!

Morbidly fascinating as their material was, I eventually became bored with their constant parade of foolishness and obfuscation, and unsubscribed. One can only wallow in that kind of stupidity for so long before it becomes unbearable.

But mostly, I was put off by their smug assurance that although the overwhelming

majority of scientists globally considered greenhouse gases and global warming as the number one threat to the future of the planet, this was somehow balanced by the views of a tiny minority who claimed to be unconvinced.

It was an almost identical position to that taken by those few scientists who refused to accept that smoking could be linked to lung cancer and other diseases. Former US Vice-President Al Gore touched on this topic in his book *An Inconvenient Truth*. Gore's sister Nancy took up smoking at age 13 and later died prematurely of lung cancer. In his book, Gore wrote: "During the 1960s, even after the Surgeon General's report made it abundantly clear that smoking can cause lung cancer, the tobacco companies were working overtime to encourage Americans not to believe the science – to create doubts about whether there was any real cause for concern. And a lot of people who might otherwise have absorbed the terrible truth about smoking and health were tempted to take it less seriously than they should have. After all, if there were still such serious doubts, then maybe the jury was still out. Maybe the science wasn't definitive.

"So for almost 40 years after the landmark Surgeon General's report linking smoking to lung cancer, emphysema and other diseases in the United States, more Americans continued to die from smoking-related causes than were killed during World War II.

"The clever and deceitful approach the tobacco companies used to confuse people about what the science really demonstrated added up to a model for the campaign that many oil and coal companies are using today to confuse people about what the science of global warming is really telling us. They exaggerate minor uncertainties in order to pretend that the big conclusions are not a matter of consensus ...

"Yet the fact that some important details are still to be fully understood in no way changes the reality of the problem. Just as it was immoral for the tobacco companies to use that tactic [using misleading caveats to convince people that the connection between cigarettes and cancer is a big lie] in the decades following the mid-1960s, it's equally immoral now for the oil and coal companies to do the same thing where global warming is concerned."

No wonder Al Gore found himself on the receiving end of a massive campaign to discredit him and especially his policies. He was even lampooned on *The Simpsons*. His copiously-illustrated book – rather like a PowerPoint presentation in print form – should be a tool in every progressive's backpack. Its photographic evidence of shrinking Polar icecaps, disappearing glaciers, melting permafrost causing entire forests to fall over, should sound alarm bells for all but the terminally obtuse.

And yet, even among many of the Left,



Al Gore.

Al Gore is not taken seriously. Perhaps because he was once part of the US Establishment. But people change. Look at that other Establishment figure Malcolm Fraser. As the American playwright Clifford Odets put it in *Waiting For Lefty*, "You believe in theories when they happen to you."

Al Gore, of course, was the chief target of the infamous "stolen election" of 2000. It was to keep Gore out of the White House that so many voters were thrown off the rolls in the key state of Florida (where George W Bush's brother Jeb was conveniently Governor). In his very first week in office as President, George W Bush reversed a campaign pledge to regulate CO2 emissions. It wasn't long before the Bush-Cheney White House abandoned Bush's pre-election rhetoric about global warming

altogether, announcing that, in Bush's opinion, global warming wasn't a problem at all.

Despite his experiences of the murkier side of capitalism – in the US elections, in the corporate attempts to discredit science over smoking and over climate change and to discredit him personally – Al Gore, needless to say, still has faith in capitalism, even as he rails against "bad apples" like the tobacco, coal and oil companies. He can't help it – it's the way he was brought up. But as ever more reactionary sectors of capitalism become ascendant, and ever more blatantly thumb their noses at the democratic principles they claim to uphold, more and more people across the social spectrum will be heard raising their voices in protest and opposition. It is the working class's task to give that opposition direction and leadership. ☘



Sunday 21 October –
Saturday 27 October

The previous season of *Auction Room* was introduced and compered by William McInnes. He is an actor and writer, not an auctioneer. I think this put him on a par with the show's audience, who probably are not in the auction business either. McInnes was the voice of Everyman, and through him the program placed its emphasis on the stories of the people who were selling the items covered in the episode. It gave the auction process a human dimension that was unique to that series.

However, it must not have drawn as many viewers as some of its competitors, such as *Bargain Hunt*, so the producers have axed McInnes and his approach, and have replaced him with antiques expert and auction habitué Gordon Brown. The new-look program (ABC1 Sundays at 6.00pm) is now about antiques and collectables, not the people selling them. It will probably appeal to people who have been wondering if that old plate of aunt Matilda's is worth anything, but a unique human-interest program has been dumped for yet another antiques program. A pity, really.

There is much about David Attenborough's new series *Kingdom Of Plants* that is not new.

Time-lapse photography has explored the novelty of plants growing and blossoming almost since the beginning of motion pictures. What makes *Kingdom Of Plants* (ABC1 Sundays at 7.30pm from October 21) different is twofold: its three parts are wholly scientific in approach, and although it deals with plants worldwide, all the plants actually shown are found in just one place: the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew.

Kew Gardens is a natural wonder in itself: a triumph of Victorian engineering designed to showcase and allow research into the thousands of botanical specimens forwarded to the mother country by British explorers who in the 19th century were scouring every little-known part of the world.

Today, as the program shows us, the emphasis has shifted from collecting to preserving: there are plants being propagated in Kew that have become extinct in their native habitat.

Through the plants at Kew, Attenborough explores all aspects of plant evolution – they began in the water, so how did they colonise the land; what effect did the appearance of insects have on plant development; and how is it that some plants and some animals have extremely close symbiotic relationships? He shows us a type of pitcher plant that has evolved to attract a very small mammal to use it as a toilet, which provides the plant with needed nourishment.

A brief synopsis of the ABC's new crime series *Jack Irish* (ABC1 Sundays at 8.30pm from last week) is not too encouraging: Jack is a former criminal lawyer whose life imploded when his beloved wife was shot dead by a disgruntled client (a brief but effective scene of short sharp violence). He now spends his time as a debt collector, an apprentice cabinet-maker and a punter who



Jack Irish (ABC1 Sundays at 8.30pm from last week) – JJ Charlie (Vadim Glowna) and Jack (Guy Pearce).

lays off bets for big players seeking to manipulate the odds trackside. And occasionally he works as an investigator.

However, when someone from an old case comes back into his life, he begins to doubt some of his earlier conclusions about that case, and about the police who investigated it. In the course of his attempted reinvestigation, he meets a female reporter who is also interested in the case. After a while they become interested in each other.

Then the police start to warn him off asking further questions about the original case. Now he knows he's onto something! But that's just the first episode. I did not have high hopes for this series, but I was being too pessimistic. Certainly it sticks within its genre conventions, but that is as it should be. Part of the pleasure of watching genre programs is knowing in advance the broad outline of how that particular genre develops. Genre fans usually dislike filmmakers who don't stick to the rules of the genre: it

is regarded as playing a dirty trick on fans. A writer or filmmaker wishing to be original must take care to be original within the limits of the genre. Not always an easy task!

Jack Irish stars Guy Pearce in the title role. He looks suitably seedy and dishevelled but still with enough charisma to credibly bed the lady in his life (Linda last week, played by Marta Dusseldorp, Lyall this week, played by Diana Glenn). The series has been adapted by Andrew Knight (scriptwriter for *Rake* and *SeaChange*) from the novels by Peter Temple. This week's episode, from Temple's novel *Black Tide*, has a hefty body count (even more than last week's). It would give even Mickey Spillane pause.

However, I found the series to be very well made, within its action genre conventions. It is well photographed in a variety of locations, there are a host of colourful bit players, and the action is well handled. I enjoyed it, and I think the ABC may be on a winner here.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the new comedy series *The Strange Calls* (ABC2 Tuesdays at 9.30pm from last week) is so overdone it is woeful. To be effective, a character's reaction to an event in a comedy needs to be at least plausible within the parameters of the plot. *The Strange Calls* is about a young constable posted to the settlement of Coolum Beach, where weird things happen at night (allegedly). But many of the constable's reactions when strange things happen in his vicinity (when the man who is turning into a chook falls off the roof, for example) the constable's reaction is so over-the-top it ceases to be believable. And that stops it from being funny.

Watching a comedy should make you feel good. It shouldn't leave you feeling that someone has attempted to bash you repeatedly about the head with a blunt instrument. I think a report card for *The Strange Calls* would have to read "Tries too hard, tries much too hard." ❌

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Anthony Harris, Professor, Psychiatry, Sydney University & President Schizophrenia Fellowship;
Rob Ramjan, CEO Schizophrenia Fellowship;

October 26
THE NEW NATIONAL SECURITY ENQUIRY – MORE SURVEILLANCE & INCREASED POWERS TO ASIO – NEW THREATS TO DEMOCRACY
Bernard Keane, Crikey.com;
Nicola McGarrity, Lecturer, Law UNSW;

November 2
WHAT'S HAPPENING IN SPAIN? CAN THE INDIGNADOS RESURRECT THE SPANISH LEFT?
Estela Valverde, Macquarie University;
Noah Bassil, Dr, Macquarie University;

November 9
IS AUSTRALIA FUNDING INDONESIAN DEATH SQUADS? STOP NEWS FROM WEST PAPUA
Peter King, Dr, Convenor, West Papua Project Centre, Peace and Conflict Studies;
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Campaign to save WA Wheat Belt Railroad gathers momentum

Richard Titelius

On a balmy Monday night in Perth when most citizens were relaxing at home a group of over 60 activated citizens gathered at Lotteries West House in West Perth to hear what a strong cast of politicians and rural activists had to say about the proposed fate of a rural rail network in the state's southwest.

There was a perfect storm of farming and business interests versus community and environmental needs building on this seemingly obscure and distant issue.

In 2009 the WA state Liberal government commissioned the Strategic Grain Network to report on the viability of the Grain Rail Network. The committee handed down its findings in December 2009 that led in early 2010 to the government announcing that it would close the Tier 3 Rail Network lines which the report had deemed as uneconomic.

This move galvanised opposition amongst farmers in the WA wheat belt area that would be affected by the closures of railways which were situated between York and Narrogin. The grain freight would instead be carted by truck along narrow country roads to highways that led to Perth and Kwinana (just south of Perth). This in turn mobilised opposition to the closure of rail in communities along the Great Eastern Highway between York and Perth and in the port communities of Kwinana and Fremantle.

The most vocal community group to form out of this was the Wheat-belt Rail Retention Alliance (WRRRA) and its President Bill Cowan was the first speaker of the evening, which was organised by Sustainable Energy Now. A farmer from Naremben, Bill Cowan said that the closure of the Tier 3 Rail Network would have a multiple effect on the communities and lives of people in the wheat belt community in which he lived.

The local shires would be affected by a requirement to build and maintain the roads as most roads in these wheat belt communities are the responsibility of local government shires. The cost to upgrade the roads to carry the increased traffic of semitrailer road trains laden with wheat would be beyond many wheat belt shires to carry out. The people living in the road district known as Wheat-Belt South already have their concerns about what would happen to road safety as it currently has the dubious distinction of having the highest road toll in Australia for the period 2001-2010 when 740 people were killed or seriously injured.

In WA on average every year, the state's farmers produce over 12 million tonnes of grain

of which 95 percent is exported and earns the state income. While the 2011-12 season was a bumper grain crop of 15 million tonnes and this year's crop is projected to be around 9 million tonnes it would create chaos on rural roads to have the majority of the crop transported by semitrailers/road trains on our rural and city roads.

The locomotives and wagons which brought this valuable product to market were until the 1990s predominantly carted by the Western Australian Government Railways. When the Hilmer Report on National Competition Policy came out in 1993, it changed the way farmers could get their grain to market.

The current arrangements have a private contractor, Brookfield-Multiplex, running the "below rail" component of the Tier 3 Rail Network and Co-operative Bulk Handling (CBH) runs the "above rail" component of the trains and carriages. CBH is owned by unit holders who are predominantly the grain farmers themselves. CBH believed trains to be the best option to cart grain which is why this year they acquired 22 new state of the art diesel locomotives from the US and 574 similar quality wagons which Bill Cowan advised cost \$175 million. In contrast the Barnett state government was prepared to only provide \$100 million to local shires to upgrade the relevant wheat-belt roads to accommodate the new semitrailers. That figure would not nearly be enough to build the type of quality roads which are required and according to Cowan would barely last beyond the first year of use by heavy trucking.

A leaflet put out by the WRRRA puts the cost to upgrade a road at \$600,000 - \$1,000,000 per kilometre for a maximum life of 15 years whereas the cost to upgrade rail is significantly less at \$127,000 per kilometre for a minimum 35 year life span. Add to this that carting grain by truck uses 4.8 times more fuel than by rail while one narrow gauge freight train can carry as much as 59 road trains. The consequences for savings on costs and competitiveness of our produce in the market place of using rail, noted Cowan, cannot be underestimated. Using trucks to haul grain instead of using trains would add \$6-7 cost per tonne when carted from the south-western wheat fields to the port of Kwinana.

Dale Park, President of the WA Farmers Federation noted that the state government of Premier Colin Barnett had inflated rail costs and deflated road costs to help make the privatisation move appealing to the parliament, the people and farmers. It was a mindset that was continuing today with the way the contract to run the rail lines was continuing with the current contractor Brookfield Rail, he said.



Thornlie Grain Train to Kwinana.

The government requires that Brookfield keep weeds from the line and ensure the line is kept operational but not maintain the line to ensure its long term viability. However, Brookfield charges CBH access fees to run its trains and CBH and farmers believe that the large sums they pay are not being spent to run the railway in the best possible way but for Brookfield to make a profit. Park pointed out that parts of the freight rail system in the US, in wheat belt states of Arkansas and Kansas, were running at a profit. In fact a recent article in *Time Magazine* (July 9, 2012) pointed out that 40 percent of intercity freight is carted by train and that the US has the lowest freight costs in the world due in large part to a well funded maintenance program that ironically is predominantly funded by the private corporations that run the rail road companies.

Park also said that farmers were angry that their assets in the new trains acquired by CBH were underutilised as they were made to run at between 60-70 kilometres per hour but because Brookfield was running the railway into the ground. In some sections the trains could barely travel at 20 kilometres per hour.

The Liberal state Treasurer Troy Buswell had been invited to speak at the meeting as it was he that was the most vocal proponent of grain on trucks and who had made the comment in the media that there was simply not enough tonnage on the Tier 3 Rail to keep those lines open. Instead another Nationals MP Philip Gardner read from a statement prepared by Buswell which said that, "road trains are almost trains anyway", which audibly raised the ire of the meeting. Gardner added that the transport of grain by trucks also, "gives the farmer flexibility."

When it was pointed out to Gardner that CBH had shown its hand by buying trains and wagons this year Gardner could only reply that "CBH were keeping its options open!"

The final speaker was Greens MP for Fremantle Lynn McLaren who addressed some

of the environmental and community health aspects of trucking as opposed to rail haulage of grain. Trucking grain also increased infrastructure costs and therefore the costs of running the state.

The spectre of Peak Oil had also not been factored into the decision to increasingly rely on trucks. There were diminishing amounts of oil reserves being developed in the world and this was pushing the price of oil ever upwards which would only be added to the cost of food production and distribution. We had therefore to use the little fuel we have more efficiently.

The rail vs trucking of grain evolving in Western Australia is turning out to be a multi-dimensional issue which is not just about saving a railway line as a cheaper option. It is also an environmental health issue, a climate change issue, a public versus private sector issue it is also about producing food efficiently for domestic and foreign markets.

With a state election coming up in March 2013, it is also galvanising voters in city as well as the country to save not only an efficient form of transport but also the viability and health of their communities.

Postscript

The state government has reversed its decision to close Tier 3 rail lines.

The lines were due to close at the end of the month but Troy Buswell now says they will remain open until at least October next year.

Mr Buswell's told the ABC's *Country Hour* that a decision was made after meeting the grain handler CBH and Brookfield Rail.

"This extra 12 months gives those two parties the time I hope to work towards a solution," he said.

"A solution which will see Brookfield able to maintain the railway lines in an operational state and it will enable CBH to run their trains on those lines." ★

Carting grain by truck uses 4.8 times more fuel than by rail while one narrow gauge freight train can carry as much as 59 road trains.



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