

'Australian dream; Australian nightmare: Some thoughts on Multiculturalism and Racism'

Event

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We meet today on land of the Ngunnawal people and I pay my respects to the Ngunnawal elders. This is not a lecture such as a scholar would give. It is a lecture a novelist would give – that is to say, it is opinion, impression, invention and speculation.

This lecture will focus on Australians' responsibilities to each other, how we fail each other, and how we might begin to stop failing each other. That the debates on Global Terrorism have infected how Australians view each other and how we feel about being a plural society seems to me unsurprising, but no less tragic for having been predictable. It is a sign of our weakness, and our reluctance to identify ourselves with being a many in one, a truly multicultural nation. I believe this weakness, expressed in deep endemic, multilateral racism, has a long history, and will have terrible consequences, so this lecture will focus on that weakness.

I read through the Racial Discrimination Act recently. It is a surprisingly compelling document, for all its unlovely architecture and its arid prose. It isn't legislation that protects a way of life or regulates power and money. It is legislation that makes a bid for a better future in the relationships between people. The hopes and dreams it embodies are to me striking; as is the gulf between what it proposes as right and just, and what happens in the day-to-day rub of peoples' lives in Australia. The Racial Discrimination Act is a work in progress that invokes our better selves and tries to counter with our better selves the strange mixture of blindness, silence and excuses that makes up Australians' reactions to each other. To me, the Racial Discrimination Act is a precious instrument to help in charting a course towards maturity as a community.

I am also moved by what a huge difference this codified idealism makes to a country, and how different life can be in countries that have not had the chance or the will to so codify for their own future peace.

Yet in peaceful Australia we have a long way to go.

I received an email a while ago in which the writer said he didn't believe that it is real racism that we see in Australia. Wouldn't racism be more accurately described as tribalism, he suggested politely, and wouldn't this just dissolve away as people got to know each other, much the same way as it had for wogs, balts etc, in fact all the outsiders who gradually assimilated and became insiders in our large Australian tribe? He didn't mention Aboriginal Australians.

This argument is nothing new. People sometimes buttonhole me to say that we have

seen it all before: when the DPs arrived after World War 2; with the post-war European migrants; when the Vietnamese refugees arrived. Nothing bad came of vilifying them: no lasting damage done. They imply that it is somehow all OK this time around too, and that any who suffer too obviously at the hands of the broader Australian community are whingers, are failing to cope with the unique rite of passage we inflict on newcomers. It is not really racism. They too don't mention Aboriginal Australians.

The idea that it is not real racism that we experience between our cultural groups is an attempt to let us off the criticism that sticks with a harsh word like racism. But racism is real and painful on the receiving end. A Vietnamese Australian worker emailed me on the same day as the tribalism proponent to ask what to do about his experiences at work. He wrote of the aggressive, pervasive racism of his work environment brought about by the prejudices of his boss. He wrote of his feelings of sadness, of his bewilderment about the source of this man's hatred, and of the hard times he and his fellow workers are enduring.

Attempts to ignore or deny Australian racism, or to suggest that it is minor, natural or transient, obscure a lot: the vulnerability of an employee and the power base of an employer, for example. The privileged position of police. Most of all this denial removes all suggestion that our actions damage people.

Tribalism, or the many variants of this argument, is never used to encourage us to do more, or improve as a community. I am never buttonholed to hear that because intense vilification of a newly arrived group happened in the past and is happening again, and, conceivably could again in the future, we have a serious problem, something unreconciled and unresolved in our national psyche.

Importantly, I am never buttonholed to hear that all is OK for living Aboriginal Australians: that they have now an equal enjoyment of their basic human rights along with the rest of us, that they have been delivered somehow undamaged from generations of prejudice to a new dawn in Australia. If I am buttonholed at all on the subject of Aboriginal Australians, it is to hear that they alone are responsible for their suffering and quality of life, or to receive a white person's solution to problems he or she has never encountered or even humbly explored.

I do know from my inbox that we in Australia are terribly touchy and thin-skinned on the subject of racism.

The Aboriginal Australians I know live in a different Australia from the one I live in. The glimpses I get of their Australia scare me. It is not that occasionally they experience discrimination, or occasionally they expect it. They expect it all the time, based on long, hard experience. I have discovered that almost every transaction I might have with officialdom or private individuals is likely to be a different transaction for my friends, whether it be with health professionals, police, social workers, educators, retailers, government or law. Sometimes these transactions are positive. But even when a transaction involves positive discrimination, even an excessive helpfulness, it is still discrimination, a making distinct, if you encounter it because you are Aboriginal. It is still alien to me and to the way I am met in the Australia I live in. More often discrimination is an ever-present negative. I have sat with Aboriginal friends when they are having a garage sale so that the presence of a white face will encourage cars to stop and browse. I am talking now about what I know of urban dwelling Aboriginal people. Regional and remote communities experience much worse.

The most awful thing I have found is that many of the Aboriginal Australians I know live without a sense of day to day personal safety, without a sense that they have rights that will be protected if they need them to be, and without a sense that they will always be able to protect their children, in fact with the constant anxiety that they will be unable to protect their children. The burden of history is such that these Australians live day to day in an exile from peace and safety that is unimaginable to most Australians.

We are fast approaching a crisis as fear and vilification of yet another group dominate public discourse. And, unlike groups who arrived in the past, this group is openly vilified both locally and internationally. Prejudice against Muslim and Arab Australians is not only freely expressed, it is fast becoming accepted as factual, endorsed by western governments' interpretations of global events and the threat of terrorism.

That is my introduction, impressionistic, derived in the main from my inbox for Australians Against Racism– always an intriguing resource. I am going to proceed in three parts – first I want to give you some impressions of who we are, and what our weakness is. This is a snapshot of multiculturalism. I want to talk a little about the source of our nightmares: the unreconciled past and present. As with all nightmares, the source is ourselves Then I will talk about loving criticism and public imagination, and you will have to wait until I get there to know what I mean by them. Much as I love Australia, revel in the few languages I have acquired, and am charmed by our unique busloads of people, I don't think there is anything comfortable about who we are and how we be it.

My son is six. He has grown up in a world in which many languages feature, and people from many places are important as friends and family. He comes from a mixed culture marriage, and is himself consciously thoughtful about diversity in languages, religion and customs. He is a German, Lebanese, English, Danish, Jewish Australian, if we fully articulate his ethnic and cultural mix. He has travelled a lot in his short life, both in remote parts of Australia and overseas. He possibly has more friends and relatives who were born elsewhere than born here. This has been his life, bound up unavoidably as it is with Roger's and mine.

Yet it is strangely heartbreaking to watch your child finally enter the social world that makes up Australia. When he began school, he became intensely conscious of who is Aboriginal and who is not. I have listened as he tunes in with a prevailing Australian distinguishing of peoples from peoples. I am intrigued that this, even at age five, is the primary differentiation, especially given the diversity in his very multicultural school.

Almost as if mirroring Australian history, the next group he noticed and commented on were people he called Chinese. 'Why are so many Chinese people in Australia?' he asked me. 'Van is as Australian as you are,' I said curtly, upset that Van, Roger's legal assistant, suddenly stands out to him as somehow differentiated. Then my son came home and said, big eyed and serious, 'The only real Australians are the white ones.'

He must have been a little uncertain about this idea, as until recently he has learned his Australian history from his lifelong best friend who is an Adnyamathanha, Fijian, Afghan Australian. Emori and Rafael had worked out that just a little bit before the olden days there were dinosaurs, and in the olden days everyone was Aboriginal, and that then some white people came, they were baddies and thieves who stole the

land. Rafael had wished out loud a number of times that he too could be Aboriginal and so more like Emori. When Rafael and Emori found two small pieces of wood nailed together they agreed that Jesus Christ threw down his x into our back garden for them to dig up, make wishes on and be blessed.

None of these cosmologies or histories prompted me to find narratives that would correct them. There is a natural correction inbuilt into all the processes of growing up that will automatically dissolve these inventive myths. But racist myths are shared by adults and are less likely to have a natural correction.

My son's third excursion into prejudice gave me an opportunity to tell him an interactive legend of how people came to be Australian. It is a story he already knows from experience, and can supplement with his own ideas and enthusiastic guesses. We included his ancestors, Emori's ancestors and his refugee friends. And thankfully this differentiating has faded as cross-cultural friendships have cemented over the last year.

But I know that he will hear again and again the ideas he has been experimenting with. It won't be long before he hears and repeats something about Arab people. I'll feel sad then too, as until now, Arab, Arabic have been words associated with us, with me, with his composite self, and with stories and friends. It will ultimately be up to him to work out what he thinks from the mismatch between the prevailing winds and his own experiences, and he will be one of the lucky ones to be torn this way and that.

This is a small vignette of Australia. We are multicultural, and this opens up possibilities for us that we would not otherwise have. The dynamic, abrasive potential that cultural misunderstanding, cultural learning and mutual discovery can bring. But this hopefulness about our potential doesn't change the small heartbreak of realising that my son has to make his own way and make his own mind, and that the pressures to choose racial loyalty groups will increase as the experiences he has include conflict and violence. To be closed and inward looking, shut off from other cultures will be one of the choices, in some circles the dominant choice, and most attractive choice, offered him as he grows, now, in Australia.

When I said to my son, Van is as Australian as you are, I was invoking an age-old act of making Australians. The assertion is familiar. I recently met a judge who told me how his mother defended him from being called a reffo. She, in her rich Jewish accent, used exactly those words. He is not a reffo, he is as Australian as you are. I am Australian because I say I am. This assertion of belonging exists in one form or another as a primary act in many refugees' and migrants' histories. It is a frail, white knuckled kind of belonging, but it is, interestingly, often remembered in migrants' narratives. It is a richer, more meaningful narrative than the day of swearing an oath, because as narrative, it is born of conflict.

The next step in acquiring acceptance seems to me to be clowning. Defusing and making ridiculous whatever threat one embodies to the mainstream Australian peoples. Interestingly, the racism with which migrants and refugees are met can be defused by clowning. The racism Aboriginal Australians experience is a different matter altogether.

Helena Holman is a young writer whose work was recently highly commended in the Alan Marshall Short Story award. She wrote of her father's intense loneliness when he first arrived in Australia from Czechoslovakia, and how he came up with an idea

to break through the language, social and cultural barriers to gain acceptance. This is what she writes:

"He built a large wooden cage in a paddock next to the bush town's only pub. He placed this sign on it in big letters:

See a real "New Australian"

Properly and leisurely

For only One Shilling!

When everyone ... knocked off from work, my dad entered the wooden cage dressed in his best European suit. There he started barking like a vicious dog. Almost immediately a crowd of people surrounded his cage. My dad then hopped like a kangaroo, sang Czech songs or talked aloud in Czech, mimicked an ape and delicately picked his teeth with the blade of his pocket knife. The audience was impressed. They threw money in the cage and gave my dad a thunderous applause. People were laughing and calling "Good onya mate!"... Since then my dad has never been lonely again. He made hundreds of friends, some still his mates today."

Helena's dad's performance took a lot of courage, for it ridiculed both himself and the prejudices of those who had ostracised him. I feel reading this that it could have gone the other way, could have unleashed something other than amusement and appreciation.

Will Muslim people clown around for the rest of us? Defuse their perceived difference by making us laugh? Dress up, perform, put on masks, so that their real selves can be left in peace? Let off steam in ribald humour rather than revolutionary action?

There are Muslim and Arab comedians, Muslim and Arab jokers. We have film *Fat Pizza* and TV *Pizza*, which, at least in the first series, played a risqué game with prejudice. But I don't get a sense that these release the pressures between the mainstream and the Arab Australian communities. They don't generate paternalistic affection for a pet community quite the way the movie *Wog Boy* seemed to. They are presented in a cultural environment in which ridicule feeds rather than subverts prejudice, in which prejudice itself is the pseudo-factual background against which humour is mapped. Prejudice is rarely questioned, or flipped on its head, and when it is, the audience doesn't come to the party, doesn't laugh. This is stillborn clowning.

Uncomfortable as all the meanings of clowning are, I don't think even that is possible today. Muslim women we seem to accept only if they are victims, fugitives from their culture who feed our prejudice. Perhaps no Muslim man can now defuse the fear and loathing with which his culture, faith and community are perceived – despite his efforts, he will remain a cipher, a representative rather than an individual.

I am afraid that there will be no space for this for a long time to come.

In Australia we don't yet have a word or a language that includes us all. We have no way to speak naturally of a many in one. The word Multicultural doesn't manage. Multicultural is used to mean some of our cultures, not all of them. Ethnic means some of our ethnicities and not others. Further, each community and each age group has different specifications as to which cultural or racial groups are them, not us. It is strange that the popular and bureaucratic use of the term multicultural does not include Aboriginal cultures – that is usually a separate entity, portfolio, art gallery, department. To me the faultline in our multiculturalism lies in the silence about Aboriginal cultures, the distinguishing of and the failure to value these cultures as an

integral part of us. This is the primary failure. Aboriginal cultures are left to be part of the multicultural nation by ... glaring silence.

I went through a list of Aboriginal languages recently on the ethnologue website, a reputable resource. Of the 231 languages listed, 39 were extinct, and I counted 167 listed as nearly extinct. The website is dated 2006, but its principle cited source is 1981, so the numbers can only be worse. Only eleven languages have more than 1000 fluent living speakers, and most of them under 2000.

Australian languages are plural. Rather than have a Prime Minister insist that the flag be raised in all schools, I'd like to hear one say that Australian languages should be taught in all schools, and I don't mean primarily the languages that came originally from elsewhere. The last living Aboriginal languages should be part of our lives. We cling so defensively to English yet of all peoples, in a nation of more than 270 languages, Australians should be bi, tri, quadrilingual.

I want to rub this in – look up the official language of New Zealand – it is languages, plural: English and Maori. What would it do for us for our official languages to be English, Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri, Arrernte, Tiwi and more? I would argue that it would do a great deal. It would say we are a plural nation, we have always been a plural nation, and it would say it both to ourselves and to others. It would remove the coy and subtle exile so much of our ingrown speak about ourselves specifies.

The list of Aboriginal languages was a striking and painful map of loss. I counted 23 languages that had, from the most recent source only one living speaker. This may be the only time you ever hear even their names:

Bandjigali, Dirari, Djawi, Djiwarli, Erre, Gugadj, Guwamu, Kuku-Mangk, Lamu-Lamu, Mandandanyi, Mangerr, Margany, Margu, Muruwari, Ngawun, Ngurnbur, Niyangga, Nyulnyul, Wamin, Wanggamala, Wulna, Yawara-warga, Yindjilandji.

Imagine that your child is to be the only person alive to speak your mother tongue. That is the end of a culture. The death of more than community. The death of all dreams of a better future. These final deaths are happening all around us all over our land without even a whisper from most of us.

Most of us don't even know.

Silences. I went to Port Augusta recently. Port Augusta is just 300 kilometres from Adelaide, and is a large regional centre at the foot of the Flinders Ranges. It is a desert town at the head of the gulf St Vincent. It is quite beautiful, with many trees. Blue water, a stark sky and orange earth. Gillian Bovero and I are in the process of setting up an Adnyamathanha language program in Adelaide, and we were up there for an elders meeting. She wanted to take me to some of the places of her childhood and show me things that upset her too. I want to tell you what Gillian showed me. Port Augusta Council has recently imposed a city wide dry zone to control the symptoms of alcohol abuse. Port Augusta drinking now must take place inside, out of sight, and with it, all violence and anti-social behaviour associated with alcohol abuse now takes place behind walls and doors.

Port Augusta's controversial curfew for youth is before parliament at the moment. Port Augusta would like to force the children who roam the streets into the houses where the adults now drink. Both signs of social disintegration and despair would then be out of sight, silenced.

Port Augusta with SA government has also built a residential compound for

transient, visiting and homeless Aboriginal people to provide, they say, safe accommodation for the influx of visitors who come from the APY lands to Pt Augusta every summer. Gillian took me just out of the main part of town along a road that passes by a white salt lake and hills to the left. Here you come to a long security fence 8 foot cyclone and topped with barbed wire. Behind it there are rows of numbered low domed canvas tents on earth, and on the other side tiny dongas that fit two single beds side by side. The sign says this is Lakeview Accommodation Centre, supported by Davenport Community, SA housing and others. Ceduna has such a camp, although community owned and run, and Coober Pedy is contemplating one. Community consultation was part of the design of this one but Port Augusta Council's Aboriginal Advisory Committee resigned en masse over the way it is fenced. Among political Aboriginal people, this place is called, with terrible irony, Blackster. It is the other side of town from Baxter, and, although less money is spent here, the echoes are stark, and when I thought about it, almost all generated by the fence.

This is where people, Australian citizens, from the northern lands who holiday in Port Augusta have to stay. They pay for it out of their centrelink at \$30/week. Two things shock me about this place: the prison like fence and the question of people's choices. The fence is a clearcut offence, but the choices less so – even some local Aboriginal people think the housing appropriate for some who live, ordinarily, with less.

People come down from the APY lands for services that are unavailable to them there, to visit relatives, and simply for summer by the seaside. Port Augusta's mayor Joy Baluch says they come only to drink. But Gillian's first thought is – what if I came to town with nothing? Would the fact that I ordinarily live in a house, would my lifestyle count at all, or are we all the same to them? Would I be forced to live with my kids here?

Lakeview wasn't made simply by looking away, by neglect and by abandonment. It is neat, funded, built to control a group of Australians by another group of Australians really as pre-emptive crime prevention. It was made deliberately and our politicians are proud of it. But nothing can hide the fact that the place was built to deal with a problem not to serve individual people.

Lakeview has been a success, according to Marie Williams of the Pt Augusta Council's Community Harmony Centre. She artlessly cites the massive decrease in numbers of people coming down from the APY lands for this summer.

Up the road from Lakeview is Davenport, an all Aboriginal suburb of Port Augusta. Gillian says this was a nice place when she was a kid: poor, but with a real community spirit. The now fenced and boarded up community centre housed many good times. The houses in Davenport are generally modest housing trust style buildings. Some are well maintained, some not. Gillian tells me of recent riots and we see burnt out cars. We come to the police station, a meshed kiosk with a carport. It is the size of a pie cart. It is unoccupied. The funding has been pulled from almost everything, it seems, here. Apparently it is very recent: Mal Brough's office out of the blue disbanded the Davenport council last year, bringing a multitude of services and community based decision making grinding to a halt. The Pika Wiya health service is operational. And the Aboriginal old folks home, Wami Kata. Children and adults on one front porch wave. If they are the occupants of that house, then there are at least 15 people living there. There are many children in

Davenport. There is no school, no shop. There are small groups of kids looking for something entertaining to do.

As you leave Davenport, you see the sign that tells you Port Augusta ahead of you is a dry zone. Davenport, of all places, is not. Whatever the reasons for this, it packs a symbolic punch: it suggests that all the social ills and violence that have been the reason for the controversial dry zone don't matter in Davenport, don't matter where whites don't live.

No matter the good intentions that have been involved in building Lakeview, and stripping Davenport of infrastructure, the overall effect is dismaying. Many things on that long back alley of Port Augusta spoke unwittingly of segregation and of a kind of collective punishment, of silencing and control.

Places like Lakeview have both a real and symbolic effect. Lakeview says symbolically that Aboriginal people collectively are a problem. Many Aboriginal people like Gillian feel an obscure anger when they look at it, even when they know in detail what serious social problems and homelessness prompted it. We have a long way to go before Aboriginal cultures are part of our sense of self, our sense of being, as a nation, a many in one. We have a long way to go before each of us takes personally what is proposed as solutions in places like Port Augusta. Until we travel that way, we will have trouble being what we are - multicultural.

Loving Criticism

I have reached the conclusion, through my life, writing, travels and significant friendships, that any criticism born of ignorance, mistrust or hatred is not only ineffectual and a complete waste of time, it is harmful and elicits equally pointless and damaging responses.

Loving criticism usually comes from within, not from the outside, because even if criticism from the outside is free of hatred or mistrust, it will often be ignorant. This principle holds for personal relationships as much as for human communities. For the big picture, human communities, think of it this way. Reform of the Catholic Church can only come from criticism expressed by people informed and influential in that church. Similarly, reform of Islam will only come from influential clerics and Muslim theologians and thinkers. Throwing our two cents worth in times of covert culture wars can only slow things down and encourage wagon circling. The most dramatic act of hostile criticism in recent years, the Iraq War, built on the rhetoric of being a good influence in reforming the political, social and cultural landscape of the Arab Muslim world, has cost possibly well over 655,000 lives so far, and is an expensive two cents worth: \$411,651,663,952 when I checked late March 2007. You'll note that the dollars have been counted far more precisely than the bodies. Loss of life, destruction, and danger for all is the only thing purchased.

The Iraq war seems doomed to fail in every one of its goals and has resulted in wagon circling that is as destructive to Iraqis as it will be to us.

Unloving criticism is a shove and a put down, and will often be met with anger and an equal and opposite reaction. An Australian writes on the HREOC website, responding to the fact that the Racial Discrimination Act does not cover religious vilification:

'... since the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, I have experienced various levels of prejudice against me, ranging from light racial remarks to high levels of verbal abuse. I am not the kind of person who will tolerate such behaviour ... my

responses have usually been at the level of the attack even though I am not a loud or violent person, but I feel that since the Australian law cannot protect me, then I must protect myself. I would like to mention that any physical assault will also be responded to physically.'

Imagine a man, who has never visited Australia and does not speak English. who criticises and advocates change for Australia. His research constitutes reading anti-Australian sentiment expressed in the media, some unflattering stats on Australia, and a handful of books and articles on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the prevalence of domestic violence in Australian culture. His sole contact with Australians is with occasional backpackers passing through his country. This person is highly critical of Australia and Australians. But this man can have nothing to say that is worth hearing even if each fact he cites is truthful. He has no genuine experience or knowledge and nothing from which he can offer a human critique of any value.

The ridiculous critic is becoming a type in our national character, on our lecture circuits and bestseller lists and too few Australians have sufficient knowledge and experience to counter ridiculous critics.

Unless you love Christianity, or Islam, or Judaism, or Aboriginal cultures, and have real experience and knowledge, what can you say that will not sound foolish or, worse, bigoted, to someone who knows and appreciates more than you do? You are not likely to be in a position to have something worth saying, believe it or not, unless you spend years immersing yourself in gaining knowledge, experience and understanding, and then only if your agenda isn't hostile. This is what I call public imagination: the ability to know that the person you are meeting is a mystery, and that their faith, or community, or cultural group are mysterious to you, just as yours is to them. This means recognising oneself as foreign to the known of any other person's life. Recognising that everyone has a complex familiar world. It is not hard. Yet we have become good at simply seeing ourselves as superior.

I would advocate far more than tolerance. I would like to advocate a true pleasure in each other, a basic affection for, and willingness to gain knowledge of, each other's cultures, a desire to learn each other's languages; and, in the absence of capacity for any of that, an acknowledgment of ignorance.

Prejudice has made damned experts of us all.

Public Imagination

Atrocities are made possible by the dissolution of public, or common, imagination. By common or public imagination I mean any person's capacity to know that a stranger is like themselves. The ability to look at a young soldier, or read of a suicide bomber, and know immediately that he or she is loved by someone, and that death or injury matters not just to the self, but in a web of human relationships – each person is enmeshed, like you and like those you love, and has the same intrinsic, mysterious worth that you have, or that your son or daughter has to you. Public imagination does not require the usually impossible step of really imagining oneself in someone else's shoes– you do not have to imagine the soldier is you or your own son, the suicide bomber yourself or your own daughter. You imagine, merely, that he is someone's son, she is someone's daughter, and you all have the wherewithal to know what this means.

Every mass atrocity I can think of has had a concomitant failure, a retreat, of public imagination. All racism has a failure of this capacity associated with it. One of the recurrent themes of racism and dehumanisation is a variant of the idea that they have a reduced capacity for human feeling. We love more deeply than they do. When the statement they do not care for their children as much as we do becomes public in any form, in any country, it is a signpost along the road to terrible injustice and potential atrocity.

Governments, especially authoritarian ones, like to control people's capacity to imagine some things. This is always related to human rights – the more limited public imagination, the more docile the populace will be and the more a government can act as it pleases. In Australia this desire to control the capacity to imagine was and is most apparent in the government's handling of refugees and detention centres.

Howard's government fears public imagination. Public imagination has been the greatest impediment to the last decade of migration and refugee policy. For years people were locked up in remote centres so we would not see or hear them. At the same time the government vilified and demonised refugees and asylum seekers in the hope that we would accept a dehumanised view and not try to imagine that they are just like us.

By constructing the paradigm of the more deserving and less deserving refugee claim, the government strengthened and exploited an already burgeoning popular view of the more deserving and less deserving human being, defined by culture of origin.

A failing common imagination creates opportunity for a defence of torture, as was published in 2005. A demolished common imagination seems to me evident in Phillip Ruddock arguing that detainees attempt suicide to get attention and to gain "a migration outcome", a statement that has a successor in US officials describing the suicide of three men imprisoned in Guantanamo as variously a "PR move", and an "act of war."

We are losing our willingness to be plural. But to keep on this path we will lose much more. A human community must make many small steps before it is sufficiently morally insulated to acquiesce to an atrocity. We as a community are making some of those small steps, and we need to stop now.

We need reconciliation now more than we ever have. It would be the beginning of being fully what we are: multicultural Australia.

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About Eva Sallis

Dr Eva Sallis is the author of five novels; *Hiam*, which won the Vogel Literary Award and the Dobbie Literary Award; *The City of Sealions*; *Mahjar* winner of the Steele Rudd Literary Award, *Fire Fire* and, most recently, *The Marsh Birds*, shortlisted for many awards and winner of the Asher Literary Award. She is also author of a book of literary criticism, *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass: the Metamorphosis of the 1001 Nights*. She has co-edited several anthologies, including, with Sonja Dechian, Jenni Devereaux and Heather Millar, two anthologies of stories by young Australian writers: *Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories* and *No Place Like Home: Australian Stories*. She is co-founder and current president of *Australians Against Racism Inc*. She is also a Visiting Research Fellow in the School of Humanities (Discipline of English) at the University of Adelaide.

