

SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY

## PUBLIC POVERTY – PRIVATE WEALTH

EDITORIAL

In the May *Beacon* editorial we spoke of 'Abbott's Wish List': some 75 items to 'reform' Australia. The list was produced by the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) – a right-wing think tank with a close association to leading politicians and public figures.

If two words jump out from the list, they would have to be 'abolish' and 'privatise'. The Liberal mindset advances private enterprise and promotes the privatisation of any public entity that makes or could make a profit in the service of private capital.

The myth of private enterprise efficiency when compared to public ownership, particularly of essential services, lies in tatters when we consider the outcome of privatisation in Australia (and elsewhere): rising prices, lack of investment in infrastructure, a downgrading in the quality of services provided, etc. It is no surprise to consumers that the profit motive reigns supreme.

Many *Beacon* readers will recall the original Medicare (then called Medibank) introduced by the Whitlam government in 1972. Successive governments of all persuasions have since emasculated the original universal healthcare concept to the extent that an increasing proportion of health dollars are now being poured into private health insurance (PHI). This 'death by a thousand cuts' is whittling away our healthcare system.

In an article in *new matilda* Ian McAuley writes (in part):

The risk we face is not that government health expenditure will break the bank, but that the policy response from future governments will focus only on immediate fiscal costs, at the expense of higher community costs and greater inequity in access to health care.

The simplest path to bad policy like this is to shift health costs 'off budget' and, through a combination of incentives and compulsions, on to private health insurance (PHI). Lobbyists for private health insurers make the glib and superficially plausible argument that PHI is the obvious means to make this saving through mechanisms like 'Medicare Select', a system which would essentially destroy Medicare and conscript Australians into PHI.

The false logic of such self-interest needs clarifying.

Shifting costs from public spending to private spending is not a saving. ... PHI is essentially a 'privatised tax', collected by NIB, HCF or Medibank Private, rather than the Australian Taxation Office, to fund our shared health care needs. We may not relish paying taxes, but we have to admit that the Australian Taxation Office does a fairer and more efficient job at collecting tax than private financial agencies.

... Private health insurance, as a permissive funding channel, makes health care more expensive, but it doesn't buy better care or produce better outcomes.

... What this all indicates is that health care is a complex system, which needs to be managed as a system through the strong hand of government. So long as governments remain under fiscal pressure, and so long as they do not succumb to the temptation to shift health care costs off-budget, they have an incentive to find which therapies and other interventions work and which do not, and to make appropriate policy responses – through controls on providers, judicious use of prices (including means-testing), persuasion, taxation, and use of broader policies to do with social conditions with health consequences. In short, they have a fiscal incentive to see that money is spent wisely.

This contrasts with the view of those in the private sector who see health care as a potential goldmine, if only it can be unleashed from the tight hand of government control – a view captured so well in the title of a keynote address of a health insurers' conference scheduled for July: 'Government cutbacks – a sea of opportunity.'

We should be alert to the PHI industry. It has consistently been promoted by Coalition governments and the current Gillard government, unlike previous Labor governments, has allowed PHI coverage to rise from 43 to 47 per cent of the population. It is extraordinary that when we have just witnessed the harm the financial sector can inflict on the real economy, we have given this branch of the financial services industry such a privileged position. We need to see PHI for what it is – an industry with a high bureaucratic overhead and with every incentive to see its market expand – for profit for a few rather than first class health care for all. ■

# NUCLEAR WEAPONS

DID YOU KNOW...

Nine countries together possess more than 19,000 nuclear weapons. The United States and Russia maintain roughly 2,000 of their nuclear weapons on high-alert status – ready to be launched within minutes of a warning. Most are many times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945. A single nuclear warhead, if detonated on a large city, could kill millions of people, with the effects persisting for decades.

The failure of the nuclear powers to disarm has heightened the risk that other countries will acquire nuclear weapons. The only guarantee against the spread and use of nuclear weapons is to eliminate them without delay. Although the leaders of some nuclear-armed nations have expressed their vision for a nuclear-weapon-free world, they have failed to develop any detailed plans to eliminate their arsenals and are modernising them.

The United States was the first country to develop nuclear weapons and the only one to have used them in war. It spends more on its nuclear arsenal than all other countries combined. It has 8,000 warheads.

Israel has a policy of ambiguity in relation to its nuclear arsenal, neither confirming nor denying its existence. As a result, there is little public information or debate about it. It has at least 80 nuclear weapons.

## The wider problem

Five European nations host US nuclear weapons on their soil as part of a NATO nuclear-sharing arrangement, and roughly two dozen other nations claim to rely on US nuclear weapons for their security. Furthermore, there are now some 40 nations with nuclear power or research reactors capable of being diverted for weapons production. The spread of nuclear know-how has increased the risk that more nations will develop the bomb.



### Nations with nuclear weapons

United States, Russia, Britain, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea

### Nations hosting nuclear weapons

Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Turkey

### Nations in nuclear alliances

Albania, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain

(Source: Federation of American Scientists)

Imagine a country where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are recognised as the sovereign owners of lands they have lived on for sixty thousand years or more.

# A New Democracy

by Jeff McMullen

Imagine the freedom to be yourself, culturally, spiritually, linguistically, regardless of your age, gender, colour or ethnic origin.

Imagine a Constitution that enshrines these human rights and upholds all of our international legal obligations.

Imagine a constitutional prohibition on discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, ethnic or national origin.

Imagine a positive mandate in that Constitution to ensure laws are made and programs enacted to end the impoverishment of so many of the First Australians as well as others.

Imagine an Australia where the Indigenous value of *custodianship* binds all of us to a shared responsibility to care for this land and for one another.

In this Constitution there would be power and poetry. It would inspire us, expressing our true sense of place, acknowledging the longer timelines of history, defining us and unifying us as Australians.

This is my dream and I hope you have one too. It is a dream of a new democracy and a constitution that is inclusive of all Australians.

If you can't see that far into the future to a brighter day that some day will come, then you risk settling for the status quo. Maybe you know some of those Australians who don't know the Constitution exists, don't know what's in it or that we have the power to change it for the better?

Even a glance at the Constitution reveals the deep stain of racism and discrimination. It is one of the few constitutions in the world today with negative race powers allowing government to make laws and policy that pointedly trample the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In contrast to the constitutions of most Western democracies Australia's says very little at all about human rights.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have long been denied many of the most fundamental human rights including those Australia is obligated to uphold under many international covenants.

So any discussion of a new attempt to belatedly recognise their legal rights as well as the rightful central place of Indigenous Australians as the most ancient founding peoples of the many nations that were here for tens of thousands of years surely must begin with an honest statement of certain facts.

Despite the lie of *terra nullius* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people occupied these lands longer than anyone really knows. Their lands were invaded and many of the settlers used brutal force to take what was never theirs.

To deny the invasion, the massacres and the theft of lands, and I say this with grim irony, would undermine any claim that the Australian Constitution has legitimacy.

The nation constituted by the Australia Constitution Act of 1900, a British Act of Parliament, is founded on the misguided notion of white supremacy and the equal folly of that tragic concept of conquest. As some Australia judges have noted conquest is a facet of international use to justify claims by other nations to sovereignty. But having witnessed many of the worst conflicts over the past 45 years I am convinced this ancient belief in conquest is a vestige of our most predatory and barbaric traits as a species.

Yet conquest, of a sort, and extraordinary denial or reality is what has landed us all in this constitutional mess.

Despite the fact that the original English invader, James Cook, ignored his orders to 'consult with the natives', despite the truth that Aboriginal resistance did occur, that there was no surrender of sovereignty and no negotiation of a treaty, the colonies established a constitution that looked right through Aboriginal people as if they were not there.

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There were just two references to 'natives' in the 1901 Constitution Act and they both tragically excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They were not even to be counted in the census because given the prevailing racism it was assumed that out among the flora and fauna they were doomed to extinction. The Parliament was prohibited from making laws for the 'natives' but this exclusion did not prevent shameful policies aimed at assimilation and at times acts of genocide.

It was not until the 1967 Referendum that a 92% majority of Australians voted emphatically to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be counted along with all other citizens and yes the Commonwealth could make laws for them too along with other races.

You see the anachronistic, racist and scientifically false notion of a White Australia was built into the Australian Constitution. The race powers are still there today.

Section 25 allows the states if they wish to disenfranchise people on the basis of race. Section 51 (xxvi) allows the federal parliament to pass special laws relating to 'the people of any race for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws'.

You can see what this means for Aboriginal people when you look closely at the crushing humiliation of the Northern Territory Intervention, as the racial discrimination was suspended again to allow official discrimination, sanctioned by a Prime Minister, an Opposition Leader and almost all members of the federal parliament.

An Aboriginal child born in one those remote communities in 1967 will spend the first fifteen years of life controlled by the new Chief Protectors who dictate fundamental aspects of family life, cultural life, work, welfare and education from thousands of kilometres away in Canberra. Their genuine right to an equal opportunity for health, education, housing and a decent standard of living has never been honoured in this hollow Constitution.

At the time the Northern Territory Intervention was launched then Prime Minister John Howard declared that he was not concerned with constitutional niceties when the safety of children was at stake. What extraordinary hypocrisy.

The intervention was a very dangerous government big lie and it shows the tragic flaws in our current democracy that allows a government to discriminate. Gormless politicians playing to the applause of neo-liberals who want to assimilate Indigenous people pass many laws that clearly do not benefit the First Australians.

When I have consulted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people privately and publicly in many places and many forums around the country, overwhelmingly they speak of their land, the land that owns them, the sovereignty they believe is the essence of their being. Sovereignty may mean many different things to different

people but to most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people clearly it means the legal right to control their destiny on their lands and waters. Polling by the National Congress of First Peoples tell us that this deep and abiding sovereignty is clearly foremost on the minds of Indigenous people, along with health and the education of their children.

Here then is the first great dilemma in the current approach to constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The consensus paper prepared by the government-appointed panel of experts makes it perfectly clear that sovereignty is not going to be included in any referendum proposal for constitutional recognition and change.

One of the members of the expert panel, Noel Pearson, is quoted as saying that apart from being unachievable, 'full-blown sovereignty' may not be necessary and that 'local indigenous sovereignty' could exist internally within a nation state 'provided that the fullest rights of self-determination are accorded'.

Given that the present policy towards Indigenous Australians is that crushing assimilation described euphemistically as modernisation or renovation of culture, and given the astonishing undermining of Aboriginal authority through the intervention and the ten-year extension known as the STRONGER FUTURES legislation, the 'fullest rights of self-determination' sadly seem lifetimes away.

This is where Australia lags behind the rest of the world. The United States government has more than 350 treaties with Native Americans. American courts have upheld

Indigenous sovereignty repeatedly and affirmed the right of the First Nations to self-government. Importantly, evidence gathered by many decades of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development led by Professors Stephen Cornell and Joe Kalt shows emphatically that sovereignty, control of their destiny, is the real key to development.

The only Indigenous people in the world who have equal life expectancy with the rest of their fellow citizens are the Sami spread across Norway, Finland and Sweden. All three of these countries have Sami parliaments and Norway's constitution recognises the country as bi-cultural, a guarantee that the government will consult and negotiate with Sami to maintain their distinct language and culture.

Such positive recognition and progress by other First Nations shows up the limitations of the Australian approach and the negative restraints imposed by a political reality, a grudging willingness to make symbolic change perhaps but real doubt about how far the politicians or the people will go.

Whatever happened to the belief in a treaty or legal compact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to address their sovereignty and so much of this nation's unfinished business?

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The expert panel clearly states that it saw its brief as coming up with recommendations that contribute to a more 'unified and reconciled nation, and be capable of being supported by an overwhelming majority of Australians from across the political and social spectrums. In addition they had to benefit and accord with the wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and be technically and legally sound'. Specifically, the experts wanted a clear expression of support from a majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for any statement of recognition.

But in truth, the panel of experts has inadvertently or intentionally reinforced the political reality that recognising Aboriginal sovereignty is not going to happen and nor is any legal compact or treaty that would in a meaningful way encapsulate land rights.

The panel notes that these are issues of great concern for future discussion.

What the panel is offering all Australians now are five strong recommendations that nonetheless clearly do not meet the priorities for action by the very people the changes are intended to benefit.

I believe this presents a grave threat to any chance of unity on constitutional change.

Australia has only ever held 44 referendums and just 8 have been carried. Here is the measure of our constitutional conservatism and of just how our nation has been held back by the timidity and lack of leadership by our elected politicians.

It is 36 years since Australians made any change to our Constitution. The last time we could ever find the two-thirds majority of voters in a majority of states was for a referendum in 1977 that required federal judges to retire at 70.

A retired judge I hugely respect, former High Court Justice Michael Kirby, has summed up the situation we are now facing, understanding the record and noting the importance of recognising the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

'Constitutionally speaking', Michael Kirby said, 'we are still basically White Australia, however much we boast that we have changed'.

Well, you have had months to mull over the expert panel's five recommendations, what are the prospects that they will change the racism and the discrimination?

The first recommendation to erase forever section 25 of the Constitution would prevent the states from ever taking away the right to vote based on race.

The second recommendation to remove section 51 (xxvi) would eliminate the negative race power that has been used to make laws that harm the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The third recommendation is for a new power that would give the federal parliament power to pass laws that benefit Indigenous Australians. This new section would also set out a clear statement of recognition of the prior occupancy of the continent and the ongoing relationship with land and waters. Echoing the Sami Constitutional recognition, there is also a proposal in this section to require the government to secure the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This may or may not give more of the right kind of support to programs that could bring equality in health, education, employment and life expectancy.

The fourth recommendation is the one that I believe is the most urgently needed because it addresses so many burning injustices right now. It would prohibit the Commonwealth, States and Territories from discriminating on the basis of race, colour, ethnic or national origin. Disappointingly, gender has not been included in this list. Why not emphasise that important human right while we are engaged in this effort to improve our Constitution?

Finally, in their fifth recommendation, the expert panel seeks a language provision that states that English is the national language but also affirms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders languages as part of our national heritage.

It is up to you, my brothers and sisters, to raise your voice wherever and whenever you can to let the Aboriginal voice ring out loud and clear.

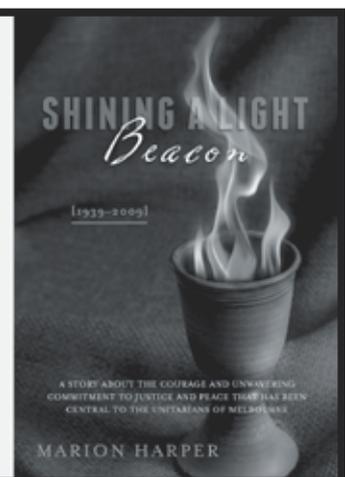
I have shared my dreams with you and I will walk with you.

I am certain that more than words in any document what this nation needs most is a change of heart. ■

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# SYRIA

by *Nina Haidar*

## the unspoken truth



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I'm very grateful to the Unitarian Church for the opportunity to speak to you today, as a member of AMRIS, which is a movement in support of peace and reconciliation in Syria.

### THE HUMAN STORY – SYRIA

The first thing to say about the story of Syria is that it is a human story, so it involves all the human qualities and motivations evident since the beginning of history, such as greed, revenge, hate, envy, treachery, fear ... but also loyalty, heroism, nobility, compassion, faith and love. The Syrian people are displaying heaps of those last qualities. But there is nothing black and white about people, about politics, especially not about war, though William Hague, John McCain, some in our government and the media want us to think otherwise.

If any people are going to witness the full range of what humans have done to other humans, it might seem appropriate that it is people in Syria that do – not that the tragedy of this war should be wished on anyone – but Syria has experienced invasions and war

for millennia and so the people of Syria have perhaps inherited an understanding of invasion and treachery, as well as gathered the strength to overcome them. Their heroes are noble figures such as Salahadin, who defeated the Crusaders, and who displayed courage and honour on the battlefield. In the 21st century, Salahadin is still revered in Syria, where he is buried.

And another hero for many, who is remembered and honoured in Syria still, is St Paul, who according to early accounts had his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, and who walked down streets that still exist in Damascus. The very roots of Christianity are in Syria. There is also a story that Prophet Mohammad viewed Damascus from the mountain road; it appeared as an enchanting oasis on the horizon. The prophet decided not to enter the city and is supposed to have said, 'Man should only enter Paradise once'.

Syrians share a love and reverence for their homeland and together they can embrace a fortitude that enables them to survive and recover even stronger than before.

I speak about *Syrians*, but if you have been paying attention to the mainstream news on Syria, you might be thinking in terms of Sunnis, Shias, Alawis, Christians, terrorists, Shabiha, Assad loyalists, jihadists, etc. That fragmented Syria is not the Syria I know; it is not the Syria, which is fighting so tenaciously to survive. It fights to stop a war that is aimed at bringing Syria to its knees.

Syria is fighting to resist imperial power and the dictates of its super-rich Gulf neighbours. It is also fighting to maintain its place in the Middle East as a strong, independent voice.

It is a war funded by states that do not respect the soul or history of Syria, as all they seem to understand is the power of obscene wealth, extremist ideology and the power of the gun.

The Syria as it is often described and presented in the Western media is a manufactured Syria, one that is being created so the real Syria can be torn apart.

That tearing apart of Syria would be stopped if we knew, and respected Syrians, as we respect ourselves. We must listen to Syrians, imagine their fears, know their courage, and understand their story. The war in Syria has been sponsored from the beginning by outside powers. Fatwas against the Syrian government had been issued from Qatar and Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the crisis there. The war could not have begun if there had not been so many lies, so much rhetoric, if extremism had been condemned, if fighters and weapons had not been able to cross borders, and if diplomacy and investigations had been insisted on by strong voices in the West.

## **SECULAR SYRIA**

Syria has about the same population as Australia, and, like Australia, it is a secular society. Because it has a very diverse population, it must be secular to guarantee social cohesion and equality among the different religious and ethnic groups.

The most holy days for Muslims and Christians are national holidays, so Christmas and Easter are holidays for all Syrians, as is Eid. The call to prayer in Syria can be heard as church bells toll.

That diversity is cherished in Syria. And Syrians have good reason to have a sense of pride in their country. Uniting 23 million people with different creeds and ethnic backgrounds around one flag is a huge achievement.

## **WOMEN**

It has probably been noted by most of you that Syrian women have been virtually ignored by our media. This is because the situation of women in Syria cannot be used to justify a NATO war against Syria as it was in Afghanistan.

Syrian women enjoy basically the same opportunities in regard to education and careers as Western women. At universities, there would be as many women as men, and the classes are mixed. There is none of the segregation you have in the Gulf countries. It should also be noted that there are no religious police in Syria. Syrian women have the freedom to dress as they choose. It is a woman's choice to cover if she is Muslim. So, a mother may choose to wear a hijab and her daughter chooses not to. Pre-war, it was never unusual to see young women walking alone in the street without fear, and to see young unmarried couples holding hands. The basic rights and social freedoms currently enjoyed by Syrian women are being threatened by this war.

## **IMAGES AND DISTORTIONS OF WAR**

Instead of seeing images of Syrian women in the streets of Damascus, what dominate our media are images of armed men, whom some Western journalists call 'revolutionaries'. The fact that the strongest fighting

force in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, is affiliated with Al-Qaeda was hardly mentioned. The fact that because of this so-called revolution, Syrians have experienced horrific suicide bombings like those experienced by Australians in Bali was hardly mentioned. Some Western journalists choose to enter Syria illegally to embed with Islamist militias, while others such as Alex Thomson for Channel 4, who report from Damascus, have another story to tell. Thomson's latest report concerns the deliberate targeting of journalists by so-called freedom fighters, and the irony of this.

So, some Western reporters present the point of view of the militias, but not the views of women in the streets of Aleppo or Damascus after a terror attack. Is this because we are not meant to hear women in hijabs curse Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or America?

The standard narrative presented by the media is that it is a civil war between the Alawi minority and the oppressed Sunni majority. So it doesn't help the selling of this war if we see Sunni, Christian, Alawi and Shia women yelling out their opposition to NATO and Gulf states. Furthermore, it doesn't help the selling of this war if we are told that the minister for defence, and other key ministers such as the foreign minister, the information minister and the minister for interior affairs are Sunni, and the majority of officers and soldiers are Sunni. For people in Syria, they are Syrian, so there is no conversation about their background, just a conversation about their performance.

## **RELIGION AND POLITICS**

Religion of any sort when combined with politics can create a deadly mix, which explains the determination of most Syrians to keep their country secular. This was critical to Syria's successful emergence as a modern state. Because it is such a diverse society, religion could be used to tear the society apart, which is what the enemies of Syria aim to do. Religion can be used to justify the most shocking of crimes, for example, in December 2011, Ammar Baloush, a Damascus University medical student killed two classmates and wounded three others during an exam. All his victims belonged to minorities. Baloush now fights with a rebel group.

Other states in the Middle East such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar rely on religion to maintain power. As always, religion (or tribal loyalties) can be used to divide and conquer. Here we are not talking about the religion at the heart of Judaism or Islam, which are religions essentially of love and peace. But we are talking about interpretations of these religions. Forces with money and power distort their original, pure messages.

But we mustn't pretend that the West doesn't have a dominant religion. It is American *exceptionalism*: the belief that the US – and by extension the West – is best and has an almost God-given right to police the world. Other imperial powers, such as the Roman Empire, would have had a similar 'religion'. This is Hillary Clinton's and John McCain's faith. We are still waiting to know if it is President Obama's.

As I have mentioned, the countries that are funding and supporting the armed groups in Syria depend on religion for their survival. The Saudi family depends on the Wahhabi school of Islam, while the family in power in Qatar depends on the Muslim Brotherhood. These were not schools of Islam introduced by the Prophet Mohammad. Just as US *exceptionalism* didn't exist 300 years ago, neither did these interpretations of Islam.

The war in Syria is not a Sunni versus Shia war. On the contrary, it's very much an extremist versus moderate war.

Young men (and a few women) are being incited to commit the most heinous crimes by extremist clerics. There is torture, mutilations, the gouging out of eyes, the cutting off of genitals, the rape of women and children, even girls as young as four, as well as many other atrocities.

The so-called revolution sanctions these atrocities. For example, Sheikh Adnan Arour, an infamous cleric who is based in Saudi Arabia, is regularly on satellite TV encouraging his followers to kill people who oppose the revolution. For example, in 2011, he encouraged the targeting of minorities, particularly members of the Alawi community who do not support the revolution. He said their bodies would be minced and fed to the dogs. It's this kind of incitement to violence which leads his followers to commit such atrocities. Late last year, there was a report in *The Australian* of a young Christian man who was beheaded and his body fed to dogs.

Based in Qatar is Egyptian Sheikh Qaradawi, the most prominent cleric in the Middle East, and a friend, reputedly, of the Qatari royal family. In 2011, Qaradawi stated that if it was necessary to kill one-third of the Syrian population to topple the 'heretical' regime, then so be it. More recently, he has said on Al-Jazeera that it is OK to kill civilians and religious scholars who support the regime. But civilians have been killed by Islamist extremists since the beginning of the 'revolution'. Almost two years ago on 17 April 2011, three children were killed in Homs by armed men. They were targeted presumably because they were in a car with an off-duty army officer. We know that in campaigns of terror the normal rules of war are ignored.

So Qatar and Saudi Arabia, by funding and arming militias and supporting extremist clerics are hugely committed to the destruction of the secular Syrian state and to the killing of millions of people in the process. We in Australia must ask ourselves, do we condone or condemn calls for genocide?

## FOREIGN FIGHTERS

The war against Syria is attracting thousands of jihadists and mercenaries from countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Britain, Belgium, Somalia, Iraq, Chechnya, and even Australia. Many of them support an Islamic caliphate. That means they are dreaming of a utopia in which Islam is the state religion. The Islamic utopia planned for the world is another version of other utopias that have claimed millions of victims.

Those leaving Australia for jihad or a so-called 'revolution' in Syria are going not only because extremist clerics urge them to go. There are credible reports that Qatar pays recruiters \$3,000 for every person they recruit to travel to Syria to support the militias in their fight against the Syrian state. So that is one other tragic element of this war: there are foreigners going to Syria believing they are going there to save Syrians from a heretical secular regime, while people in Syria curse them for their part in the war against them and their country.

The foreign powers that want them to keep streaming into Syria to fight their proxy war have to create reasons for them to go. So massacres are being committed, lies are being told. Extreme shock and horror has to

be created to motivate people to leave their family in Australia to fight in a country most do not have family ties with and have never visited.

War is always a terrible mess built on lies, death and destruction.

Fighters may also be going to Syria because of the stories of Syrian expatriates who falsify events and distort the history of Syria. Perhaps they do this because they are stuck in an old Syria and they are reliving old fights, remembering their old wounds and bitter defeats.

Or perhaps they have family loyalties to a father or an uncle that was victimised or killed in Syria many decades ago and while most people in Syria have moved on, they are stuck in a past that distorts the present.

## MAINSTREAM MEDIA

The mainstream media as well as institutions such as Amnesty International and even the United Nations have encouraged the view that Syrians need to be saved from the president. 'Assad has to go' is even a mantra on the lips of people who wouldn't know where Syria is.

Like Chinese whispers, reports on Syria are often based on reports on Syria based on reports by people who have never entered Syria and who have only interviewed supporters of the armed opposition. They are not based on the reality of Syria. People assume they are getting the truth when they access Al-Jazeera, not realising this media outlet is owned by the emir of Qatar, and is very much a player in the propaganda war. Syrian TV is censored by the Arab League and some Western governments so they can continue to distort the reality on the ground and the voices of Syrians.

It is 10 years since the beginning of the war in Iraq and we are now awake to the lies and distortions presented to us in order for that war to occur. The same thing is happening now: otherwise, the war in Syria couldn't occur.

## OIL

Another key element of the war relates to resources. Questions not being asked include: who is going to exploit the huge gas reserves recently discovered off the coast of Syria? Who is going to dominate the European gas market? Will it be the US, Britain and France with support from Turkey and Gulf allies – Saudi Arabia and Qatar? Or will it be Russia together with Iran and Syria, and China in the background? Will this be America's century or Russia's and China's? If this were a James Bond movie, we might be on the side of the West, MI5 and the CIA. But it is not a movie and millions of people's lives are at stake. Our values are at stake here too.

Some leaders, such as William Hague, may think they are protecting the economies of their countries by pursuing a war in Syria, by playing with truth and by condoning terror. But in what ways can anyone's interests be enhanced by the destruction of a society and by the murder of millions of people? In what ways can the interests of the world be enhanced by the encouragement of ignorance, conformity, and extremism, as well as the sponsorship of terror? Are Western governments defending the values we cherish most as humans or the interests of huge corporations? If they are protecting corporations, where will this take humanity?

## CONCLUSION

There are many Australians whose relatives are casualties of this war. For example, my husband's and my families have lost 11 relatives in this war.

We must not forget the families and communities behind every victim. They all deserve the truth. Peace can come to Syria but it can't be lasting unless everyone's grief is respected and what mustn't be forgotten is the value of peace.

I leave you with a message that was sent to me this morning by a friend. With it, came a photo of three lifelong friends, posing together without any idea of the war that was to be imposed on their homeland months later.

The message read: 'These are my best friends, Fadi, who is Christian; I, a Muslim Alawi; and Louay, a Muslim Sunni. This is what unity is all about. We will never be divided like they are trying to do to us in Syria. Segregation by religion, if that was to happen, what would happen to people like us?' ■

# Greece: the crossroads of a new war

by *Constantina Spiliotopoulou*

One day in May 2010, the International Monetary Fund, the eye of the European Union and the European Central Bank, broke into our daily lives. There is a before and an after. It is like going into the fog of war or of an occupation without having the opportunity to defend our homeland once again. It is an ill wind, an ever-present poison, putting to death our customs, big and small, and our beliefs in civilisation and democracy. It is a rapid collective mutation, underpinned by the loss of our standards. From now on we are plunging, even to the kingdom of Hades.

Although the signs were there all along, destruction came rapidly, in only two years! This makes us think that every country, even the most wealthy, could suffer the fate of Greece and Cyprus.

Clearly, you are unable to fight against the new enemy. It is called *The Crisis*. It is an illness of our civilisation, without remedy, which is deepening and lurching towards a dramatic meltdown of the financial markets. *The Crisis* is the love-child of the 'new world order' and the law of the banks, which feeds on human disaster and the destruction of the environment, generates social apartheid, encourages racism and ethnic strife and undermines the rights gained from the sacrifices of earlier generations.

For the last two or three years Greek society has suffered a prolonged period of economic, humanitarian and political crisis, which has been magnified by unprecedented austerity measures. The famous so-called plans to 'rescue Greece' – are nothing but guaranteed loans, agreed at bumped-up interest rates, and nothing to do with new money given to the advantage of the

people. They have no aim but to ensure the repayment of the debt, the burden of which has reached an exorbitant level, and which has not ceased to grow.

Such measures have never before been implemented in the other countries of the Eurozone which have considerable public debt. The political and social consequences of these measures have not been effectively calculated or, in many respects, even anticipated. It has caused rapid destabilisation, and dramatically affected the everyday lives of all Greeks even in the fashionable districts.

It is this whole socio-economic model that has collapsed under the impact of the recent whirlwind. The 'austerity measures' (a sinister euphemism!) imposed by the troika comprising the EU, ECB and IMF, and adopted by the Greek Parliament, can have no effect other than to 'break' Greek society. An independent observer of this destructive enterprise cannot but be sceptical. It is undoubtedly not a matter of getting Greece back on the right track.

Coming back from Paris, during the Christmas holidays of 2010, I conducted two hundred in-depth interviews with Greeks aged 20 to 65. I visited schools, institutions, the homes of people who had an easy life. Being a social anthropologist and as a president of an international NGO dealing with children's rights in the past, I studied important indicators of my field research and I concluded unequivocally that Greece is currently in the centre of a humanitarian crisis.

Western societies typically assume that humanitarian crises only take place in the aftermath of natural disasters, epidemics, wars or civil conflicts, particularly somewhere else far away in the Third World. That such a crisis could happen in a country to such extent, especially one that has been a member of the European Union since 1981, seems out of the question. According to the UN Human Development Index, in 2008 Greece was ranked 18th in the world. Now it is 29th. No one in the country really thought that this could change from one day to the other.

And yet a number of experts have reached the same conclusion as I did. Even international NGOs can't easily believe what is happening and so they won't take the decision to support Greece more actively. But as a large part of the population lacks access to social welfare services, to primary health services, medical treatment and diagnostic tests, hospitalisation and medication, the Medical Society of Athens, the largest professional body of its kind, as well as other prominent professional bodies and organisations, have even sent formal letters to the UN asking for intervention. If you still have some

money left, you can see a doctor. Otherwise ... you can simply die.

Greek family relationships express the strength of these bonds in beliefs, rites and customs. For centuries now, since Sophocles' *Antigone*, death rituals have represented the fundamental step in the acquisition of an ethical consciousness and in the formation of all communities. Antigone's defence of Polynices's dead body symbolises a deep understanding of what it is to be human. Yet since the crisis, for the first time in our long history, some Greeks do not collect their dead loved ones from the hospital because they cannot pay for the funeral.

After the Second World War, families would often take in and care for orphaned children. It has rarely happened for a Greek mother to leave her child. But abandoning their own children because they can't afford to feed and clothe them is increasingly becoming reality for some Greek parents. The few social workers are unable to help this wave of 'economic orphans', abandoned not through lack of love but of money, as institutions close one after the other. In the schools, teachers ask the charities to supply them with food, as children are fainting in the classrooms.

The explosion of unemployment currently represents the main expression of the soaring pauperisation of the country. According to official statistics nearly 30% of the population has already fallen below the poverty line. Young people, with degrees and mostly multilingual, have again today *en masse* taken the route of emigration.

On the other hand, many analysts believe that there are between 1 million and 1.3 million immigrants, most of them illegally in Greece, making up as much as 10 per cent of the population.

Until there are improvements, then Greeks will continue to feel angry, agonised, and cornered. This has led to the popularity of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn. The despair of people who fought in the Resistance against the Nazis during World War II, and whose grandchildren are admiring a party which includes Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in its literature is all too obvious.

The threat of Golden Dawn must not be underestimated as they establish a presence in sectors where the state is unable to provide services: food distribution, kindergartens, even medical services. One common approach with the Nationalist Socialist (Nazi) party of the 1930s is that they both stress their emphasis on biological racism and violent street tactics. This sets Golden Dawn apart from other European nationalist movements like Le Pen's French National Front party.

However, some things will never change in Greece, the birthplace of philosophy, drama, literature, mathematics, democracy, and the Olympic Games. The sun will always shine and our spirit will always be free. As historians largely confirm, Greeks always have the pride to defend not just their own freedom, not just their own country, but the principles of Western civilisation. ■

Source: *Adelaide Voices Mar–May 2013*



# from our readers



## Dear Editor

The assault on the fragile ecology of the earth is unrelenting. In Australia, koalas are endangered from forest destruction, habitat fragmentation, dogs, cats and cars. Tasmanian Devils are threatened with extinction, from disease and loss of habitat. The Tarkine wilderness is at risk from mining operations and the Kimberley wildernesses from gas extraction projects. Clear felling of our precious native forests goes on, resulting in the loss of more native animal species. Such logging practices are pushing Leadbeater's Possums to the brink of extinction. The Great Barrier Reef is in dire jeopardy from ports and shipping developments associated with coal and gas.

And in the world at large, we are overusing the earth's limited resources.

Our oceans are polluted and over-fished. Land clearing is creating deserts and droughts. The Amazon and other rainforests are being destroyed, along with the habitat of the wondrous wildlife there. Orangutans are in danger of extinction due to logging rapidly destroying their forest and from the pet trade. Poaching and loss of habitat threaten tigers and rhinos. Climate change goes inexorably on. I could keep going on.

The continuous neglect of our amazing world and the overconsumption of its finite resources is the path to complete environmental disaster and the death of life on earth. The only thing to do is continue to go on striving for a better, healthier, saner, safer, sustainable world. Learning to live simply, so we can all simply live a decent life. The choice is really stark and the renewable alternative is viable.

**Steven Katsineris, Vic**

## Dear Editor

Please find enclosed a cheque for my renewed subscription for the *Beacon*, which I love receiving. The extra amount is for postage and the expense involved in converting the cheque from Illawarra Mutual Bank in Wollongong.

Would it be possible for you to give us another article about the use of fracking by mining companies exploring for minerals? In the process of shifting, I seem to have lost the copy of the *Beacon* that discussed this subject several years ago.

**With thanks**

**B Hilton, New Zealand**

## How Kids Cope with Occupation

By **Maria Cristobal**

Restrictions, harassment and violence are everyday matters for Palestinians living under occupation. That's taking a terrible toll on the mental health of children, writes Maria Cristobal from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

Since the Israeli army first occupied the West Bank in 1967, there has been a massive military presence in the area. A complex system has been developed to keep the local population under control, which extends far beyond the wall separating the West Bank from neighbouring Israel. On a daily basis, Palestinians have to negotiate a series of checkpoints, spot checks and road blocks, all under the watchful eye of the army's surveillance towers.

Meanwhile, Israeli settlements – illegal under international humanitarian law – have mushroomed through the area. Hebron, the most populated town

in the West Bank, has several settlements, one of which is in the historical centre of the city, its 800 residents closely guarded by the Israeli army.

For Palestinian civilians, harassment by Israeli soldiers and settlers, restrictions on their movements, and violence amongst Palestinian factions are a constant fact of life. This leaves many struggling with feelings of fear, hopelessness and frustration. These can have a severe impact on their mental health and for many, especially children, the consequences can be severe.

Médecins Sans Frontières has been running a mental health program in the West Bank for more than 10 years. More than half of our patients are children who have directly experienced violence related to the conflict. ■

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**Editorial**

**Nuclear weapons**

**A new democracy**

**Syria the unspoken truth**

**Greece: the crossroads of a new war**

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