

the BEACON

Journal of the
Melbourne Unitarian
Peace Memorial
Church

October 2013
Price /\$2

SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY

INTENSIFY YOUR ANGER



EDITORIAL

Gough Whitlam's famous words, **'Maintain your rage'**, are more applicable today than ever before. If a country is judged by its people's security, quality of life, wellbeing and participation, then we have failed dismally as a nation.

Unitarians are outraged when we see our extremely wealthy country, large in size, small in population, with immense mineral deposits, with rich and productive farmland, failing to give a full and productive life to its people.

Unitarians are outraged when governments of both political persuasions denigrate and destroy the lives of those coming to our country seeking compassion and assistance, particularly when they come from countries where we have illegally interfered in that country's internal affairs.

Unitarians are outraged when we note that over 150,000 Australians sleep rough every night and that thousands more 'couch surf' or are on the verge of homelessness, unable to contribute to or participate in the life of their society.

Unitarians are outraged when governments deliberately suppress factual scientific information about global warming, reminiscent of the flat earthers' stupidity.

Daily, government whittles away, destroys and removes so many necessary programs that make the difference between a dignified life, a fulfilled life and the right to such a life.

Often the changes are imperceptible. Small, unreported, unrecognised, until it is too late. Often welfare organisations are forbidden to protest or risk losing their grants.

These are not new methods: watering down programs; removing persistent and outspoken leaders; threatening funding to community groups; concealing and suppressing important information; ensuring media duplicity and misinformation; attacking the trade unions; aggressive foreign policies.

These have always been the weapons leading to more repressive government. It is called dumbing down opposition and in the process democracy is whittled away.

We are outraged by the steps being taken. They have been taken many times before where democratic rights have been removed. Here are just a few and you may think of more:

- disdain for the recognition of human rights
- promotion of the military
- controlled mass media
- suppression of labour power
- obsession with crime and punishment.

We should all be outraged. There are many ways we can protest and many ways we can take action. Come together with others who share your concerns: write letters of protest, contact your local member to express your view. Finally, you can assist by promoting *Beacon* to your friends and neighbours. We in turn will continue to bring you the truth. ■

US RISKS MAKING SYRIA ANOTHER IRAQ

PUBLISHED: 3 SEPTEMBER 2013

Joseph Camilleri

The case for intervention in Syria is strangely reminiscent of the Iraq War. The planned US strike looks as if it rests on the same dubious logic. It could well have the same tragic consequences.

The British government has discovered the hard way that many of its people understand the troubling parallel. Not surprisingly, last Thursday the House of Commons firmly resisted government attempts to railroad it into giving the green light for a military strike.

Uncannily, Prime Minister David Cameron was following in the footsteps of Tony Blair. Like Blair he pressed the Obama administration to delay a strike until United Nations inspectors completed their investigation and until an attempt was made to get the necessary support from the UN Security Council.

Cameron's failure to persuade enough of his parliamentary colleagues of the wisdom of this approach has given the international community breathing space and the US time to think again.

In deciding what to do about Syria the White House and the US Congress would do well to recall the prelude to the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The issue then as now was weapons of mass destruction.

A UN inspection team, headed by Hans Blix, was in Iraq investigating the situation but had yet to complete its investigation.

Having sought but failed to get authorisation from the UN Security Council, the Bush administration decided there was no point waiting any longer. The time had come to strike.

To gain international support for its decision the US produced evidence suggesting Saddam Hussein's regime was developing – and possibly intending to use – weapons of mass destruction. Most experts and governments – and world public opinion – remained unconvinced.

And so it was that the US set out on a military adventure, based at best on shaky legal grounds.

Getting rid of Saddam proved the easy part. No WMD were found. But what was meant to be a limited intervention turned out to be a protracted one that left the US demoralised and Iraq in ruins.

Prolonged sectarian violence, which continues to this day, has generated a destabilising dynamic that now engulfs much of the Middle East.

Ten years later the Obama administration, with the support of a few European governments, is on the verge of embarking on a similarly ill-conceived expedition.

Last time it was Britain that bolstered an otherwise feeble coalition. This time the hope is that France will come to the party. Several Arab countries, including Egypt and Jordan, have already indicated they oppose military intervention.

US Secretary of State John Kerry claims to have conclusive evidence that the Assad government has launched a chemical attack on its people, and argues that such actions must not go unpunished. Obama has spoken of a limited strike not aimed at regime change.

But what is the reality? The indications are that a chemical weapons attack did take place in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. But we know little about the chemicals used – though sarin gas has been mentioned frequently – the means of delivery or their provenance.

The US intelligence report released on Friday speaks of more than 1400 casualties – but this and other details given are asserted rather than demonstrated.

As for the sources of the evidence, we are simply referred to general categories, much of it available on the public record, and generally regarded as less than conclusive.

As for motive, US policymakers remain remarkably silent. Why should Assad decide to use chemical weapons at a time when his forces are making considerable gains against the rebels? And why should he do it at the moment that UN inspectors are inside the country and within 10 minutes' reach of the site of destruction?

And the possibility of one or other of the rebel groups acquiring such weapons has been all too easily dismissed. It is only three months since Carla del Ponte, a member of the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria, announced she had 'strong concrete suspicions' that rebels had used the nerve gas sarin.

The sarin attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, which killed 13 people, severely injured 50 and caused temporary vision problems for nearly a thousand others, was the work of a small, unaided cult group. One of the well organised and internationally supported rebel groups would, one assumes, be capable of inflicting much greater havoc.

With evidence that is still less than conclusive, Obama appears on the verge of repeating the mistakes of his predecessor – assuming he is able to persuade Congress to vote for the proposed strike.

If he does go ahead, he will, like Bush, be doing so on dubious legal grounds. Even if it is established that the Syrian army did carry out the chemical attack, the US is not under direct military threat – it is not therefore acting in self-defence. And, in the absence of UN Security Council authorisation, which will not be forthcoming, the ‘responsibility to protect’ principle does not allow third parties to take matters into their own hands.

In any case, why not wait, at least for the UN inspection team to complete its report? Why discredit the credibility of its investigation before it has had a chance to submit its report.

The Syrian government claims it has given the UN inspectors clear evidence that it was not responsible for the attack. Why not wait to see what the inspectors make of such claims?

If it goes ahead, a US military strike on Syria will be the ninth Western military intervention in a Muslim country in 15 years. The gains thus far for peace and security have been negligible and the costs for the authors and victims of intervention nothing short of horrendous.

A US military foray into Syria will reopen Pandora’s box. What will the US do if, as seems likely, the planned ‘limited strike’ fails to achieve its objective of intimidating Assad? In all probability, the US and its allies will be tempted to take additional military action, with incalculable consequences for Syria, and for regional and global security.

As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Pope Francis have stated in clear language, only a politically negotiated solution offers any prospect of peace in Syria and the reconstruction of that war-torn country.

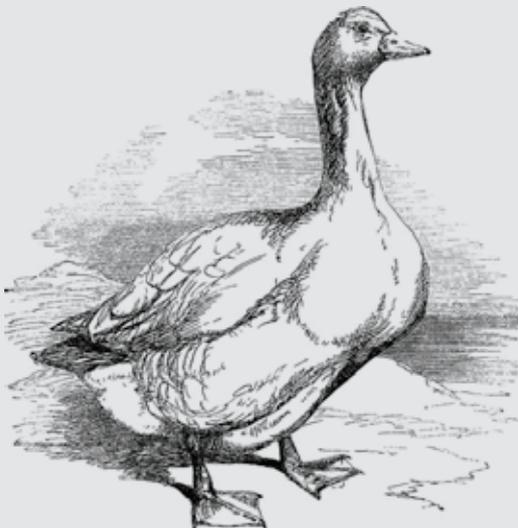
An Australian government wishing to exercise the limited leverage afforded by membership of the Security Council would do well to press for this option in the difficult days and weeks ahead. ■

Joseph Camilleri is Emeritus Professor, La Trobe University, and founding director of the Centre for Dialogue.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/us-risks-making-syria-another-iraq-20130902-2t0ya.html>

Opposition to ‘enclosure’ in England

(anon. circa 1764)



They hang the man and flog the woman
That steal the goose from off the common,
But let the greater villain loose
That steals the common from the goose.

The law demands that we atone
When we take things we do not own
But leaves the lords and ladies fine
Who take things that are yours and mine.

The poor and wretched don’t escape
If they conspire the law to break;
This must be so but they endure
Those who conspire to make the law.

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the
common’
And geese will still a common lack
Till they go and steal it back.

On May 24 Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) approved the irradiation of tomatoes and capsicums. This is the first time that irradiation has been approved for foods that make up a significant part of our diet – but it won't be the last.



by Robin Taubenfeld

IRRADIATED FOOD

coming to a supermarket near you

Irradiation is the process of exposing food or other materials to ionising radiation. It is used for shelf-life extension and for neutralising, not removing, contaminants or pests. Irradiation decreases the vitamin and nutritional content of food and disrupts its molecular structure, producing free radicals and potentially harmful chemicals such as benzene, formaldehyde and cyclobutanones.

To date, FSANZ has approved the irradiation of tomatoes, capsicums, herbs, spices, herbal teas, mangoes, mangosteens, pawpaws, carambolas, breadfruits, custard apples, lychees, longans, rambutans and persimmon. Pet food, animal feed and therapeutic goods may also be irradiated.

While acknowledging that irradiation may deplete vitamin and nutritional content, FSANZ has so far justified irradiation approvals on the basis that the approved foods make up a minimal part of the Australian and New Zealander diet. Now they are approving some of our most commonly eaten fruits.

Recent surveys have shown that 59% of Australians purchase fresh tomatoes in their weekly shopping and the average Australian consumes an estimated 23 kg of tomato-based products per year. The irradiation of a further 16 commonly eaten foods is in the pipeline with irradiation being flagged for zucchinis, honey dew melons, rockmelons, nectarines, strawberries, cherries, apricots, plums, peaches, table grapes, and apples.

Proponents downplay science that exposes problems with irradiation. However, claims that irradiated food has a safe track record are misleading as no long-term study

of human consumption of an irradiated diet has been carried out.

Irradiation destroys and disrupts vitamins, proteins, essential fatty acids and other nutrients in food – sometimes significantly. It can destroy up to 80% of vitamin A in eggs and 48% of beta-carotene in orange juice. It has been linked to health problems such as nutritional deficiencies, immune system disorders, and genetic damage.

Another health concern is the risk of irradiation being used to mask poor production practices. Irradiation can kill most bacteria in food, but it does not remove the faeces, urine, pus and vomit that often contaminate meat or the pests or other foreign matter that may contaminate herbs, spices, or fruit and vegetables.

In 2008, up to 100 Australian pet cats suffered neurological disease linked to eating irradiated cat food. The Australian government has since banned the irradiation of cat food. FSANZ asserts the problems were species specific and continues to expand the list of foods permitted to be irradiated for human consumption. In late 2012, however, the US Food and Drug Administration announced that it would commence investigations into the possibility that consumption of irradiated food has led to the unexplained deaths of 360 dogs and one cat and illnesses in 2,200 dogs since 2007. Numerous scientific reports have been produced questioning the safety of irradiation. The Australian cats affected by irradiation were not experimental animals but family pets. The real life example of the potential impacts of an irradiated diet warrants an immediate cessation of all food irradiation – until it is proven safe.

Australian irradiated tomatoes will most likely soon be sold in New Zealand and the public is expressing their concern. A *New Zealand Herald* poll in June 2013 found that 72% of respondents were 'very concerned' or a 'little worried'.

With real concerns about the technology in the community, irradiation proponents are working hard to present a positive spin on irradiation as an 'alternative' to pesticide use. The claim is disingenuous. As a post-harvest treatment, irradiation will not substitute for the numerous chemicals and pesticides potentially used in 'conventional' agriculture. Irradiation will be used in conjunction with them, raising further concerns about the interaction of radiation and those chemicals. Irradiation for 'phytosanitary control' is a prime example of an industry-driven use of bad technology instead of healthy and environmentally sustainable production practices.

In 1986, the Queensland government produced research promoting the post-harvest use of dimethoate and fenthion for controlling fruit fly on tomatoes. Thirty-five years on, this research has proven faulty. The Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (AVPMA) is withdrawing this use of these chemicals because they are harmful to human health. The Queensland government has now presented its own, new, unpublished research to secure approvals to irradiate tomatoes in lieu of these chemicals.

There is no technological need for irradiation to replace these chemicals. Australia was the only country permitting dimethoate to be used for post-harvest pest control. This alone tells us that all other markets have found other options. Indeed, the taskforce phasing out this chemical has provided growers numerous chemical alternatives to dimethoate and fenthion. Of course, non-chemical alternatives such as organic production exist.

Some of the alternatives currently in use include: cold storage; cold treatment; heat/steam, vapour treatment; hot water dips; atmospheric control with oxygen, carbon dioxide or nitrogen; physical disinfestation i.e. cleaning, washing; hygienic and safe production practices; pest exclusion zones; early harvesting; and organic production.

With numerous chemical-free and irradiation-free options for the production of food, the use of irradiation as a phytosanitary measure is inexcusable. Both irradiation and the pesticides currently being phased out may provide financially cost-effective production practices for market access, yet in doing so they put our health and long-term food security at risk.

Our church is a public and usable asset with portable seating and excellent conference, meeting and function facilities. We welcome its use by those who support our motto 'Seek the Truth and Serve Humanity'. Interested individuals or groups can contact the church office – we would be delighted to speak to you. A donation is payable.

Labelling

Irradiated tomatoes, capsicums and other produce may start to appear in our shops without labels. The tomatoes and capsicums will be irradiated in Queensland. They may be sold in Queensland but are likely to be sent interstate and overseas. Shoppers in southern states and New Zealand must keep a particular eye out for Queensland tomatoes.

Food Irradiation Watch advises shoppers wishing to avoid irradiated produce to look down at the produce to see if there is a sticker and then look up to see if there is a sign. Current laws allow shops to use a sign close to irradiated produce, rather than actual stickers or labels. There is no mandatory wording for the irradiation statement, leaving the messaging up to marketing companies. Neither the words radiation nor irradiation is required.

Knowing that people do not want to consume irradiated food, the industry has long pushed for weak labelling laws, such as the ones we have today. Inadequate labelling already makes it difficult for consumers to know if a product has been irradiated. Now Australia is poised to get rid of labelling all together; FSANZ will be undertaking a review of mandatory irradiation labelling in 2014.

In 2013–2014, Food Irradiation Watch will be mounting a campaign to ensure that our right to know is protected: irradiated food must be labelled.

We need your help! Refuse to eat irradiated food! Let your supermarket, greengrocer and your local politician know that you want to eat irradiation free and to do so you demand that irradiated food be labelled.

The messages are clear: good food does not need irradiating and irradiated food does require labelling. ■

To find out more:

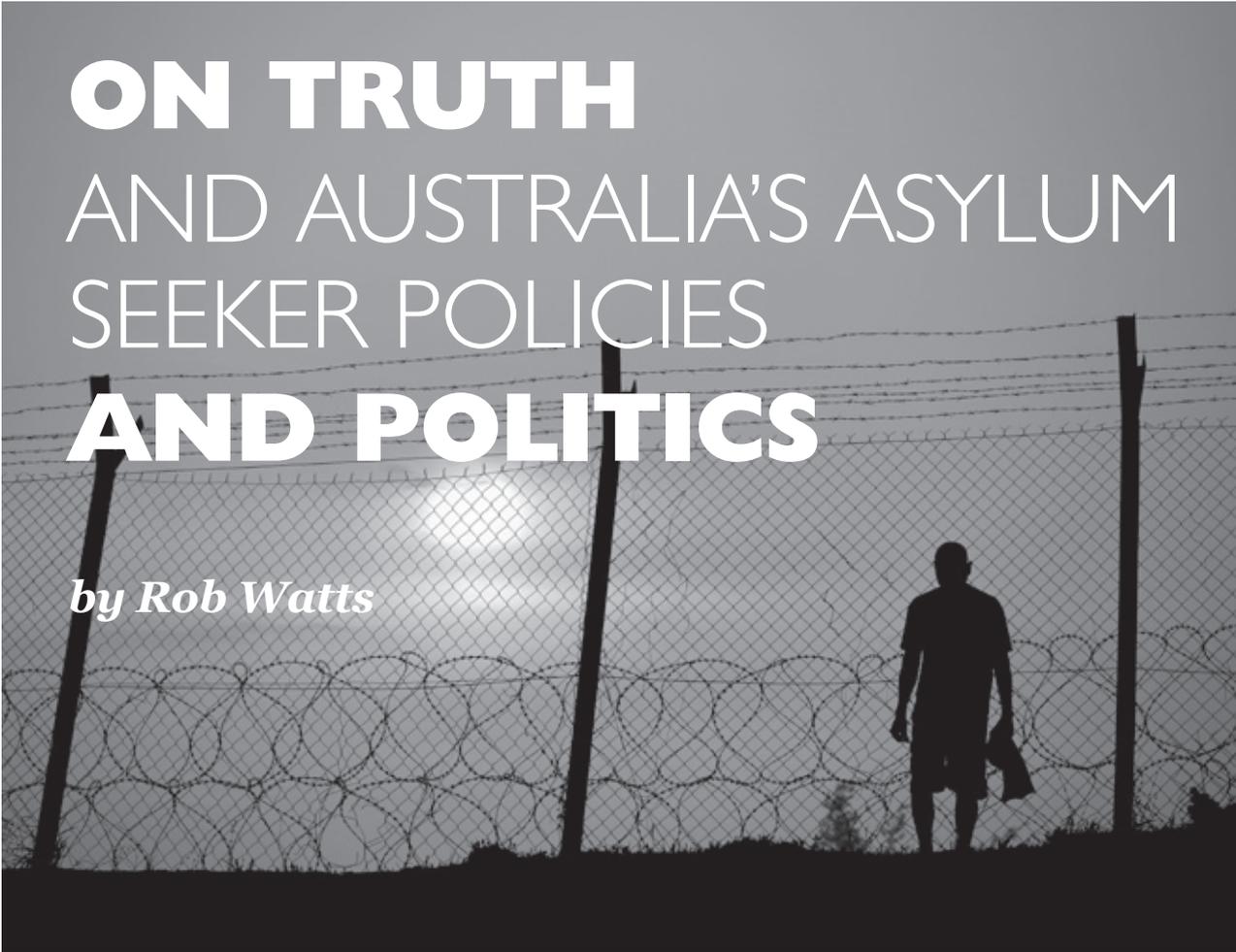
website: foodirradiationwatch.org
facebook: [facebook.com/groups/212241255452651](https://www.facebook.com/groups/212241255452651)
email: foodirradiationwatch@yahoo.com.au

Robin Taubenfeld is a member of Friends of the Earth, Brisbane and Food Irradiation Watch.

Source: Chain Reaction August 2013

PAYPAL ACCOUNT

The church has now opened a PayPal account. If you have access to PayPal – all you need do is log on and the church's PayPal address is admin@melbourneunitarian.org.au Visit our web page and click on the link. You will be able to pay your subscription and make donations.



ON TRUTH AND AUSTRALIA'S ASYLUM SEEKER POLICIES AND POLITICS

by Rob Watts

I want to talk today about the politics of truth telling. You may have heard that we are in the middle of a short election campaign. What is happening suggests an old adage needs to be revised: it used to be said that 'in war truth is the first casualty'. Today, and honouring the idea that 'politics is war by other means' we can say that in any election campaign truth is the first casualty.

I want to think about this as it bears on Australia's bi-partisan asylum seeker policy. Since 2001 we have seen an appalling race to the bottom of the septic tank as both major parties seek to outdo each other to see who can come up with the most outrageous, harmful and noxious policies based on trashing any regard for truth telling or for core principles like the rule of law or respecting and promoting human rights. (I take it as read that any society that tolerates this is in really serious trouble.)

At stake is one simple proposition: in 1954 Australia

signed an international convention (The United Nations *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951*) agreeing to promote and protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. Through the 1990s that objective was turned into a different idea, that we needed to protect ourselves from 'illegal boat people' and 'people smugglers'. To that end we have allowed truth to go out the window and the rule of law to be persistently breached. I will come back to these points shortly.

Let me simply remind you firstly that both George Orwell and Hannah Arendt thought that truth telling mattered deeply for the health of a democratic society.

Truth telling matters

George Orwell captured the attention of his contemporaries in 1946 when he identified truth as the major casualty in totalitarian regimes. In his great essay *Politics and the English language* Orwell pointed to the way any degradation in our use of language degrades our political life.

Hannah Arendt was also deeply concerned with the loss of truthfulness in political life. Like both of these writers, I think the truthfulness of statements made by citizens or their representatives is of paramount concern in a democracy, as our current political situation suggests.

Though I cannot spell out the details of Arendt's account

of truth here, Arendt helps us make sense of why it matters to reflect on the distinctive character of truth claims in politics. Above all else, Arendt helped us to think about how to develop a public sphere in which citizens could not only tell the difference between warranted public opinion and ideology, or outright lies, but could turn what they knew to be true into something politically important.

I want to draw on the recent film by Steven Spielberg called *Lincoln* (2012) to show you what I have in mind. This film is a compelling and deeply thought out political film, certainly the best one I have seen. (It is written by a great playwright called Tony Kushner.) It helps us to think about the character of 'policy' and 'politics' – two words that are often confused and misunderstood.

Spielberg's film follows the second term of President Abraham Lincoln as he pursues his greatest policy project, namely the passage of the proposed *Thirteenth Amendment* to the American Constitution through the American House of Representatives.

Lincoln, acting under presidential war powers, had already issued his *Emancipation of Slavery* on 1 January 1863, declaring all slaves in rebel-controlled territory to be free. (The Emancipation proclamation did not affect the status of slaves in the border states that had remained loyal to the Union.) The Thirteenth Amendment was designed to formally abolish the institution of slavery in America. It declared simply that: 'Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude ... shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.'

The film reminds us of several things. Firstly, 'policy' and 'politics' are always about pursuing various ideas about what a good society looks like. This is another way of saying policymaking and politics are always about conceptions of justice. We literally cannot think about policy or politics without thinking about those things we value. Words like good and bad should never be far from our lips as we think about policy and politics. People who insist e.g. that politicians are just amoral 'pragmatists', who want power for its own sake, are not telling you the truth.

Secondly, the film also reminds us that if there is any difference between 'policy' and 'politics', it is a small yet important difference.

'Policy' is always about the things we want to see done, the changes we need to make to the rules and ways of doing things that bring some conception of the 'good society' into being.

Lincoln's vision of a good society did not include slavery. He set out to abolish an appalling and cruel institution. (His opponents, as the film makes clear, had no trouble with living in a society in which black people, like women, lived in a state of unfreedom and perpetual inferiority to white men and whose very identity was defined largely by their capacity to unthinkingly and unhesitatingly meet every need of those white men.)

On the other hand, 'politics' refers to all the things we do and rely on to deal with the inevitable conflicts found in any society between people and their different conceptions of the good society. Politics pursues the

great ideas about the good society, the imperatives of justice, whether this involves the abolition of slavery or the provision of street lighting so that people can move about the streets at night safely. In short, politics refers to the way communities deal with the deepest conflicts, gets decisions made and laws passed and generally keeps enough people on side such that chaos or civil war is avoided.

As the film demonstrates, Lincoln brought to bear many political techniques and abilities designed to secure his great policy objective.

He commanded remarkable and persuasive powers of language that ranged from soaring oratory to the use of funny stories. Yet he also used his powers of language to tell lies, make threats, cajole and seduce. He even relied on crude bribery and threats even of violence ... and deep empathy. And as befits a politician in any democracy where the principle of majority vote rules, he understood the art and craft of counting the numbers and getting in the numbers. (The film pursues quite obsessively this aspect; indeed, it supplies much of the narrative thread of the film.)

The key point? Lincoln never wavered from the great truth that informed his policy of abolition: slavery is always wrong under any circumstance and in any time. Its existence is inimical to any true conception of a good society. To achieve that great idea Lincoln would do anything and everything in his power, which the political culture he lived in permitted, whether this involved making speeches, telling stories, lying, bribing, threatening or cajoling.

In short, Spielberg's film opens up a much richer, more complex view of the relation between truth and policy and truth and politics. (I haven't commented on the obvious implications of this for thinking about the relation of truth to ethical criteria.)

Australian asylum seeker policies

If we turn back to our time and place I propose that we see a situation where we have both a policy and a politics mired in delusion and lies. As the last decade or more indicates, all of the major parties and the tabloid press decided some time back that Australians should stop worrying about how to discharge our legal obligations under the *1951 UN Convention on Refugees*. This was done simply by changing the definition of the policy problem. By persistent use of the Big Lie, the media inflamed public opinion and obscured the fact that we have legal obligations under international law to those people who are asylum seekers.

What we have seen is a redefinition of the policy problem so that rather than meeting our international legal obligations, we now declare our determination to protect our borders, to keep 'illegal boat people' from ever arriving or settling in Australia, and to 'make war' on 'people smugglers'.

As many academic studies have shown, the tabloid press and electronic media have found it remarkably easy to deploy a barrage of metaphors masquerading as nouns to scare many ordinary Australians into a state of high anxiety. Sharon Pickering's (2001) study of the

Australian press e.g. showed how binary representations inform both a discourse of deviance and government policy responses. According to the *Brisbane Courier Mail* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'we' are soon to be 'awash', 'swamped', 'weathering the influx', of 'waves', 'latest waves', 'more waves', 'tides', 'floods', 'migratory flood', 'mass exodus' of 'aliens', 'queue jumpers', 'illegal immigrants', 'people smugglers', 'boat people', 'jumbo people', 'jetloads of illegals', 'illegal foreigners', 'bogus' and 'phony' applicants, and 'hungry Asians' upon 'our shores', 'isolated coastlines', and 'deserted beaches' that make up the 'promised land', the 'land of hope', the 'lucky country', 'heaven', 'the good life', 'dream destination' and they continue to 'slip through', 'sneak in', 'gathering to our north', 'invade' with 'false papers' or 'no papers', 'exotic diseases', 'sicknesses', as part of 'gangs', 'criminal gangs', 'triads', 'organised crime', and 'Asian crime'. In response, 'we' should have 'closed doors', only sometimes having 'open doors', we should respond 'nationally' with the 'navy and armed services at the ready', 'we' should 'send messages', 'deter', 'lock up' and 'detain', 'we' should not be 'exploited', 'played for a fool', be seen as 'gullible' or be a 'forelock-tugging serf'.

And this stuff works!

As Pedersen et al. (2006) show, people who report negative attitudes toward asylum seekers also tend to demonstrate that they accept as true what is factually incorrect (or what these academics calls negative 'false beliefs'). In their study they matched spontaneously generated lies with negative attitudes toward asylum seekers, as well as examining the presence of these lies in politicians' statements. (To do this they analysed survey data collected from 602 Western Australian participants.) Three false beliefs were frequently cited ('boatpeople are queue jumpers', 'asylum seekers are illegal' and 'people who arrive unauthorised are not genuine refugees'). As predicted, the total number of false beliefs significantly correlated with negative attitudes. The same beliefs were also found in statements made by Federal Government representatives.

As we know, the past few years have seen increasingly irrational public discussion as both parties set about trumping each other's policies. By August 2013 the Rudd Labor government e.g. was insisting that their policy was designed to 'deter asylum seekers from coming to Australia' and to 'deter people smugglers'. The Rudd government's policy insists that asylum seekers who come by boat will not be resettled in Australia but will instead be sent to Papua New Guinea for processing and, if found to be refugees, will be resettled there or in other countries such as Nauru. (PNG seems not to have understood this last aspect of their 'agreement' with the Australian Government.) There is no cap on the number of asylum seekers who could be sent to Manus Island, but PNG expects up to 3000 could be sent to the island by Christmas. Under the new arrangement, PNG officials will assess asylum seekers' claims for refugee status. Asylum seekers not classified as refugees will be sent home or to another country under the agreement, which will apply for 12 months and be subject to annual review. Labor last year increased Australia's annual humanitarian intake to 20,000 places a year.

For its part, the Abbott-led Coalition policy says a Coalition government would reintroduce temporary protection visas and extend them, meaning no one who came to Australia by boat would get permanent resettlement. They would have to reapply for protection periodically and return to their home country once it was safe. The Coalition would also make this retrospective, meaning more than 30,000 asylum seekers who have already arrived in Australia to claim asylum would never get permanent residency. (This alone requires introducing retrospective laws which are a fundamental assault on a core rule of law principle.) The Coalition would also reduce the humanitarian intake of refugees to 13,750, from the government's expanded 20,000 places. It would remove the right of asylum seekers to appeal against any adverse decisions through the courts. Anyone found not to be a refugee would be detained and then removed from Australia.

My view on this is simple: the vision of the good society which both policies are oriented to is dystopian: it is a conception of a society whose political leaders and key media institutions can tell basic lies about certain states of affairs with impunity. It holds that governments can treat a regard for the rule of law or basic legal or human rights as optional. It is a model of society where it is a good idea that Australians can refuse to understand their place in an interconnected global web of human relationships and that is acceptable.

For the record (and here I draw frequently on the plain language adopted by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and its publications) there are certain facts that we can ill afford to ignore.

Fact: An asylum seeker is a person who has fled their own country and applied for protection as a refugee. This the only way these people should be referred to. They are not 'boat people', 'illegal immigrants', 'queue jumpers' or whatever else has been used to name them.

Further, it is lawful [under Article 31, of the *UN Convention on Refugees*] to seek asylum by using boats. Contrary to endless scare campaigns Australia is not being flooded by asylum seekers because compared to the rest of the world Australia receives very few boat arrivals and applications for asylum.

Fact: Asylum seekers or refugees and migrants have all sorts of experiences and reasons for fleeing their country of birth and moving around the globe. It is therefore unwise to generalise about them too glibly. 'Migrants' choose to leave their home country, and can choose where to go and when they might return to their home country. However 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees' tend to flee their country of origin for their own safety and cannot return unless the situation that forced them to leave improves. Over 90 per cent of asylum seekers arriving by boat have proven to be genuine refugees fleeing persecution, and most are often families and children.

Fact: As a nation-state which signed off on the Refugee Convention in 1954, Australia agreed to ensure that asylum seekers who meet the definition of a refugee are not sent back to a country where their life or freedom

would be threatened. This is known as the principle of *non-refoulement*. Current policy proposals before the Australian people will put us in breach of these obligations.

Fact: Australia also has obligations not to return people who face a real risk of violation of certain human rights under the ICCPR, the CAT and the CRC, and not to send people to third countries where they would face a real risk of violation of their human rights under these instruments. These obligations also apply to people who have not been found to be refugees.

Fact: Asylum seekers typically arrive in Australia without a valid visa or other documentation for a number of reasons. For example, a person who is fleeing persecution by the government of their country of origin might not be able to obtain a passport from officials in that country. Alternatively, a person fleeing persecution might travel without documentation to avoid being identified as they leave their country of origin in order to reduce the risk to themselves and their family.

Fact: Under the *Commonwealth Migration Act 1958*, since 1992 Australia has had a system of mandatory detention. Any non-citizen who is in Australia without a valid visa must be detained according to the Migration Act. There is no limit under Australian law to the length of time for which a person may be held in immigration detention. Some asylum seekers spend long periods of time in immigration detention waiting for their refugee claim to be assessed; waiting for the completion of health, identity and security checks; or awaiting removal from Australia if they have been found not to be a refugee or someone who is owed 'complementary protection'.

Fact: There are currently thousands of asylum seekers, as well as some recognised refugees, being held in immigration detention around Australia. As at the end of May 2013 there are 8,521 people in immigration detention facilities and 2,820 people in community detention in Australia, 1,731 children in immigration detention facilities and 1,326 children in community detention. Hundreds of asylum seekers who arrived in Australia are also being detained in Nauru and on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea under the Australian Government's third country processing policy.

Fact: Australia has international obligations to protect the human rights of all asylum seekers and refugees who arrive in Australia, regardless of how or where they arrive and whether they arrive with or without a visa. These obligations are now routinely breached.

Australia continues to have one of the strictest immigration detention regimes in the world. Not only is it mandatory, it is not time limited, and people are not able to challenge the need for their detention in a court. Australia is in breach of Australia's human rights obligations, including obligations under the ICCPR and CRC not to subject anyone to arbitrary detention. While asylum seekers and refugees are in Australian territory (or otherwise engage Australia's jurisdiction), the Australian Government has obligations under various international treaties to ensure

that their human rights are respected and protected. These treaties include the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *UN Covenant on the Rights of the Child*.

These treaties cover a broad range of rights and freedoms. Key human rights principles in these treaties that are relevant to people in immigration detention include:

- Everyone has the right not to be subjected to arbitrary detention.
- Children should only be detained as a measure of last resort, and for the shortest appropriate period of time.
- Anyone who is detained has the right to challenge the lawfulness of their detention in court, and should have access to independent legal advice and assistance.
- All persons who are detained should be treated with humanity and respect for their inherent dignity.
- No one should be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
- In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration.
- Refugees and people with certain claims under the ICCPR, CAT or CRC cannot be returned to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened.
- Everyone is entitled to respect for their human rights without discrimination.

Under Australia's international human rights obligations e.g. anyone deprived of their liberty should be able to challenge their detention in a court. To comply with Article 9(4) of the ICCPR, that court must have the power to order the person's release if their detention is found to be arbitrary. Currently Australia does not provide access to such review and is therefore again in breach of its international obligations.

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has to its great credit raised particular concerns about the mandatory detention of children. Australia's mandatory detention system does not provide a robust and transparent individual assessment mechanism to determine whether the immigration detention of each person is necessary, reasonable or proportionate. The detention of unlawful non-citizens is not an exceptional step, but the norm and it is often for lengthy periods. Australia is therefore in breach of its international obligations.

Conclusion

What we have seen since 1992 is an ugly policy and an uglier political process which has had very serious consequences for the legitimacy of our democratic order and the credibility of our claim to be a liberal society committed to principles like rule of law and a regard to uphold basic human rights and to practices like telling the truth. This is, in my view, an impossibly high cost to pay for sustaining what is a delusional and dystopian vision of the 'good society'. ■

From Hiroshima to Syria, the enemy whose name we dare not speak

By John Pilger

10 September 2013 Information Clearing House

– On my wall is the front page of *Daily Express* of 5 September 1945 and the words: 'I write this as a warning to the world.' So began Wilfred Burchett's report from Hiroshima. It was the scoop of the century. For his lone, perilous journey that defied the US occupation authorities, Burchett was pilloried, not least by his embedded colleagues. He warned that an act of premeditated mass murder on an epic scale had launched a new era of terror.

Almost every day now, he is vindicated. The intrinsic criminality of the atomic bombing is borne out in the US National Archives and by the subsequent decades of militarism camouflaged as democracy. The Syria psychodrama exemplifies this. Yet again, we are held hostage to the prospect of a terrorism whose nature and history even the most liberal critics still deny. The great unmentionable is that humanity's most dangerous enemy resides across the Atlantic.

John Kerry's farce and Barack Obama's pirouettes are temporary. Russia's peace deal over chemical weapons will, in time, be treated with the contempt that all militarists reserve for diplomacy. With Al-Qaida now among its allies, and US-armed coup masters secure in Cairo, the US intends to crush the last independent states in the Middle East: Syria first, then Iran. 'This operation [in Syria],' said the former French foreign minister Roland Dumas in June, 'goes way back. It was prepared, pre-conceived and planned.'

When the public is 'psychologically scarred', as the Channel 4 reporter Jonathan Rugman described the British people's overwhelming hostility to an attack on Syria, reinforcing the unmentionable is made urgent. Whether or not Bashar al-Assad or the 'rebels' used gas in the suburbs of Damascus, it is the US not Syria that is the world's most prolific user of these terrible weapons. In 1970, the Senate reported, 'The US has dumped on Vietnam a quantity of toxic chemical (dioxin) amounting to six pounds per head of population'. This was Operation Hades, later renamed the friendlier Operation Rand Hand: the source of what Vietnamese doctors call a 'cycle of foetal catastrophe'. I have seen generations of young children with their familiar, monstrous deformities. John Kerry, with his own blood-soaked war record, will remember them. I have seen them in Iraq, too, where the US used depleted uranium and white phosphorous, as did the Israelis in Gaza, raining it down on UN schools and hospitals. No Obama 'red line' for them. No showdown psychodrama for them.

The repetitive debate about whether 'we' should 'take action' against selected dictators (i.e. cheer on the US and its acolytes in yet another aerial killing spree) is part of our brainwashing. Richard Falk, emeritus professor of international law and UN Special Rapporteur on Palestine, describes it as 'a self-righteous, one-way, legal/moral screen [with] positive images of Western values and

innocence portrayed as threatened, validating a campaign of unrestricted political violence'. This 'is so widely accepted as to be virtually unchallengeable'.

It is the biggest lie: the product of 'liberal realists' in Anglo-American politics, scholarship and the media who ordain themselves as the world's crisis managers, rather than the cause of a crisis. Stripping humanity from the study of nations and congealing it with jargon that serves Western power designs, they mark 'failed', 'rogue' or 'evil' states for 'humanitarian intervention'.

An attack on Syria or Iran or any other US 'demon' would draw on a fashionable variant, 'Responsibility to Protect', or R2P, whose lectern-trotting zealot is the former Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans, co-chair of a 'Global Centre', based in New York. Evans and his generously funded lobbyists play a vital propaganda role in urging the 'international community' to attack countries where 'the Security Council rejects a proposal or fails to deal with it in a reasonable time'.

Evans has form. He appears in my 1994 film *Death of a Nation*, which revealed the scale of genocide in East Timor. Canberra's smiling man is raising his champagne glass in a toast to his Indonesian equivalent as they fly over East Timor in an Australian aircraft, having just signed a treaty that pirated the oil and gas of the stricken country below where Indonesia's tyrant, Suharto, killed or starved a third of the population.

Under the 'weak' Obama, militarism has risen perhaps as never before. With not a single tank on the White House lawn, a military coup has taken place in Washington. In 2008, while his liberal devotees dried their eyes, Obama accepted the entire Pentagon of his predecessor, George Bush: its wars and war crimes. As the constitution is replaced by an emerging police state, those who destroyed Iraq with shock and awe, and piled up the rubble in Afghanistan and reduced Libya to a Hobbesian nightmare, are ascendant across the US administration. Behind their beribboned façade, more former US soldiers are killing themselves than are dying on battlefields. Last year, 6,500 veterans took their own lives. Put out more flags.

The historian Norman Pollack calls this 'liberal fascism'. 'For goose-steppers,' he wrote, 'substitute the seemingly more innocuous militarisation of the total culture. And for the bombastic leader, we have the reformer manqué, blithely at work, planning and executing assassination, smiling all the while.' Every Tuesday, the 'humanitarian' Obama personally oversees a worldwide terror network of drones that 'bugspat' people, their rescuers and mourners. In the west's comfort zones, the first black leader of the land of slavery still feels good, as if his very existence represents a social advance, regardless of his trail of blood. This obeisance to a symbol has all but destroyed the US anti-war movement: Obama's singular achievement.

In Britain, the distractions of the fakery of image and identity politics have not quite succeeded. A stirring has begun, though people of conscience should hurry. The judges at Nuremberg were succinct: 'Individual citizens have the duty to violate domestic laws to prevent crimes against peace and humanity.' The ordinary people of Syria, and countless others, and our own self-respect, deserve nothing less now. ■ JohnPilger.com

from our readers



Dear Editor

Please find enclosed \$40 for magazine subscription.

Thank you for your informative articles.

Yours truly, A Jarman, Qld

Dear Donna

Thanks to everyone for wonderful services on interesting topics. Please find cheque for \$11 to cover 2-years associate membership.

*Yours faithfully
M Forssyth, Vic*

Dear friends at the Peace Memorial Church

Thank you once again for your timely and provocative *Beacon*.

I am renewing my subscription early and sending subscriptions to two others.

*Yours with thanks
M Morrison, NSW*

Dear Editor

So many billions each year on military budgets and armaments and wars (and the USA is the biggest spender of all), it would all solve all the world's ills many times over, stopping severe hunger, poverty and disease and providing properly funded education, health and welfare. We certainly cannot let those in power keep going on this way, destroying the earth with all their chemicals, mines, wars, land clearing, climate change, etc., and continue to waste billions on wars, arms, greed, polluting industries, while the people, animals and the planet go on suffering and dying. We really do have to make a choice and soon, as our indifference is now reaching the verge of risking the wellbeing of this precious life on earth. And liveable planets are hard to find.

Steven Katsineris, Vic.

Letter to the Editor

An Open Letter to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition

In our collective living memories it is a rare occurrence that both people vying for office are regular churchgoing Christians. It is extraordinary to us as practising Christians and a matter of shame therefore, that both of you are determined to win office by continuing cruel, oppressive and wasteful policies towards the Aboriginal and Islander First Peoples, towards desperate refugees and asylum seekers, and also by deliberate disregard for the perilous state of the earth under global warming.

It's incredible to us that whoever wins government, from the lofty heights of membership of the UN Security Council, Australia will be pointing out human rights abuses in **other** countries.

'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'
(Matthew 7/12)

'Welcome the stranger.' (Matthew 25/36) '

'Take care of the Earth.' (Genesis 2/16)

We don't think so.

signed

Dr Alitya Rigney, Kaurna Elder

*(Sisters) Robert Aitken, Joan Evans, Alice Foley,
Margaret Kenny, Marion Gambin, Rebecca Scanlan,
Susan Pollard, Kenise Neill, Marie Faulkner and
Maureen McGuire*

for the Josephite SA Reconciliation Circle

**TUNE INTO THE
Unitarian Half Hour**
EVERY SATURDAY AT 10.30 AM
3CR • 855 AM • COMMUNITY RADIO

Increase our Circulation:
Nominate potential subscribers for
three free monthly copies without
ongoing obligation! (Try before you buy)

MELBOURNE UNITARIAN PEACE MEMORIAL CHURCH

‘SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY’

Tel: 03 9417 4178 (10 am to 3 pm weekdays) Fax and Answering machine: 03 9417 4178
110 Grey Street, East Melbourne (opposite the Mercy Hospital)
Services, Sunday 11 am

IN THIS ISSUE:

Editorial

US risks making Syria another Iraq

**Irradiated food coming to a supermarket near you
On truth and Australia’s asylum seeker policies and politics**

From Hiroshima to Syria, the enemy whose name we dare not speak

Beacon Editorial Board

Peter Abrehart
Marion Harper
Donna Sensi
Julie Stafford

The Editorial opinions expressed are those of the Editorial Board.

Opinions expressed in the editorial, articles, letters, etc., in the *Beacon* are those of the writers themselves and do not necessarily reflect the policy of the Melbourne Unitarian Church or any other organisation to which a particular writer is affiliated. Titles and affiliations are used for individual identification purposes only.

MELBOURNE UNITARIAN PEACE MEMORIAL CHURCH

110 Grey Street, East Melbourne 3002
Email: admin@melbourneunitarian.org.au
Website: www.melbourneunitarian.org.au

Monthly Journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church
Est. 1852

Registered by Australia Post

Post Print Approved
100003043

SURFACE
MAIL

POSTAGE
PAID
E. Melbourne
Victoria
Australia
3002

Simply cut out this form, fill in the details, and forward it along with your subscription. Why not do it now? If you are already a subscriber, send one to a friend.

To: The Editor, **The Beacon**, Melbourne Unitarian Church
110 Grey Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002 Australia
Please forward a copy of **The Beacon** every month. Enclosed is \$20.00 for twelve months subscription. (A\$20 Overseas and \$10 concession)

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Also send a copy to:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

A GIFT THAT SAYS YOU CARE

A Gift Subscription to **The Beacon**, the ideal gift that lasts a whole year.
Please enter my gift subscription to the following:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Donor's Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Enter payment of \$20.00 (A\$20 Overseas, \$10 Concession) for one year's subscription to the Editor, **Beacon**, Melbourne Unitarian Church, 110 Grey Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002 Australia. Cheques payable to Melbourne Unitarian Church.