



Abbott still determined to destroy Medicare

Anna Pha

The removal of the \$20 co-payment on short (up to 10 minute) GP consultations last Thursday (January 15) is great news. It was introduced by the Abbott government through regulatory means towards the end of December with little publicity and was to have come into force on Monday January 21. But it is too soon to celebrate; Medicare remains under attack and new Health Minister Sussan Ley is as determined as PM Tony Abbott to destroy bulk billing and Americanise Australia's health system.

On Wednesday last week Prime Minister Tony Abbott was adamant that the \$20 co-payment on short GP consultations of less than 10 minutes would remain. Come Thursday facing massive opposition on all fronts, including within government ranks, it was removed.

In February last year, Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared the Coalition government would be "the best friend Medicare has ever had". As the saying goes, "With friends like these, who needs enemies?" And before that there was the "no cuts to health" pre-election promise. The government's first budget in May 2014 contained measures for \$350 billion in cuts to Medicare.

Treasurer Joe Hockey tried to justify the cuts in terms of "unsustainable health-care spending ... if no changes are made." Abbott keeps on telling us that the Medicare "blowout is unsustainable." Overall government spending on health (including subsidies to private hospitals) might have increased, but spending on Medicare has been flat for a number of years. And there is plenty

of spare fat to be found in the military budget and non-payment of taxes by corporations.

First the \$7 co-payment

The centre-piece of the budget cuts was a \$7 co-payment by patients for GP consultations and out-of-hospital pathology and X-rays. (\$2 to be kept by doctor, and a \$5 reduction in the government rebate to doctors.) The co-payment was to commence on July 1, 2015.

Doctors and other service providers were not obliged to charge the co-payment, but there was an incentive – the \$5 cut in the rebate paid to the doctor. This would apply for the first 10 services a year for concession card-holders, children under 16 and a few other groups. Thereafter they could be bulk billed without the service provider losing \$5.

The co-payment would have been unaffordable for many patients and unsustainable for bulk billing doctors, some of whom were already struggling after years of frozen or below CPI increases in government rebates. A four-year freeze on rebates as contained in the budget would have compounded the situation.

Once fees replaced bulk billing, that would be the death of Medicare, which of course is Abbott's aim.

Not surprisingly, doctors, nurses, midwives, other health groups, trade unions, various political groups and the general public strongly opposed the co-payment. There were national rallies. Pressure mounted and it was clear the Senate would block the \$7 co-payment with Labor, Greens and a number of cross-benchers committed to defeating it.



Then the \$5 copayment

Under immense pressure, on December 9 Abbott announced a new "optional co-payment" as if the \$7 scheme had not been optional. Medicare rebates would be reduced by \$5, the same as under the first package. GPs would not be penalised for bulk billing concessional patients and children. GPs would miss out on the \$2 in the original scheme.

Doctors could continue to bulk bill but would be \$5 worse off than before. They could charge the co-payment to replace the \$5 reduction in their rebate. The government still speaks as though this is bulk billing. It is not – as said above, it is the death of bulk billing.

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A co-payment goes right to the fundamental underpinnings of Medicare – attacking universal access to quality care and bulk billing. Bulk billing means the patient does not pay a cent when seeing a medical practitioner, having pathology or other tests or treatment. People pay through their taxes including the Medicare levy according to income. Medicare pays the provider directly out of central revenue raised through the taxation system.

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Guardian

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There are no absolute freedoms

The murderous attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris has been rightly condemned by people around the world. Those producing the magazine lay claim to “freedom of expression”, meaning to them the right to say and portray any thing and any one regardless of offence given. In this case the insult is a slur against a religion observed by many millions of peace loving followers of Islam.

To put it in focus, one French citizen, a Muslim, when asked by a reporter in regard to *Charlie Hebdo* publishing images of the prophet Mohammad, stated: “This is not freedom of expression – to humiliate and insult is an attack.”

There are no absolute freedoms. In the complexity of a society there are, by necessity, limitations. In this context the material published by *Charlie Hebdo* is at times gratuitous and irresponsible.

Objectively, the producers of the magazine have found themselves in the camp of the class enemy. Their actions have helped fuel division, are adding fuel to imperialism’s drive to domination. The French Prime Minister’s declaration last week, that France was “at war with terrorism”, highlights the role that *Charlie Hebdo* knowingly or unknowingly played in the big power strategies of imperialism.

It reveals the tactic of having public focus directed at a sham conflict and away from the real, class war taking place. Terrorism is as old as politics; it is a tactic. It is not possible to prosecute a war against a tactic. Imperialism is waging war against the working class and working people around the world.

It is cutting a swathe through countries in the Middle East using proxy jihadist forces and out-and-out mercenaries, bringing about regime change and causing utter havoc with widespread death and disaster to civilian populations. Almost 20 years of ongoing conflict – led by the United States – have resulted in the displacement of more than 55 million people in the world.

The gathering of heads of states in Paris following the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* was also revealing in that it demonstrated where the Western powers that make up the main imperialist block have their allegiance – to another “coalition of the willing”. Obama has since expressed regret for not participating. It shows up the divide between them with their agenda for global domination and the rest of the world.

In Nigeria, where the week before the Paris incident the Boko Haram terrorist group had slaughtered an entire village of 2,000 people, a Catholic archbishop, whose diocese the village is in, sent a message: that those leaders were in the wrong country. France, he said, as a rich developed country has the means to defend itself. But Nigeria, a former colonial possession, oil rich but with a poor population, had no means to defend itself against a substantial and ruthless insurgency. His call, of course, fell on deaf ears.

“Free speech”

In a weird and twisted take, PM Tony Abbott used the attacks in Paris to push his government’s “free speech” agenda. Posing with a copy of the latest *Charlie Hebdo* magazine he stated, “I believe in free speech – I absolutely believe in free speech”. Abbott denies wanting to return to his government’s attempt to scrap section 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act, which saw Attorney General George Brandis demand the “right to be a bigot”. Section 18c puts limits on the use of offensive language.

But the fact is that far from being the champions of free speech, the Abbott government has put legislation in place meant to gag people, including a law that allows for the jailing of journalists for up to ten years for reporting details of any activities of police and spy agencies that the government deems to be national security operations.

This is, after all, a government based on bullying and secrecy. As the ruling class enters a new phase in the system’s inherent crisis, the means are being put in place to quell growing public opposition and to gag public speech itself; to drown out the voice of the people.

This is the class nature of “free speech”.

PRESS FUND

The year has started well for the Press Fund, but we really have to keep up the momentum. The Abbott government’s response to a series of policy crises is to try to sell off more public assets and introduce even more drastic cuts to government services. We’ll see big changes at both federal and state level this year, but we really need your help by way of Press Fund contributions, which help us cover production costs each week. So please, send us a contribution for the next edition if you possibly can, and preferably make it a regular practice. Many thanks to those who contributed over the break, as follows:

Peter and Laurie Reed, in memory of Allan Miller, a truly devoted communist, \$200

Ahmed \$20.60, John Clough \$10, R Gillespie \$20, R Girvan \$10, Donna McLaren \$23.65, “Round Figure” \$15.75, Tod Tickle \$150

This week’s total: \$350

An appeal in the defence of political prisoners in Iran

Sixteen political prisoners of Karaj Gohardash prison, via a declaration, have objected to the organised conspiracy of security apparatus of the Islamic regime against Behnam Ibrahimzadeh.

In Iran, our country, injustice and unleashed repression are integral parts of the Islamic regime. Its judicial system is an instrument for murder, imprisonment and torture of freedom fighters for a better future for the Iranian people.

Behnam Ibrahimzadeh, an advocate of children and workers’ rights has been in the notorious regimes’ jail for over four years now and due to his protest to horrendous conditions of the prison, he has been sentenced to extra nine and half years in an unfair retrial.

We, the political, social, cultural and media activists and advocates of workers and political prisoners’ rights, support the Karaj political prisoners’ declaration and condemn

the organised conspiracy against the jailed labour activists and political prisoners.

We are asking all of the freedom fighters to support us in any possible way to hinder the Islamic regimes’ judicial system from further imprisonment of Behnam Ibrahimzadeh and other political and labour activists.

www.gozareshgar.com ☺

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Or they could charge a higher fee as many “private” practices do. The Australian Medical Association’s (AMA) recommended rate for a standard consultation is \$73. The patient pays the GP’s fee and then makes a claim through Medicare. The present refund (rebate) is \$37. It would be reduced by \$5 to \$32.

Doctors are free to charge what they like. Without the competition from Medicare their fees would be much higher.

Hence universal access to Medicare is critical.

Nobody was fooled by the \$5 scheme, no matter how hard Abbott tried to put a new spin on it. The new \$5 co-payment was met with just as much opposition and had no hope of getting through the Senate.

Add on the \$20.05 co-payment

Then, without any fanfare, in late December, the government introduced a new regulation, to start on January 19. This would cut the government rebate for short consultations (up to 10 minutes) by \$20.05! GPs would have to charge at least the \$20 co-payment to stay in business. In effect it would be a \$20 co-payment.

The present Medicare rebate for a short consultation is \$37. The rebate if the \$20 cut came in, would be \$17. But that’s not all. Come July 1, if the \$5 co-payment is passed, that rebate would be reduced to \$12! That is unsustainable.

This meant that a doctor who bulk billed or a patient who paid a fee receives \$16.95 from the government instead of \$37. The \$20 rebate is what doctors and patients were paid in 1994. It is unsustainable.

Short consultations play an extremely important role in primary and preventative medicine, such as monitoring patients with specific conditions, follow-ups on tests, immunisations, etc. Any sharks rorting the system can be dealt with by other means.

As with the previous three proposed packages of cuts, there was no consultation.

The reaction to the \$20 co-payment which was in addition to the

\$5 co-payment package was even stronger. Rallies were being organised, pressure was placed on MPs and GPs were organising to use their rooms as campaign offices.

The AMA wrote a strong letter to the PM regarding the short consultation regulation; “The level of anger and disbelief within the general practitioner community that your government has so little regard for the value of their services at the front line of Australian healthcare is unprecedented.

“In health policy terms the measure is short-sighted. As the backbone of Australian health care, general practice is proven to be cost-effective in preventing, managing and delaying the development of health conditions and the associated downstream health costs,” the AMA letter said.

The \$20 co-payment was facing certain disallowance in the Senate and the government was up against strong opposition within its own ranks. Added to that the Queensland Premier was furious and desperate to get rid of the co-payment with difficult state elections at the end of this month.

So, just four days out from the commencement of the \$20 co-payment the PM pulls the plug on it. But the government is still pursuing the \$5 co-payment and a freeze on rebates. The Minister has said she will consult with doctors and other on a co-payment or some type of “price signal”, in other words a fee. The AMA is prepared to accept fees for those on higher incomes which suggests some sort of means testing of access to bulk billing – something Labor might support.

The result of any co-payment would put GP consultations out of reach for many Australians with all the negative consequences that would follow. Overstretched hospital emergency departments would be flooded, costs would rise. Ambulances cost over \$700, Emergency Departments around \$300 compared with \$37 for the GP.

Americanisation

Economically, it makes no sense to introduce a co-payment. But that is not what it is about. The main objectives of the government are to abolish bulk billing; privatise Medicare;

and allow private health insurance (PHI) funds to provide cover for co-payments and administer Medicare rebates.

BUPA and Medicare Private, the largest funds, are driving the government’s agenda.

The government’s objectives are ideological. For the corporate sector that stands to make a killing they are first and foremost economic – another source of rich profits.

The spin about blowouts and unsustainability is an attempt to sell the government’s neo-liberal privatisation agenda to the public and cover up the pro-big business ideology behind the budget measures.

Abbott is hell bent on taking Australia down the disastrous, high cost American path of managed health care. The result will be that people who cannot afford private health insurance will be denied quality primary and preventative care from a general practice. And it won’t be cheap!

Act now!

It is critical that as many forces as possible are mobilised to ensure the complete \$5 co-payment package or any replacement is defeated. At present, Labor, the Greens, the Palmer United Party’s Glenn Lazarus, Nick Xenophon, Ricky Muir and Jacqui Lambie have indicated they will oppose the co-payment.

The Greens have also indicated that they will oppose the freeze on rebates. The Labor Party disturbingly remains silent on this question. The freeze is also a means of making bulk billing unsustainable for medical, pathology and imaging services.

There are huge cracks within Liberal ranks. These have to be widened, especially in marginal electorates. The federal elections are due next year. Labor needs to be convinced of the need to block the freeze on rebates and any form of fee.

Time to lobby using social media outlets, talkback radio, letters to the editor, etc. Phone your local MP and Senators. The \$20 co-payment has gone for now. It is possible to defeat the \$5 co-payment and freeze.

NB: Figures for rebates and fees have been rounded off. ☺

Australia 2015 - Open season on the excluded

Bob Briton

Scott Morrison's appointment as Social Services Minister in December was the signal. Fresh from his stint as Immigration Minister where he "stopped the boats" – or at least enforced the offshore warehousing of refugees in worsening misery – he is now committed to "stopping the bludgers". Morrison has dubbed himself "Minister for Economic Participation", as if the measures the federal government has announced were about getting people into decent paying jobs. That's not the real agenda behind a raft of changes being rolled out now and in the pipeline. The planners of globalised capitalism have ordered privatised "welfare" and lower living standards for all Australian workers and Morrison has vowed to try harder to deliver.

fix it. Compulsory contraception for those on benefits would help crack intergenerational reproduction of strife. As for inadequate non-beneficiaries, we just have to grin and bear it," Johns said in a tasteless reference to the case of a Cairns woman accused of stabbing seven of her children and her niece.

Morrison is threatening that the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) – a privatising social security initiative with bi-partisan support – will be slashed if he doesn't get Senate backing for axe-wielding measures in his new portfolio. He wants to hold the social security budget increase for 2015-16 to just 2.4 percent in the face of worsening unemployment, growing accommodation stress and other cost of living pressures on underprivileged Australians.

His predecessor, Howard-era hardliner Kevin Andrews, managed to get ALP backing for a host of



removing scholarships for students moving between major cities

The new minister has already taken the attacks up a notch. From January 1, those applying for the Disability Support Pension will have to be assessed by a doctor contracted by the government instead of their own GP. If the government doctor finds they're not completely unable to work they could be put on the dole instead – which is about \$160 a week less. DSP recipients are at the very centre of the government's social security hit list but NewStart, Sickness Benefit, widow or Youth Allowances will all have to wait an extra week to start receiving support. Payments to the unemployed will be cut off immediately if they fail to attend a Centrelink interview. The schoolkids' bonus will be means-tested.

Advocates are very concerned about how Morrison will apply the recommendations of the McLure and Forrest reports. Among its many recommendations, the McLure report suggests "streamlining" the current system of social security payments from 20 to just five delivering unexplained savings. Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest's report included a recommendation for cashless social security with a stigma-carrying "healthy welfare" card for Visa,

MasterCard or EFTPOS purchases of a limited range of goods.

Other possible initiatives are being pushed for the Northern Territory at the moment. NT Senator and Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion has announced a Work for the Dole scheme for remote Aboriginal communities involving work for 50 hours a fortnight, five days a week, 12 months of the year. The original CDEP scheme – the first work for the dole scheme of the modern era – was introduced in Aboriginal communities and involved 15 hours a week work to receive payments. That meant that recipients were getting something approaching the minimum wage for the hours worked but concepts like awards and minimum wages have little respect in the Abbott government. In fact they are under sustained attack including from current social security changes.

The claim that these are "welfare to work" initiatives is so much eyewash. The country's leading demographer, Australian National University Professor Peter McDonald, has concluded a report that shows that the net job creation impact of these programs is zero. Many unemployed are locked out of the workforce due to a lack of relevant skills and, with the state and federal governments' attacks on TAFE and higher education continuing, their exclusion is set to continue for a long time.

The number of potential critics with the resources to operate is on the decline, too. The latest batch of organisations to have Commonwealth funding unceremoniously abolished includes Blind Citizens Australia and homeless advocacy bodies such as National Shelter and the Community Housing Federation. ❖

If the government doctor finds anyone applying for the Disability Support Pension is not completely unable to work, they could be put on the dole instead – which is about \$160 a week less.

The corporate media is playing its part, supporting the extremist approach. Tales of millionaires on social security are back on the pages of the tabloids. Comments from a former Labor MP, Gary Johns, that people receiving social security payments should be forced to take contraceptive measures were contained in a well-timed opinion piece in *The Australian*.

"Some families, some communities, some cultures breed strife. Governments cannot always

downgrades already. These included:

- limiting the Family Tax Benefit (FTB) "A" large family payment to those with four or more children
- reducing the primary income earner limit for FTB "B" from \$150,000 to \$100,000
- reviewing the cases of people under 35 who are receiving a Disability Support Pension (DSP)
- including untaxed super income in eligibility assessments for the Seniors Health Card

Pete's Corner



Win against East-West Link

In December the now notorious anti-East-West Link protesters held a victory street party at their campaign headquarters in Fitzroy, Melbourne. With the Napthine Liberal government being thrown out of office in late November and Labor coming to power on the promise not to build the East-West Link, conditions have been created that make it near impossible for the new government to go back on its word.

The community group says that if Labor were to back track now it would create huge anger in the community and give impetus to the anti-toll road campaign. The community pressure has been so intense that Labor knows all hell would break loose if it were to go ahead with the project now.

Protesters are taking the opportunity to mark down the significant victory against one of the biggest, but most unpopular, infrastructure projects in the world that would have forced people out of their homes and created major noise pollution problems.

Protest organiser Anthony Main said, "Everyone said we wouldn't

be able to do it. We have proven them all wrong. It's been a long and hard 18 months but against all odds we've forced Labor into a position where it would be suicide for them to proceed.

"We had all the 'powers-that-be' lined up against us. Not just the Liberals but the road lobby, the police, the courts, the media, they were all on the pro-tunnel side. We should never forget that until recently we also had Labor supporting this dud project. The fact that we spent a lot of time pressuring them, picketing their offices etc, this was key in forcing them to change their position.

"What everyone underestimated was our ability to win ordinary people to our cause. We relied on the truth and on people power. That's what got us there in the end.

"What this campaign shows is that when ordinary people organise and mobilise you can win. You don't have to put up with big business interests dominating your lives.

"We are hoping that other communities take inspiration from this campaign," Anthony said. ❖

Survival Day events

Survival Day events will be held around Australia on January 26, as much of the nation celebrates Australia Day. While the day marks the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, Indigenous people will celebrate their continuing survival in a host of concerts and gatherings.

The first Survival Day concert was held in 1992, and since then it has become an opportunity to stand up and be proud of culture, to celebrate survival and to enjoy the talent of Indigenous artists, dancers and musicians.

All Survival Day events are drug-and-alcohol-free.

In NSW, the annual Yabun Festival will be held in Victoria Park, Camperdown, from 10am. The program includes a range of music, dancers and speakers. More details at gadigal.org.au/

The Saltwater Freshwater Festival will be held this year at Coffs Harbour. Archie Roach headlines the music, with dance, story, art and craft, cultural activities, children's and youth areas and workshops on the all-day program. More details at www.saltwaterfreshwater.com.au/

In Victoria, the annual Belgrave Survival Day will focus on caring for country. Cay Donovan, Miss Hood and Joe Geia are on the bill, with a

"Walk to Survival Day" from Belgrave Station car park planned. More details are available at belgravesurvivalday.org

Melbourne's Share the Spirit Festival, organised by Songlines Aboriginal Music, will be held during the afternoon at the Treasury Gardens. Details at sharethespiritfestival.com

In Brisbane, Murriss will both protest and celebrate on January 26. A rally will start at 10.30 at Parliament House in George Street, followed by a march to Musgrave Park for ceremonies, welcome to country, cultural activities, entertainment, kids activities and food stalls.

In Perth, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu will headline the Survival Day concert, which has an anti-smoking message. The activities, in the Supreme Court Gardens, also include The Merindas, Red Sand Beat and Urban Youth Crew with the Wesley College Dancers, and there will be a range of family-based activities, all starting at 1pm.

In Canberra, the Freedom Movement is scheduled to reach the front lawns of Parliament House on January 26. Members of the movement are encouraging locals to join in.

In Adelaide, activities, supported by Tandany's, will centre on the Semaphore Foreshore, with

performances by Michael Collard (rapper Big Sexy) and Zacchariah Fielding (from *The Voice Australia*) with the CASM Soul Band. Stalls, children's activities and dancing are also on the program, which starts at 11am. More details at www.tandanya.com.au/event

In Tasmania, a camp will be held on Aboriginal land on the island's west coast. Activities will include trips to cultural areas, sand castle competitions, stories about local rock art, basket and hat making and yarning around the camp fire. Details from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre on 1800 132 260.

It was not known if Survival Day events would be held in the Northern Territory.

Freedom protest at Parliament House

Nearly 43 years ago, the first Tent Embassy was formed when four young men camped under an umbrella on the lawns of Parliament House, Canberra.

This Survival Day, the newly formed Freedom Movement hoped it will not be four but 4,000 people who turn out in the national capital to protest.

"On January 26, the nation's attention will be drawn to hundreds if



not thousands of our people moving in for a sit-in just outside Parliament," Freedom Movement spokesman Tauto Sansbury said.

"We are mobilising. We are heading to Canberra to reclaim the Aboriginal rights struggle, and the right for our voices to at long last be heard," the Narrunga (SA) Elder said. "We as blacks will do the leading, however the struggle for what is right must be owned by everyone – white and black.

"We need everyone to drop whatever they intended doing on January 26 and onwards and rock up to Canberra.

"Forty-three years after the Aboriginal tent Embassy, far too many of our people are worse off.

"We must act now, as we did in 1972, because in waiting we will be robbed of every last vestige of whatever it is we are clinging to."

Koori Mail ☘

Ensuring Queensland's survival

Lock the Gate Alliance President, Drew Hutton, says the coming state election is the most important yet for Queensland's survival or demise.

"Queenslanders' food bowls, clean water and air are being trashed by politicians and big business, especially the mining industry," Mr Hutton said.

"This is our chance to say 'enough is enough' of the indiscriminate coal seam gas and coal mining that is ruining this state for the short-term gain of so few."

He said Lock the Gate would survey candidates where they stood on CSG and other inappropriate mining and would advise voters accordingly.

Lock the Gate will lobby for the People's Common Rights and Provisions Bill 2014 to be introduced to restore democracy to Queensland,

stamp out corruption and to reinstate the Upper House as the House of Review.

"Queenslanders are being pushed off their land and sacrificed to make way for the mining juggernaut," Mr Hutton said.

"The mining industry is undermining our democracy and hogging our land and water. Mining executives have unfettered access to politicians and undue influence on decision-making. The People's Bill aims to restore the balance, clean out the political system and give the people back their parliament, their land, water and rights."

People's Common Rights and Provisions Bill

Objectives:

- To shine a light on the glaring

failures in control and governance of mining in Queensland

- To set a standard for mining law reform that is engaging, exciting and reflects community values
- To tell our own stories and pursue our campaign agenda outside government mandated processes
- To expose democratic failures, loss of community rights and institutional corruption in mining in Queensland
- To expose the steps taken by the Newman government to weaken and undermine community rights
- To bring joy, humour and colourful direct action to play in engaging with a wider audience
- The elements of the People's Common Provision's Bill are:
 - The right to say "no" to mining
 - The right to our health, livelihoods and the quiet enjoyment of our homes

- The right to be represented in parliament
- The right to our common heritage – the land, water and clean air
- The right to object and have our objections heard
- The right to clean politics

Documentary

Wide Bay Burnett communities have welcomed the release of a documentary highlighting the devastating impacts of mining in the region. The documentary, by Brisbane film-maker Mark Doyle and called Open for Business, includes interviews with residents and farmers describing their battle to keep their lifestyle, farmland and clean water and air.

Coal Free Wide Bay Burnett spokesperson, Vicki Perrin, said the release was "timely" given the coming state election.

"We are battling to keep our

communities free of coal and gas mining because it threatens our lifestyle and livelihoods," Ms Perrin said.

"The election gives us the opportunity to tell politicians that we demand the right to foodlands, clean water and air, and peace and quiet in our homes."

She said the communities of Avondale and Winfield were concerned that the Liberal National Parties had taken away people's objection rights and allowed high-value farmland to be mined.

The group has invited all candidates from the Burnett, Bundaberg and Callide electorates to attend a Pre-Election Community Forum at Tegege Hall on Wednesday, January 21 at 6.30pm.

The documentary can be viewed here vimeo.com/116528927 ☘

Manus in meltdown

As the Guardian went to press up to 700 asylum seekers were on hunger strike on Manus Island. Noisy protests continued into the night at Delta compound as no water had been delivered to the compound and asylum seekers had to burrow under the perimeter fence to reach bottled water left outside the compound fence.

Last Saturday, more than 200 asylum seekers were taken to the medical centre for treatment after collapsing in their compounds.

At times asylum seekers have been left lying unconscious in their compounds or left on the ground outside the make-shift field clinic because there are not enough stretchers or mattresses for the numbers requiring treatment.

Another two people swallowed

washing powder in the early hours of this morning.

Two supposed "ring-leaders" have also been taken into the notorious isolation unit Chauka. A letter signed by over 80 asylum seekers in Foxtrot Compound has spelled out their fears about resettlement in PNG.

"As the asylum seekers' letter says, there is a disaster happening on Manus Island. The real fears of the asylum seekers can't be ignored. There is no viable prospect for refugees to be resettled in PNG. The first step is to stop the forced removal of refugees to insecure temporary housing on January 22," said Ian Rintoul, spokesperson for the Refugee Action Coalition.

"There needs to be urgent discussions about possible third country

resettlement. The asylum seekers are asking for the UNHCR to be involved with resettlement discussions. The ball is in the Minister's court. He can keep pretending that the protests aren't happening or he can act to prevent the unfolding disaster."

Foxtrot letter:

To whom it may concern:

"It is been a week that hundreds of asylum seekers of Australia are on hunger strike and it is because of 18 months of indefinite detention without any clear future in Manus Island.

"Here a disaster is about to happen, please prevent this disaster. The Australian government is planning to resettle us in PNG against our will, by forcing us.

"We are not willing to be resettled in PNG because there is no

safety [or] any future for us and our family.

"Today we consider us to be hostage for the Australian government so they can deter others not to come to Australia."

Witch hunt

In an attempt to break up the hunger strike protest, Transfield officers began rounding up asylum seekers' compound leaders. At least four leaders of different nationalities – one from Mike, one from Oscar, and two from Foxtrot – have been seized and taken to the high security Chauka isolation unit.

Up to 40 Transfield riot squad officers raided the Foxtrot compound around 1:00am (Sunday January 18), looking for other community leaders.

The riot squad also attempted to

force water down the throat of two unconscious asylum seekers in the compound. They also threatened that a special forces unit will come from Port Moresby "to deal with you" unless the hunger strike was ended.

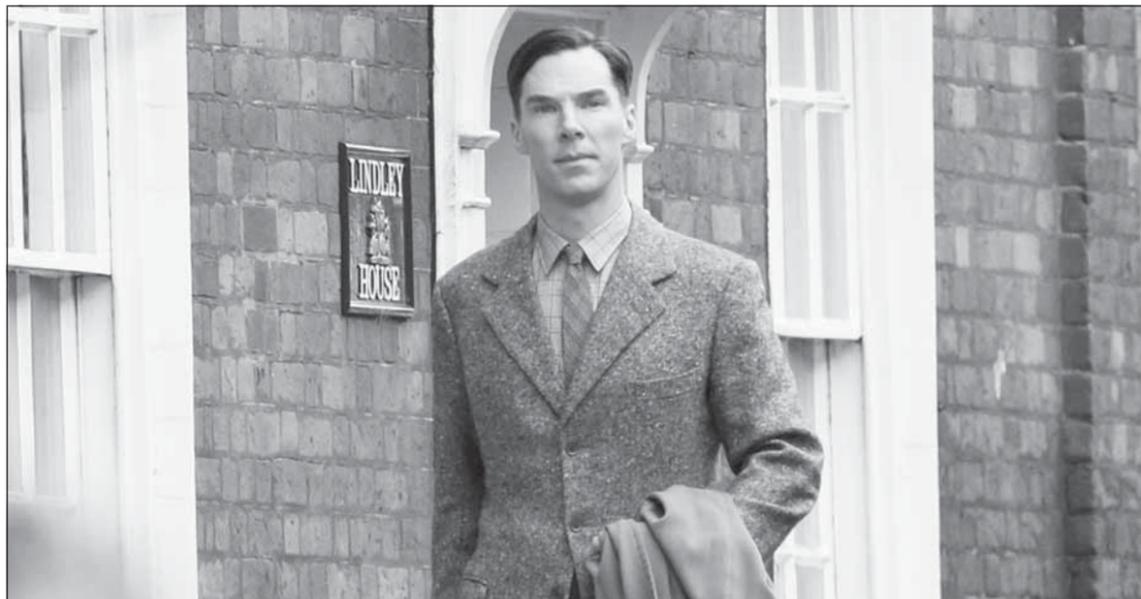
Foxtrot asylum seekers have sent another letter explaining that PNG is not safe and appealing to the Minister to halt the forced transfers of asylum seekers.

"Taking leaders hostage or using the riot squad won't stop the hunger strike protest," said Ian Rintoul. "The tactics are eerily similar to those that ended in tragedy in February last year.

"The Minister has said he supports 'discussion and negotiations'. He must act urgently to prevent a tragedy on Manus Island." ☘

Film Review by Peter McLaren

The Imitation Game



Benedict Cumberbatch in his role as Alan Turing.

The struggle to break the WWII German radio code was crucial for an allied victory in Europe. In the 1930s Polish scientists had decoded some intercepted German messages, but after the war started the top cryptographers of Britain, the US, France and the Soviet Union failed to do so.

The messages were encoded by devices known as Enigma machines and could only be decoded by them. In 1939 Britain received a machine from Polish intelligence, but its encryption settings changed every day at midnight. The British had no instruction manual and there were more than 150 trillion possible settings. The Germans believed the Enigma system was unbreakable.

In 1939 Alan Mathison Turing, a 27-year old professor of mathematics from Cambridge, arrived at Britain's main decoding centre, the Government Code and Cipher School, (known to the public as the Bletchley Park Radio Factory).

By then many vital shipments to Britain from the US were being lost in attacks by U-boats, which carried Enigma machines to decipher radio messages on the location of allied shipping. Britain faced the prospect of starvation.

Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch) realised that the Enigma settings could only be revealed by an electronic machine which could carry out a massive number of calculations between receipt of the first intercepted messages at 6am and the midnight deadline for expiry of the settings.

Unfortunately, his convictions were not shared by the Bletchley Park authorities, nor by other members of the Enigma team, who lodged a formal complaint about his behaviour.

Turing in turn complained about his treatment to Commander Deniston, the frosty bureaucrat who directed the centre. Deniston sneered that if Turing didn't like the way things were done he could complain to the Prime Minister, but Turing took him at his word and contacted Churchill, who then issued directions for Turing to take charge of the group.

When Turing's decoding machine was built it proved inadequate to decipher messages within the time frame. Deniston used this as vindication for an attempt to shut the machine down and sack Turing, but Turing's colleagues, who had become converted to his approach,

threatened to resign en masse if he was forced out.

The machine finally came good after the team realised that in order to find the day's settings the machine only had to search for two words which all the messages included. (Guess what they were!)

The subplot thickens

Turing had great difficulty appreciating the emotional response of other people to his statements and actions. He was brilliant at cross-words (and used them with astonishing success to recruit employees), but couldn't understand metaphors, jokes or double entendres, and consistently accepted the statements of others at face value.

He also had little patience with those who couldn't understand his ideas (i.e. almost everybody), and his tendency to publicly assess others' capabilities with blunt honesty, like a maths problem, was interpreted as callous or cruel. He was also gay, and homosexual acts were a criminal offence in Britain.

The Imitation Game depicts the war years in a series of flashbacks from 1951, when Turing was investigated for suspected involvement in espionage. He was cleared, but the investigation revealed homosexual activity, for which he was subsequently brought to trial.

Found guilty, the judge gave him the hideous choice of going to prison for two years or submitting to chemical castration by hormone drugs.

Turing chose the latter because he wanted to continue his highly successful work in computer development, but found to his horror that he lost not only his sex drive but also to a great extent his mental focus.

In 1954, aged 41, he committed suicide. Britain lost its greatest mathematician, who was also an unacknowledged war hero, the conceiver of artificial intelligence and designer of the first modern computers, and arguably the nation's single most important figure in the field of code-breaking, an essential element in the global struggle to defeat fascism.

According to the film, during the period in which the vicious anti-homosexual law was in force, some 49,000 men were convicted of the "offence".

Truth and art

The film mainly focuses on the desperate drive to get Turing's

decoding machine to work in the early war years. The Bletchley Park staff later grew to approximately 10,000 members, and by war's end the establishment contained the greatest store of military intelligence in history.

However, the film does not acknowledge the crucial work carried out before the war by Polish scientists, or the contribution of the small army of engineers and technicians who built Turing's machine.

Nor does it reveal that in 1942 the Nazis introduced even more complex machines, which caused a delay of almost a year in the Enigma group's operations.

The film lists the defeat of the Nazis at Stalingrad, the Normandy invasion, and the battles in the Ardennes as allied achievements to which the Enigma group's work made a major contribution.

But Turing realised that acting defensively on every message would alert the Nazis to a breach in the Enigma defences. His team spent much of the remainder of the war working out which deciphered messages would maximise the strategic advantage for the allies without alerting the enemy.

The film makes the astounding claim that with the help of the newly-formed MI6 intelligence division the Enigma group concealed from the armed service chiefs the information contained in the other messages.

It seems unlikely that such a situation would have prevailed for long, but if it did, it would explain why details of the Bletchley Park operations were not accessible until 50 years after it was closed down.

The film also claims that Churchill refused to pass on crucial information to the Soviet Union, but that MI6 deceived him by intercepting information sent to the Soviets by an Enigma group member, and substituting information that was more limited but would still assist the Soviets without damaging allied interests.

Again, this may be true, but it's unlikely that Churchill would not have eventually realised what was going on.

Nevertheless, the film has great performances and is well worth seeing, because of its gripping depiction of the Enigma struggle and the fascinating, tragic story of Alan Turing. ✪



"... the mere concept of seeing homeless in this location opposite our business and in clear view is very much inappropriate, as it undermines the guest experience and our investment in the building", an email sent to Melbourne City Council from a city hotel owners said. Business operators are not happy with the sight of homeless people and demand they be shifted somewhere else – out of sight of paying guests. It is not illegal to sleep in swags or sleeping bags but "people are offended by visible homelessness and hardship", said Homeless Law manager. The police and Melbourne City Council are under a lot of pressure to remove the homeless from the city – but shifting people from place to place does not provide them with the services they need or accommodation they do not have. Poverty and destitution are not pretty – but doing nothing will not solve the problem.

A West Australian inquiry into the mental health impacts of fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers is still continuing. It was brought about by a high number of suicides among those workers. From 2008 to 2013, 24 WA workers committed suicide, seven of whom were explicitly named as FIFO workers, while the others were in jobs suggestive of FIFO work, such as miners and drillers. It is estimated that WA has 67,000 FIFO workers. Physical exhaustion, being away from friends and family and heightened risk of mental health problems makes FIFO workers vulnerable. One of the biggest issues is admission of a mental health issue – it usually means losing a job. As part of a growing push for more family-friendly rosters, many FIFO workers on longer rosters in WA are prepared to take a pay cut in exchange for a fewer weeks away from home.

It pays to be alert and vigilant, especially when it comes to fracking and related activities. AGL has been in the centre of fresh controversy over its coal seam gas exploration near Gloucester where its contractor shipped untreated waste water to the Hunter region despite explicit rejection of the plan from the local water authority. Transpacific Industries transported 600,000 litres of so-called flowback water from AGL's four pilot coal seam gas (CSG) wells to a facility at Kooragang Island, near Newcastle. Flowback water contains chemicals used in fracking for CSG. That flowback water was treated before being discharged into Hunter Water's sewer network. Hunter Water was not amused as it had previously stated quite forcefully that "Hunter Water is not to be approached as a potential disposal source for groundwater from the Gloucester Gas Project". As its standard policy Hunter Water does not accept any waste water from outside its region, regardless of how it was treated. AGL was advised of that policy as well. Vigilant anti-fracking protesters followed the first Transpacific Industries convoy all the way from Gloucester to Newcastle. The Newcastle Herald alerted Hunter Water to the discharge. The NSW Environmental Protection Authority is yet to start regulatory action against AGL or Transpacific over the flowback water.

The “selfless friendship” the Cuban Five solidarity

Stephen Kimber

In the sweet afterglow of last month’s historic rapprochement between the United States and Cuba, much has been made of the pivotal roles played by Pope Francis, the Canadian government, *New York Times* editorialists, various American politicians and their aides, even “sperm diplomacy.”

All that is true, of course, but there are other narratives in this larger tale too, perhaps none more compelling than the against-all-odds, never-say-never global campaign to “free the Cuban Five.” For a decade and a half, small, dedicated, disparate, sometimes competing groups of political activists in the United States and around the world have demonstrated, lobbied, lettered, conferenced, cajoled and hectored in a seemingly quixotic quest to win the release of five imprisoned Cuban men.

The Five were members of a Cuban intelligence network dispatched to South Florida in the 1990s to infiltrate and report back to Havana on Miami exile groups that were plotting – and carrying out – deadly terrorist attacks against their homeland. In June 1998, Cuban State Security shared the fruits of its intelligence on some of those plots – including one to blow up an aeroplane filled with beach-bound tourists – with American authorities. Three months later, the FBI swooped in and arrested... not the terrorists but the Cuban agents. Charged in hostile-to-all-things-Castro Miami and tried against the backdrop of an emotional child custody tug-of-war between Havana and Miami over the fate of rescued rafter child Elian González, the Five were summarily convicted and sentenced to unconscionably long terms in American prisons. The network’s leader, Gerardo Hernandez, received a double-life-plus-15-year sentence.

For the Cuban government, winning the release of the three members of the Five still in American prisons – each of them a certifiable, first-name-basis hero at home – was the sine qua non for everything else that happened on December 17: freeing American USAID contractor Alan Gross, handing over a Cuban national convicted of spying for the United States, agreeing to re-establish diplomatic relations with Washington and all the possibilities and perils that will inevitably flow from that...

None of 2015s hopes, however, would have been possible if not for the efforts of that eclectic collection of progressive political activists, Hollywood celebrities and ordinary folk who refused to allow the story of the Five and the injustice against them to be forgotten.

The campaign to free the Five didn’t begin in earnest until after their convictions in 2001, in part because the Cuban government initially refused to claim them as their own. (That’s not surprising; the US government only publicly

acknowledged its own agent inside Cuban State Security when he was finally released from Cuban prison last month, nearly 20 years after Cuban authorities arrested him.)

No choice

By the time the trial of the Five began in late 2000, however, Havana had not only acknowledged them as Cuban intelligence agents but also staked out its key leg and moral argument: that it had had no choice but to deploy its agents to Florida because US law enforcement agencies allowed anti-Cuba terrorists to operate freely – and illegally – on American soil.

Alicia Jrapko, an Oakland, California, political activist, first wrote to Gerardo Hernandez in late 2000 or early 2001. He wrote back, beginning a deep political partnership (he sometimes half-jokingly referred to her as his “secretary”) and personal friendship that continues to this day.

Jrapko’s partner and fellow progressive, photographer Bill Hackwell – they met during a Pastors for Peace Caravan to Cuba in 1995 – was among the few Americans at the sentencing of the Five in Miami in December 2001. “That’s when we first met the mothers of the Five,” Hackwell recalls. “It was remarkable just how strong they were.”

The first “Free the Cuban Five” banner was unfurled at a May 2002 anti-war rally in San Francisco. Initially, Hackwell admits today, working on the case was simply “solidarity work, a project. It was just what we do. But eventually,” he adds, “it became something else, a way of life. It ultimately defined who we were.”

In 2006, Hackwell, Jrapko and some others split from the original National Committee to Free the Cuban Five – which had been formed by Gloria La Riva, a prominent California political activist – to form the International Committee for the Freedom of the Cuban Five. The split was partly about activist politics, partly about personalities, but, in the end, the rift created two groups working determinedly, if sometimes uneasily, in parallel for the same goal.

La Riva’s group continued to stage its own events and even helped unearth evidence the US government had paid thousands of dollars to “journalists” who’d written incendiary stories about Cuba and the case of the Five in the Miami media before and during their trial. Such revelations raised new and troubling questions about the fairness of the original trials – which had also been questioned by Amnesty International and the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention – and laid the groundwork for last-ditch legal appeals that were still working their way through the courts at the time of last month’s release of the remaining members of the Five.

The newly minted International Committee, meanwhile, pushed to broaden support for the cause beyond traditional left-wing organisations. It wasn’t easy. “Liberals shied away from us in the early days,” Hackwell recalls. “So did the established social democracy groups. The NGOs wouldn’t touch it. Even many of the [Washington think tanks and lobby groups] involved in Cuba issues thought the Five were “too left.”

Jrapko’s and Hackwell’s cozy two-bedroom home in Oakland became the International Committee’s 24-hour-a-day world headquarters. Their day jobs – Hackwell and Jrapko both worked for a small Bay-area non-profit – took a distant second place to their Cuba work. “Our boss was a progressive and very accommodating,” Hackwell says. “We’ve always walked the edge on our finances, but we cobbled stuff together to make it work.”

Making progress

They made slow, stuttering progress. They connected with Gayle McLaughlin, the mayor of Richmond, California, and that launched a free-the-Five letter writing campaign that eventually won the signatures of 13 American mayors. With the help of Tony Woodley, a British union leader involved in the growing international Cuban Five solidarity campaign, they made tentative contacts with progressive elements in the American labour movement. And they joined forces with Graciela Ramirez, an Argentine-born human rights activist based in Cuba, who became International Co-Chair of their committee.

The National and International committees weren’t the only groups involved. Cuba Solidarity organisations in many American cities had already formed their own local Free the Five sub-committees. Similar groups sprouted in Latin America and Europe. Vancouver’s Committee to Free the Five, for example, was especially active, staging more than 100 monthly, fifth-of-every-month protests in front of the US consulate to keep up the pressure.

In 2012, the Canadian Network on Cuba staged a two-day “Breaking the Silence: People’s Tribunal and Assembly” in Toronto to discuss the case.

In March 2014, a European-based international coalition attracted 300 people from 27 countries to the Grand Hall of the Law Society in London for an “International Commission of Inquiry into the Case of the Cuban Five,” which was presided over by the former Chief Justice of India, a former judge of the French Supreme Court, and a former Justice of the Constitutional Court of South Africa.

By then, one initially seemingly unrelated but ultimately critical turning point in the campaign to free the Five had already occurred. In



2011 when Hackwell, Jrapko and a patchwork of allies across the country orchestrated a successful three-city, three-week US tour for La Colmenita, a popular Cuban children’s theatre troupe. Besides raising American awareness of Cuban theatre and culture, including the iconic place of the Five in its national psyche (La Colmenita’s repertoire includes a popular play about the Five), the success of the tour convinced Jrapko and the others they had a first-rate organising team in place that could stage events on a national scale, even international scale.

That led directly to the first “Five Days for the Five” event in Washington in April 2012, a modestly ambitious week of speeches, panels, film screenings and lobbying.

The event was important for a number of reasons. Besides already well-known Five supporters like Danny Glover, the actor and activist, and Saul Landau, the late filmmaker whose documentary about the Five was screened during the week, Five Days brought together for the first time under the Free-the-Five banner such well-known and respected progressive public figures as Dolores Huerta, the co-founder of the United Farm Workers’ Union, Cindy Sheenan, the anti-war activist, and James Early, the Director of Cultural Studies and Communication at the Smithsonian Institution. The event also attracted prominent voices from the broader Cuba debate like Wayne Smith, the former head of the US Interest Section in Havana, and Mavis Anderson, a Senior Associate at the Latin American Working Group.

Lobbying the Hill

But perhaps the most significant impact from that first Five Days was the recognition of the importance of lobbying on Capitol Hill. While chatting up Washington lawmakers was well outside the political comfort zone for most of the International Committee’s activists, they also understood that freeing the Five would almost certainly come down to a political decision – a presidential pardon – and that

For a decade and a half, small, dedicated, disparate, sometimes competing groups of political activists in the United States and around the world have demonstrated, lobbied, lettered, conferenced, cajoled and hectored in a seemingly quixotic quest to win the release of five imprisoned Cuban men.

" of y movement



could only happen if there was some political support for it. The initial results, however, were hardly encouraging. Few, mostly low-level Congressional staffers agreed to meet with them. Those who did knew little, often nothing at all, about the case. When they learned the details, the aides were occasionally hostile, at best, indifferent.

Undeterred, the Committee organised a second Five Days in September 2013, then a third last June.

The third "annual" 5 Days for the Cuban 5 – highlighted this time by an ambitious two-day conference entitled "A New Era in USA-Cuba Relations" – featured an eclectic group of international speakers, including Ignacio Ramonet, the former editor-in-Chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique*; Fernando Morais, the best-selling Brazilian author; Reverend Joan Brown Campbell, the former General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the US; Lawrence Wilkerson, a retired US Army Colonel and former Chief of staff to Colin Powell; Gilbert Brownstone, an art curator and Director of the Brownstone Foundation; Tom Hayden, a former California State Senator and long-time civil rights activist; and Martin Garbus, the prominent American first amendment lawyer who represented Gerardo Hernandez in his last-ditch legal appeal.

Attendees also participated in a 500-strong march from the White House to the Justice Department, and attended a concert dedicated to the Five featuring the popular political hip hop group, Dead Prez.

Coming to Washington

Just as important, the event brought together representatives from 31 countries in Washington. "That was important," explains Jrapko. "We needed them to come to Washington because that was where the real struggle was."

Among the foreign participants this time were 11 international parliamentarians who helped lobby their fellow legislators in Washington. The number – and tone – of the

meetings with American politicians was different too. The International Committee managed to arrange more than 60 individual meetings – three times as many as in 2012 – and many of them were face to face sessions with elected officials themselves.

Instead of asking who the Five were and what the fuss was about, some legislators were now asking what they could do to help – or reporting on what they'd already done. The Committee even managed to score two meetings with senior Cuba Desk officials in the State Department who previously hadn't even responded to their requests.

It didn't hurt that local Cuba support groups in a number of American cities as well as more than a dozen countries staged simultaneous events to mark the third Five Days in Washington. More than 230 Spanish legislators even signed a letter to President Barack Obama that week, requesting he release the Five.

Plans were already well underway for an even more impressive fourth Five Days for the Five scheduled for Washington in September 2015 – the International Committee had lined up 1,500 public endorsers for the event, and in early December signed a lease on a DC duplex they planned to use as an organising base for the next year – when Washington and Havana stunned them, and the world, by announcing the deal that freed the three remaining members of the Five last month.

If their efforts – and those of solidarity activists around the world – are now largely ignored by the American press, the Cubans did not forget. In October, the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples presented Jrapko and Hackwell with Cuba's Friendship Medal, in part for their individual "maximum commitment to Cuba, and put their professional and family life second to this constant struggle", and in part because "Alicia and Bill form part of this selfless friendship" that helped finally free all of the Cuban Five.

Counterpunch ✪

The Five are already in Cuba

Statement, Raúl Castro, President of Cuba

Fellow countrymen,

Since my election as President of the State Council and Council of Ministers I have reiterated on many occasions our willingness to hold a respectful dialogue with the United States on the basis of sovereign equality, in order to deal reciprocally with a wide variety of topics without detriment to the national independence and self-determination of our people.

This stance was conveyed to the US government both publicly and privately by Comrade Fidel on several occasions during our long standing struggle, stating the willingness to discuss and solve our differences without renouncing any of our principles.

The heroic Cuban people, in the wake of serious dangers, aggressions, adversities and sacrifices has proven to be faithful and will continue to be faithful to our ideals of independence and social justice. Strongly united throughout these 56 years of Revolution, we have kept our unswerving loyalty to those who died in defence of our principles since the beginning of our independence wars in 1868.

Today, despite the difficulties, we have embarked on the task of updating our economic model in order to build a prosperous and sustainable Socialism.

As a result of a dialogue at the highest level, which included a phone conversation I had yesterday with President Obama, we have been able to make headway in the solution of some topics of mutual interest for both nations.

Coming home

As Fidel promised on June 2001 when he said: "They shall return!" Gerardo, Ramon, and Antonio have arrived today to our homeland.

The enormous joy of their families and of all our people, who have relentlessly fought for this goal, is shared by hundreds of solidarity committees and groups, governments, parliaments, organisations, institutions, and personalities, who for the last 16 years have made tireless efforts demanding their release. We convey our deepest gratitude and commitment to all of them.

President Obama's decision deserves the respect and acknowledgement of our people.

I wish to thank and acknowledge the support of the Vatican, most particularly the support of Pope Francisco in the efforts for improving relations between Cuba and the United States. I also want to thank the govern-

ment of Canada for facilitating the high-level dialogue between the two countries.

In turn, we have decided to release and send back to the United States a spy of Cuban origin who was working for that nation.

On the other hand, and for humanitarian reasons, today we have also sent the American citizen Alan Gross back to his country.

Unilaterally, as has always been our practice, and in strict compliance with the provisions of our legal system, the concerned prisoners have received legal benefits, including the release of those persons that the government of the United States had conveyed their interest in.

End the blockade

We have also agreed to renew diplomatic relations.

This in no way means that the heart of the matter has been solved. The economic, commercial, and financial blockade, which causes enormous human and economic damages to our country, must cease.

Though the blockade has been codified into law, the President of the United States has the executive authority to modify its implementation.

We propose to the government of the United States the adoption of mutual steps to improve the bilateral atmosphere and advance towards normalisation of relations between our two countries, based on the principles of International Law and the United Nations Charter.

Cuba reiterates its willingness to cooperate in multilateral bodies, such as the United Nations.

While acknowledging our profound differences, particularly on issues related to national sovereignty, democracy, human rights and foreign policy, I reaffirm our willingness to dialogue on all these issues.

I call upon the government of the United States to remove the obstacles hindering or restricting ties between peoples, families, and citizens of both countries, particularly restrictions on travelling, direct post services, and telecommunications.

The progress made in our exchanges proves that it is possible to find solutions to many problems.

As we have reiterated, we must learn the art of coexisting with our differences in a civilized manner.

We will continue talking about these important issues at a later date

Thank you ✪

Nigeria: economic stress and terror attacks

Emile Schepers

Nigeria is in the news again because of vicious attacks by the extremist jihadi group Boko Haram (“The Book is Sinful”) in the country’s north-eastern state of Borno. Various reports give disputed accounts of the number of persons killed as high as 2,000. In addition, there have been suicide bombings which have killed many, with small girls as young as 10 acting as the perpetrators. Some speculate that the girls used in these bombings may come from last year’s mass kidnapping in Chibok and Borno.

And into this mix now comes a national election, on February 14.

Nigeria, with its population of 184 million, is the seventh largest country in the world. It is the 13th largest oil producer, pumping two and a half billion barrels per day, with proven reserves of 37 billion barrels and substantial production and reserves of natural gas also. The vast majority of Nigeria’s other exports are products of mining, agriculture, and fisheries.

An economic system that disproportionately emphasises this kind of export puts a country at the mercy of fluctuating world commodity prices. And that is happening to Nigeria and other oil-producing countries right now. The worldwide tumble of oil prices may delight people in the United States who find that it now costs only half as much to fill up the family car as it did two years ago, but it represents very bad news to those oil producing countries that are poor overall, such as Nigeria, Angola, Ecuador, Iran, Iraq, and Venezuela.

It also divides OPEC, the international association of oil-producing countries to which Nigeria belongs. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has

refused to cut back oil production, the standard OPEC method of stabilising prices. This has left countries like Nigeria and Venezuela in a difficult situation.

In 2012 there were massive protests by students and labour union members when the Nigerian government eliminated subsidies on fuel. The government of President Goodluck Jonathan had to back off and partially rescind the cuts. There is still widespread dissatisfaction with corruption, which among other things is blamed for the fact that, in spite of the immense oil wealth, Nigeria’s refineries are in such a terrible state that it has to import fuel. The electrical grid is so unreliable that many enterprises have to rely on their own crude generators. And the inability of the government to put an end to the Boko Haram rebellion has many worried.

This year’s presidential election is shaping up to be a contest between the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan of the People’s Democratic Party, and former military dictator (from 1983 to 1985) Muhammadu Buhari, running as the candidate of the five-party All Progressives Congress coalition. Several other parties are not seen as having any chance of victory. One left-wing party, the Socialist Party of Nigeria, wants to run a candidate but was blocked by a ruling of the Independent National Electoral Commission. The Socialists have appealed.

Nigeria was created as a consolidated British colony in 1914. The British interest in the territory was originally commercial, but also included a desire to block French colonial expansion. The colony incorporated great diversity: in the north, a number of Muslim emirs were enlisted to continue ruling their formerly independent states as



Some speculate that the girls used in these bombings may come from last year’s mass kidnapping in Chibok and Borno.

vassals of the British Empire, while in the South Christian missions made headway against existing religious systems, and commercial activity became more developed.

When Nigeria achieved independence in 1960, the first government was dominated by conservative northerners allied with British imperialism. In 1966, junior army officers from the South overthrew and killed Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and several other northern leaders. Reprisals ensued and the situation developed into the unsuccessful effort to turn south-eastern Nigeria into the independent country of Biafra. After the defeat of the Biafra secession, weak civilian governments alternated with military dictatorships, with the North-South divide never being overcome.

The All Progressives Congress presidential candidate in this year’s election, Buhari, was a major general and the governor of the north-eastern State, where the Boko Haram insurgency is now centred, when he took national power in a military coup in 1983. His government was characterised by a push for austerity but also an import substitution model of economic development. Buhari’s presidency lasted less than two years when he was overthrown by another military coup. In 2011 he ran for president against Goodluck Jonathan but was heavily defeated.

But this year, Jonathan carries much baggage, so many see Buhari as having a chance of ousting him. Jonathan’s People’s Democratic Party had previously observed the practice of alternating its candidates

between people from the Muslim North and people from the Christian South, but Jonathan’s re-election quest breaks with this and may antagonise northern voters. The failure of the Jonathan government to deal with either corruption or Boko Haram may lead some to seek, in a military man such as Buhari, a president willing and able to crush the revolt. Buhari has spoken in favour of the Sharia law which is used in all of Northern Nigeria, but promises not to impose it nationwide.

There is some doubt as to whether a proper election can be carried out in the disturbed state of the country at present.

People’s World ✪

What the Charlie Hebdo video really shows

Jonathan Cook

I am well aware that I’m stepping into a hornet’s nest by posting this video, which is going viral. Those who wish to silence all debate have an easy card to play here, accusing me of buying into a conspiracy theory. There’s only one problem: unlike the video-maker, I have few conclusions to draw about what the significance of this video is in relation to the official story. That is not why I am posting it.

But it does, at least to my mind and obviously a lot of other people’s, judging by how quickly it’s spreading, suggest that Ahmed Merabet, the policeman outside the Charlie Hebdo office, was not shot in the head, as all the media have been stating.

That said, it does not prove much more. It doesn’t prove that Merabet did not die at the scene. Maybe he bled to death there on the pavement from his earlier wound. It certainly doesn’t prove that the Kouachi brothers were not the gunmen or that the one who fired

missed on purpose. Maybe he just missed.

Nor does the video’s removal from most websites prove that there is some sort of massive cover-up going on. Ideas of good taste, especially in the immediate aftermath of a massacre close to home (i.e. here in the West), can lead to a media consensus that a video is too upsetting. That can occur even if it does not show blood and gore, simply because of what it implies. Herd instinct in these instances is very strong.

But the unedited video clip does leave a sour taste: because unless someone has a good rebuttal, it does indeed seem impossible that an AK-47 bullet fired from close range would not have done something pretty dramatic to that policeman’s head. And if the video is real – and there doesn’t seem much doubt that it is – it clearly shows nothing significant happened to his head either as or after the bullet was fired.

So what points am I making? The first one is more tentative. It seems – though I suppose there

could be an explanation I have overlooked – that the authorities have lied about the cause of the policeman’s death. That could be for several probably unknowable reasons, including that his being executed was a simpler, neater story than that he bled to death on the pavement because of official incompetence (there already seems to have been plenty of that in this case).

The second point is even more troubling. Most of the senior editors of our mainstream media have watched the unedited video just as you now have. And either not one of them saw the problem raised here – that the video does not show what it is supposed to show – or some of them did see it but did not care. Either way, they simply regurgitated an official story that does not seem to fit the available evidence.

That is a cause for deep concern. Because if the media are acting as a collective mouth-piece for a dubious official narrative on this occasion, on a story of huge significance that one assumes is being carefully scrutinised for news

angles, what are they doing the rest of the time?

The lesson is that we as news consumers must create our own critical distance from the “news” because we cannot trust our corporate media to do that work for us. They are far too close to power. In fact, they are power.

Official narratives are inherently suspect because power always looks out for itself. This appears to be a good example – whether what it shows is relatively harmless or sinister – to remind us of that fact.

Update

I’m still trying to imagine a plausible explanation for the video. I’m no ballistics expert, so I’m firmly in the land of conjecture. But I wonder whether, if the bullet hit the pavement close to Merabet’s head, it might have been possible for bullet fragments to hit him, possibly killing him.

This possibility (assuming it is one) does not invalidate the point of my post. If it was indeed the case, certainly no media outlet has suggested that the gunman missed

Merabet and that he died from the exploding fragments.

This isn’t meant to raise technical, or gruesome, details of the case. It is to suggest that western journalists do not report fearlessly and independently when they examine events being narrated by official sources. They mostly regurgitate information on trust, because they trust the authorities to be telling the truth. They do the same when the acts of official enemies are being examined – they again turn to official sources on their side. In short, most journalists have no critical distance from the events they are reporting on our behalf.

That leaves us, ordinary news consumers, in a position of either blindly trusting our own officials too or trying to work things out for ourselves. You would hope that the issues raised by this video get aired by journalists as part of establishing greater trust in our profession and proof of our independence. Instead, I expect it will simply be consigned to the “conspiracy theory” bin.

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Gaza struggles with lack of shelter

Rami Almeghari

Since 2011, Aaed al-Athamna, his wife Asmaa and their six children have been sheltering in a mud-brick home in the Izbet Abed Rabbo neighbourhood in the north-eastern Gaza Strip. They have been displaced since Israel's three-week-long "Operation Cast Lead" assault six years ago.

The area suffered heavy Israeli bombing and shelling in January 2009, destroying the family's 230-square-metre cement home.

The al-Athamnas' life has been similar to that of thousands of families in the coastal enclave displaced during the Israeli attack six years ago. The situation has gotten catastrophically worse since Israel's most recent attack in the summer, which left more than 2,200 people dead.

"I consider myself lucky compared with tens of thousands of others," Aaed, a taxi driver in his mid-30s, told The Electronic Intifada. "At least my current home of sand and mud has sheltered my family from the sun and winter rains, even though it is only 80 square metres," he said.

The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs now reports that an additional 100,000 people in Gaza have been displaced and need permanent shelter.

Damaged in latest Israeli attack

More than 113,000 homes, or 13 percent of Gaza's housing stock, were affected by the summer bombardment, with 22,000 units destroyed or severely damaged. Much of the destruction would have been caused in attacks by barrages of Israeli heavy artillery. But Israel also deliberately targeted private homes on a large scale, including multi-story apartment buildings, actions Amnesty International has described

Two percent of the US\$5.4 billion in reconstruction funds pledged by international donors last October has actually arrived.

as war crimes.

It is now winter and Asmaa al-Athamna spends much of her time mopping up water and trying to keep the house comfortable for Aaed and their four girls and two boys. Asmaa told The Electronic Intifada that Israeli shelling in the area over the summer caused cracks in the ceiling that allow the rain to come through.

"But in general, this home has proved much better than many other metal boxes," al-Athamna said, referring to the shipping container homes donated by international organisations as emergency shelters for some of the displaced. The metal containers are known for being extremely hot in summer and bitterly cold in winter.

"Thank God we have a home to protect us," al-Athamna said as she carried on with her housework.

Innovations

Mushrif al-Irr lives in another mud-brick home with eleven members of his family, also in north-eastern Gaza. What's remarkable is that the house contains not a drop of cement, nor any steel reinforcement bars (known as rebar).

"We started living in this home almost one year after the 2008-2009 Israeli war on Gaza," al-Irr told The Electronic Intifada. "And since then, we have been living comfortably at all times of the year, including summer and winter. In summer, the home feels cool, while in winter it feels warm."

Cement and rebar are the basic ingredients of construction in Gaza, but both are in severely short supply due to the siege Israel imposed on Gaza in 2007. The UN's Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, brokered after this summer's assault, has done nothing to ease the shortage. Many Palestinian analysts say the arrangement for strictly monitored imports simply turns the UN into the enforcer of Israel's siege.

Al-Irr is full of praise for the sand- and mud-brick houses. "This is a very creative idea that has helped partially resolve the reconstruction problem in Gaza," he said. "I myself have been applying for a cement home since my home was destroyed in 2009."

Al-Irr, who is in his early 50s, spoke as he showed The Electronic Intifada the spot – about two kilometres from the Israel-Gaza boundary – where his old home had stood.

Gaza soil

The initiative to build the mud and sand houses has been backed by UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestine refugees, and a number of other international aid organisations.

Engineer Imad al-Khaldi, a designer of alternative buildings, told The Electronic Intifada that

he had suggested the initiative to UNRWA.

"Back in 2009, I and many others realised the need for speedy reconstruction of destroyed homes. I had long experience in the field of alternative construction and I offered my expertise to UNRWA, which had built several such homes of sand by then," al-Khaldi said.

Each home costs about US\$13-14,000 to build and includes three rooms – a small family room, a kitchen and a bathroom – al-Khaldi explained during an interview at his office in Gaza City.

In his 40s, al-Khaldi is the owner of the New Horizons alternative construction company. Al-Khaldi says that using materials from Gaza's "rich" soil makes sense. Natural ingredients such as potassium and calcium make the buildings durable, he says.



"These days I am working on new ideas for using the soil based on the fact that it contains such substances," he said. "We're thinking about how to build sand bricks and walls that can be installed and uninstalled easily."

While al-Khaldi is excited by these innovations, the number of people likely to benefit is still a tiny fraction of those in need. UNRWA says that while it is providing emergency payments for shelter assistance to 39,000 displaced refugee families, its funding for this purpose will reach zero in January. As of mid-December, the agency said that it was still sheltering more than 19,000 people in its schools displaced by the most recent Israeli assault.

Slow reconstruction

After two full-scale Israeli assaults in 2008-2009 and 2014 destroyed tens of thousands of homes, reconstruction has barely begun, and to rebuild on such a scale there is still little alternative to traditional methods.

According to estimates by the Palestinian Authority ministry of housing and construction in the Gaza Strip, only two percent of the US\$5.4 billion in reconstruction funds pledged by international donors last October has actually arrived.

The international charity Oxfam has estimated that at the current glacial pace, reconstruction could take 23 years. The housing shortage doesn't just apply to the destroyed homes. Gaza was already suffering from a shortage of some 250,000 units, the housing ministry estimates, to accommodate its fast-growing population which is now around 1.8 million.

"In our assessment, Gaza needs at least 5.5 million tons of raw building materials, including 1.5 million tons of cement alone," Nabil Abu Muelik, chairman of the Gaza contractors union, told The Electronic Intifada.

Yet under the UN Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, a mere 4,000 tons of cement has entered Gaza since October – that's less than one quarter of one percent of the estimated need.

The Electronic Intifada ✪



Region Briefs

According to Japan's Internal Affairs Ministry, the number of casual workers in Japan has reached 20.12 million, increasing by 480,000 in 2014, while the number of permanent workers decreased by 290,000. Just over 50 percent of young workers aged 15-24 and 57 percent of female workers are casual workers. The National (Japan) Confederation of Trade Unions General Secretary, Inoue Hisashi, said that the statistics showed that large corporations would continue to cut labour costs by employing more casual workers. Japan's recently re-elected Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, on January 14, pushed parliament to approve an increase of US\$43 billion in the 2015 military budget. The budget would allow the government to increase investment in the research and development of military technology as well as buying new weapons from the US.

Two female and one male Bangladesh garment unionists were brutally attacked by a group of unidentified people in front of a factory owned by the Azim Group. The attack was captured by the factory's surveillance cameras. Three months earlier, a female union president was attacked outside another factory that was also owned by Azim Group. The Group has 24 factories, employing 27,000 workers. Its founder was a Bangladeshi Parliament member until recently. The group denied of having any involvement in these attacks and claimed that it did not have responsibility to take care of workers who were beaten outside the factory because it happened outside working hours.

The eight-day 10th Central Committee meeting of the Communist Party of Vietnam opened on January 5, hosted by its General Secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong. The meeting discussed and approved documents that are to be submitted to the 12th National Party Congress. The meeting also introduced candidates to the Politburo and it elected additional members for the Central Committee's Inspection Commission.

The ability to speak the Tibetan language has become a requirement for non-Tibetan government cadres who are working in China's Tibet Autonomous Region. Chinese President Xi made an instruction last year when visiting the region. Xi said that "one cannot serve the local people well if one cannot speak the local language", and he encouraged ethnic minority cadres and Han Chinese cadres to learn each other's languages. The regional government has started to organise Tibetan language training for cadres in the region's major cities. It includes handing out language books and helping cadres to find local language-learning peers. Tibetan and Chinese have been the region's official languages since 1987.

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



email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

Take action on Gaza

International donors have pledged \$5.4 billion to rebuild Gaza after Israel's 50-day assault last summer that killed 2,254 Palestinians, including 538 children, and caused widespread destruction. But studies show that at least 45 percent of the aid pledged by international donors will go to the Israeli economy.

The companies that are set to rake in profits providing materials for the reconstruction of Gaza are corporate criminals. Companies like Neshor and ReadyMix pillage Palestinian natural resources and participate in the construction of illegal [Israeli] settlements.

It is time the UN felt the extent

of public outcry as details emerge of the UN's complicity in keeping Gaza under siege and the ways in which Israeli companies will profit from the reconstruction of Gaza.

Take action now and send a message to key UN officials urging them to stop Israel from profiting from Gaza's destruction and to adopt a procurement policy that exclude corporate criminals from tenders for Gaza reconstruction.

Please take action: Tell the UN: Don't reward Israel for Gaza massacre.

Take action:
www.bdsmovement.net/dont-reward-israel

Steven Katsineris
Vic

Worst idea in a history of bad ideas

We're shocked. Environment Minister Greg Hunt is fast-tracking destructive coal port plans which endanger the Great Barrier Reef. There's a chance bulldozing wetlands and dredging the sea floor at Abbot Point could begin soon after Christmas.

The Queensland government

is desperate to start ripping up the seabed, despite all of the concerns by UNESCO, scientists and the millions of Australians who love the Reef.

You couldn't make this stuff up. We're really concerned that Minister Hunt will bow to pressure and give the green light to Reef destruction. Gladstone showed us what terrible damage industrialisation can cause to the Reef coast.

We've been fighting this every step of the way, and we've already kicked some major goals. But the fight is far from over. With your help we can win this.

Thank you for being a Reef defender.

Shani Tager
Greenpeace Australia Pacific

Cruelty in the racing industry

The fact that three Victorian trainers have last week had their horses test positive for banned substances is not surprising, considering the immense abuse that goes on in the racing industry. Imagine being pushed beyond the point of exhaustion: the bones in

your legs straining to hold up the weight of your body, your bleeding lungs incapable of taking in enough air, and you're forced to keep running despite it all.

This is what life is like for racehorses, who are too often chronically drugged by trainers in order to mask their pain and enhance their performance.

Horses in the racing industry are so routinely doped up that they have been labelled "chemical horses," and their feet, bones, and bodies are progressively destroyed as a result.

In fact, the entire horseracing business causes enormous suffering and often death every year to thousands of horses. They suffer broken bones, gastric ulcers and bleeding into their lungs from over-exertion.

Doping with anti-inflammatory and other drugs can affect their respiration and muscles, and pain killers will allow trainers to push the horse well beyond safe levels.

Horses that don't win immediately are often classified as "wastage" and are sent, with the ageing winners, to the knackeries for pet food or on long journeys to abattoirs for human consumption. Government figures show that as many as 40,000 horses are slaughtered each year in Australia.

Horseracing is an industry, not a sport, and the persistent corruption scandals just emphasise that it is a cruel and inhumane business.

Jason Baker
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

Something to say?
Write to the Editor!

email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

Culture & Life

by

Rob Gowland

At war with Islam?

The French Prime Minister apparently said in the wake of the barbarous attack on the staff of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, "France is at war with Islam". But is that in fact the case?

France is an imperialist power, and the imperialist powers have used – and abused – Islam for a great many years. The Christian empires of Germany and Austria-Hungary allied themselves with the Islamic Turkish Empire in preparing for the great trade war that would become known as WW1.

Their opponents, France, Britain and Russia, who also claimed that God was on their side, numbered many Islamic populations among their imperial possessions, especially in North Africa and Central Asia.

When it suited them, as for instance when they were trying to rally opposition to Revolutionary change in the former Russian Empire after 1917 or in France, Italy and Spain's North African possessions during the guerrilla wars of liberation in the 1930s through the 1950s, they would happily pose as the champions of extreme bigotry and religious intolerance.

Any religion would do if it had a fundamentalist section that could be riled up with appeals to "defend our way of life" against the atheistic, Godless Communists.

Both Christianity and Islam, at similar stages of their development, have regarded women as the property of their masculine superiors, and have fought strenuously, even viciously, to prevent women from breaking out of those social shackles. The brutal treatment

of women in Britain campaigning for the right to vote or the deadly treatment of women in Central Asia who had the temerity to discard the veil in the 1920s is almost identical.

We are not talking here about discarding the delicate piece of gauze that adorns the face of "harem girls" in Hollywood films, but a horsehair veil like a rigid tent that hid the woman from the top of her head to the ground. It took remarkable courage to discard these symbols of "woman as property"; it frequently got the woman killed for her courage. Killed by male relatives who claimed they had been "dishonoured" but who were really upset that by her actions "their" woman had lowered her value, and that reflected badly on them.

The liberation of women was one of the greatest achievements of the Revolution, not just in the former Russian empire but, in the decades after the Revolution, throughout the colonial world. The first woman to discard the veil in Egypt for example was a Communist.

Most religions depend for their success on being the defenders of the common people, of the poor, the oppressed, the defenceless. Imperialism on the other hand regards these sectors of society as so much disposable dross, consumers at best, cannon fodder or slaves at worst.

The blatant anti-people policies of imperialism have allowed populist movements, especially those of a nationalistic character, to gain ground in certain countries at certain times. In Iran, for example, at the time of the overthrow of the Shah. Ayatollah Khomeini could quite rightly label the USA as "the Great

Satan", but the lessons he drew from it were wrong and plunged Iran into a dark chapter.

He was wrong because he did not analyse imperialism's actions from a class perspective, and so could not see accurately the causes and the effects of the actions of imperialist governments. Attributing the actions of the USA, Britain, France or any other imperialist country, great or small, to religion (or the lack of it) is to make a fundamental error.

Imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism. It cares nothing for religion, except as a tool that can be used to achieve – and protect – its profits. Consequently, its intelligence services can be arranging training and arms deliveries to Islamic fundamentalists even as its military are bombing those same fundamentalists.

There is no contradiction here: they are merely keeping a useful conflict going. In the Middle East, ISIS is seriously damaging Syria and helping to break up Iraq potentially into several easily controlled mini-states. In Europe, the UK, North America and Australia, the actions of "Islamic terrorists" – thoroughly brainwashed and indoctrinated – are used to justify the discarding of democratic rights and the imposition of draconian laws so clearly intended to oppress ordinary people that they would never dare to be put forward without the excuse of "a grave terror threat".

But if you look at where this threat originated, it is clearly a threat designed and engineered by those same imperialist governments that govern on behalf of the biggest corporations, the corporations that are

out to corner the world's energy resources, its dominant food production businesses, its water supply companies.

They are out to rule the world, and if any of us little people get in the way, we will be trampled underfoot. And if religion is of use in that trampling, then they will use religion. And they will stand with head bowed at the floral tributes to victims of the forces they themselves let loose for their own profit, and they will solemnly swear to stamp out this "scourge" and never to give in to "the terrorists".

But they know that terrorism is the weapon not of the poor but of the extreme Right, of the oppressor classes, of the exploiters and employers. The actual perpetrators might be poor, uneducated, might even be filled with a fervent desire to strike a blow for the poor and oppressed. But their fervour is being used to bolster the position of the rich and the powerful.

It was ever thus. The anarchists who threw bombs at the Tsar merely provided the Ochrana with excuses for arresting and torturing (and executing) opponents of autocracy. The murderers of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists have given excuses and justification to repressive governments all around the globe. And that was the actual goal, even if they themselves were unaware of it.

Imperialism is not at war with Islam. It is at war with the working people of the world. Misguided Islamists are merely one of its weapons. ☺



The murderers of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists have given excuses and justification to repressive governments all around the globe. And that was the actual goal, even if they themselves were unaware of it.



Rob Gowland
previews
ABC & SBS
Public Television

Sunday January 25 –
Sat 31 January 31

The usual problem with American Bible-belt “archaeologists” is that the only research they do is to memorise the Bible. One such is Ron Wyatt, a nurse anaesthetist from Nashville Tennessee who, at age 47, turned amateur archaeologist to prove the bible stories are historically true. In 1977 he and his teenage sons Ronny and Danny went to Mount Ararat in Turkey and “found” Noah’s Ark.

It mattered not to good ole boy Ron that folk legends of a great flood pre-date the story of Noah, and that the ark comes ashore on different mountain-tops depending on which country the legend is being told in. The Israelites simply took over an earlier “historical” tale.

Not only did Ron and his sons “find” Noah’s Ark but they also “proved” that Moses parted the Red Sea and later claimed to have found the Ark of the Covenant, although curiously he had no witnesses and could produce no evidence.

Raider Ron And The Lost Ark (SBS ONE Sunday January 25 at 7.30pm) treats him and Biblical archaeology much more seriously than he or it deserves.

I said last year that I thought the Iseries **Sherlock (ABC Sundays from January 25 at 8.40pm)** unfortunate in its attempt to rip Conan Doyle’s creation Sherlock Holmes and his assistant and chronicler Dr John Watson out of their 19th century milieu and to stick them into a supposedly more marketable modern setting.

In this week’s episode Holmes and Watson find themselves battling “international terrorism, rogue CIA agents, and a secret conspiracy involving the British government”. Of course. Why did they need to call their super sleuth/secret agent Sherlock Holmes? Why not James Bond?

The ancients thought the Sun revolved around the Earth, and that we were so important we were actually made in the image of God himself. Professor Brian Cox in this week’s episode (the fourth) of his series **Human Universe (ABC Wednesdays January 28 at 8.30pm)** puts us in our place: an infinitely small speck in an infinite universe.

This very scientific series is fascinating, if sometimes too

scientific: some of Albert Einstein’s musings leave me baffled, but it is still refreshing to see a series that does not assume that the universe was created by an all-powerful male God (or the great she-hippopotamus or seven turtles riding on the back of seven other turtles).

The story by the US astronaut of photographing the rising Earth from Moon-orbit is rather neat: “Our mission was to explore the Moon, but we discovered the Earth.”

From 1939 to 1945 over 8,000 young airmen of RAF Bomber Command died not at the hands the enemy but in catastrophic accidents and training crashes.

In this week’s episode of **WWII Air Crash Detectives (SBS ONE Wednesday January 28 at 8.30pm)** the team investigate the crash that killed the Duke of Kent and 13 other people. Like his brother the Duke of Windsor, Kent was pro Nazi, so there were plenty of rumours about the reasons for the crash, rumours the program tries to put to rest.

The British sitcom **Plebs (ABC Thursdays at 9.30pm)** is described as “a modern comedy in an ancient setting”. That apparently means heavy-handed humour in ancient Rome about trying to pick up the pretty female doctor who is examining the hero for Herpes.

Personally, I thought Frankie Howerd did it better in *Up Pompeii* all those years ago.

We’ll Take Manhattan (ABC Thursday January 29 at 8.30pm) is a 2011 made-for-TV feature film about the time in 1962 when young cockney upstart photographer David Bailey was given an important assignment by *British Vogue* to do a fashion shoot in New York. He stuck his neck out, and insisted on using the then-unknown model Jean Shrimpton. Who happened to be his girlfriend.

In the course of that week in Manhattan, they behaved very badly, fell in love, and invented a new style of fashion photography. Gosh! Shrimpton is played by former *Doctor Who* companion Karen Gillan, but I could tolerate only a little of it before giving up. So fashion photography changed? Big deal.

Quentin Tarantino’s movie **Pulp Fiction (SBS ONE Friday January 30 at 8.30pm)** is a pastiche of movie genres and styles all rolled together in a self-referential, ultra-hip movie joke that some critics took so seriously they labelled it “post-modern film noir”.

A pretentious, multi-strand crime movie larded with philosophical discussions by a couple of hit-men (John Travolta and Samuel L Jackson), **Pulp Fiction** was more astutely described by US novelist and critic Nicholas Christopher who called it “more gangland camp than neo-noir” while Foster Hirsch pointed out that its “trippy fantasy landscape” characterises it more definitively than any genre label.

The film won the Oscar for Best



Professor Brian Cox in this week’s episode of his series *Human Universe* puts us in our place: an infinitely small speck in an infinite universe. (ABC Wednesdays January 28 at 8.30pm)

Original Screenplay and was also awarded the *Palme d’Or* at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival.

There is a wonderful *Punch* cartoon showing two filthy, begrimed workmen sitting in a posh railway carriage in full view of two bejeweled and scandalised ladies of fashion. “Ere, ’Arry”, says one to the other, “we’ve got in a first-class carriage by mistake!” “Cor!” says ’Arry, “and me wiv odd socks on!”

Michael Portillo yearns for those days and in episode two of **Great Continental Railway Journeys (SBS ONE Saturday January 31 at 7.30pm)** he “explores the once-great empire of Austria-Hungary, domain of the famous Habsburg monarchs”.

Starting in Budapest, he travels via Bratislava in Slovakia to the beautiful and elegant city of Vienna, where he “immerses himself in pre-war decadence”. From there, he travels to Salzburg, before heading to the magnificent scenery of the Salzkammergut region to visit the emperor’s Austrian summer-house at Bad Ischl.

Common workmen don’t feature much in Mr Portillo’s railway journeys.

Anthony Minghella wrote and directed **The English Patient (SBS ONE Saturday January 31 at 8.30pm)**, his award-winning adaptation of Michael Ondaatje’s novel about a doomed and tragic romance set against the backdrop of World War II. The film won nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director and Best Supporting Actress (Juliette Binoche). ☺

POLITICS IN THE PUB

February 5

METADATA RETENTION AND THE TPP? GLOBAL SURVEILLANCE TAX? OR JUST THE END OF PRIVACY, FREE SPEECH & THE FUTURE OF WHISTLEBLOWING?

Senator Scott Ludlam, Communications Portfolio, Greens WA; Samantha Castro, WACA (Whistleblowers, Activists & Citizens Alliance);

Kas Cochrane, WACA; Philip Dorling, Dr, Special guest;

February 12

HOW SERIOUS IS THE CONTINUOUS GROWTH OF INEQUALITY DRIVEN BY NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY AND ECONOMICS, AND ITS SOCIAL AND PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES IN AUSTRALIA?

Chris Sheil, Dr, President Evatt Foundation and Visiting Fellow School of Humanities and Languages, UNSW;

Frank Stilwell, Emeritus Professor, Department of Political Economy, Sydney University;

February 19

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN AUSTRALIA: THE POLITICS OF RACE HATE IN NEOLIBERAL AUSTRALIA

Jock Collins, Professor of Social Economics, UTS Business School; Alana Lentini, Professor, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, University of Western Sydney;

February 26

AUSTRALIA AT WAR AGAIN: THE REAL REASONS WHY WE ARE AT WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Jake Lynch, Professor, Director of Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies;

Richard Broinowski, President of Australian Institute International Affairs (NSW), former Ambassador Vietnam, Korea, Mexico; author 4 books, latest *Fallout from Fukushima*;

March 5

THE RUSSELL TRIBUNAL ON PALESTINE: PREVENTING THE CRIME OF SILENCE

Peter Slezak, Professor, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UNSW; Cathy Peters, Australians 4BDS and former Marrickville Councillor;

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Reminiscences of a Tasmanian draft dodger

Steven Katsineris

In 1972 the Vietnam War was still raging and Australian military forces were still fighting there. Some of these troops were 20-year-old conscripts who were called up after registering for national service (their birth dates had been put on a marble and pulled out of a barrel). Other young men, including myself, believed the Vietnam War to be unjust and refused to be conscripted and didn't register for National Service or comply with call up notices and became draft resisters. The National Service Act imposed a two-year jail term for draft resisters or others trying to avoid the draft. I was liable to register for National Service in 1972, but I wrote a letter to the department on May 1 informing them that I did not register in the last call up period, explained my reasons for this stand and said I would continue to refuse to cooperate with the National Service system. I wrote several further letters to the NS Department and refused to attend court cases I was later summoned to.

I had already been very involved in the anti-war movement in Hobart and Melbourne for several years while at high school and helped form the local Draft Resisters Union (DRU) in Tasmania which actively urged young men not to register and sought to make the system unworkable. It was an incredibly distressing, busy and fulfilling period for me. I wrote articles and letters for publications, printed leaflets, went to and spoke at meetings, distributed leaflets and attended numerous rallies and marches.

The DRU published leaflets and booklets on the Vietnam War, the Draft and the various ways to oppose it or avoid it. The DRU also wrote letters, ran information stalls, held meetings, teach-ins, sit-ins and other demonstrations. We also challenged the draft by having campaigns to fill out false registration forms. We held so many sit-ins at the National Service Department in Hobart that the government would shut the office when they found that a protest was planned for that afternoon or morning. This showed how effective our actions were and, of course, was exactly what we wanted. After that, whenever we wanted to occupy the building, we planned our actions by word of mouth.

The NS Department also stationed guards outside the building with two-way radios so they could quickly lock up the place and thwart our surprise sit-ins. We started assembling away from the building in different spots and sent a few people ahead to block the gate at the entrance and doorways inside. This also proved a very successful tactic. Eventually the police would arrive and carry and drag us from the building to the footpath outside. Occasionally things could get a bit rough and police would throw protestors down the stairs. Sometimes they would put us into police trucks and vans and take us to the police station. Usually we were all released without charges being laid. This was probably because there were generally 50-60 people or more at these sit-ins.

My family lived in Warrane, a working class neighbourhood on Hobart's eastern shore. One evening, in 1972, while I was at home with my family watching TV, our dog started to bark. Through the window we could see a car parked outside the front gate and two men approaching the house. I thought they were plainclothes police and as they knocked



at the front door I quickly left the house by the back door and stood in the dark alcove under the back steps where we stored the firewood. The police informed my parents that they had a warrant for my arrest and searched the house for a few minutes looking for me. After they left my oldest sister Julie came to tell me they had gone.

Now that I knew a warrant had been issued for my arrest, I wanted to make it as difficult for them to find me as I could. It was my intention to try to avoid arrest until a time of my choosing, when it would get the most exposure for the issues and cause the most trouble for the government. So I decided it was time to disappear by going underground. I had already discussed this option with several friends and had a network of supporters to rely on. Most of these people were not well-known anti-war activists and contacts and therefore it was less likely for the police to identify them and find me.

Early the next morning I packed a bag, discreetly left by the back door, walked through the bush to the local shopping centre and caught a bus to town. I moved into a three-storey group house in South Hobart with three old friends from my Matriculation College days. They all worked or were at university, so I had the house to myself during the day to read and write. Up to this time I had been very politically active, but now I stayed out of most of the more public involvement, writing articles and letters for publication. While I still went out, I was careful about where I went and when.

For instance, I visited my parents at night by catching a bus and getting off at the top of the hill a few stops before their house. From there, I walked across the golf course and through the bush. I then knocked at the back door and entered the house while plainclothes police sat in a car in the street outside the front of the house. The police also kept a close watch on my father's shop and occasionally searched these premises and questioned my family.

One day, in South Hobart, while sitting reading in the sun in my upstairs bedroom, I saw two overweight men in suits open the back gate and look around the yard. I immediately thought they looked like plainclothes policemen. I remembered I had left the back door of the house open to let in some fresh air and sunshine. I quickly left the room and started down the stairs but by the time I got halfway there they were at the back door. So I stopped and asked them who they were and what they wanted. One of them said they were police and they were investigating the report of an unidentified car that might be stolen that was allegedly parked in the laneway outside our yard. I told them I knew nothing about any strange cars and had not seen any cars parked there except for that belonging to the man in the downstairs part of the house. I stayed in my position on the stairs and spoke to them from there.

While I was talking and listening to them, thoughts ran through my head that if they tried to rush at me, I could run into the bedroom, close the door and then get out the front window onto the roof, climb down to the street from there and get away.

They said they would check with the neighbour downstairs and when they left I locked the door. A few minutes later they left the yard. I was convinced they were looking for me and reasoned that they were checking the house to confirm if it was in fact me living there.

I packed all my possessions in a backpack and rang a friend, Harry, to see if I could stay the night at his place. He said that was fine and would arrange for me to stay at another place in the country for a while. I waited until one of my friends, Max, returned from work and told him what had happened. He thought I was being paranoid and that I should forget about it. But my mind was made up so I left by the back gate and walked through a number of back streets and lanes to Harry's flat in Sandy Bay. I got a phone call the next morning to say that

the Commonwealth police had raided the South Hobart house during the night. My friends had denied knowing me, but the police found a card with my name on it and my friends were questioned for a while before the police left.

That morning I bought a bus ticket and left Hobart for a farm on the east coast of Tasmania. After that, I divided my time between this place and various safe houses in Hobart. I also visited Melbourne and attended several demonstrations there. In the period of the lead-up to the federal election of 1972, I came out of hiding and moved back home to campaign for the Labor Party in the election. I thought that if I were arrested during the election period it would be a great benefit towards the anti-war effort. It seemed though that the police were inclined to wait for the electoral outcome before bothering with us as none of the draft resisters were bothered in Tasmania during this time.

On December 2, Gough Whitlam and the Australian Labor Party were elected to government and conscription was ended on December 5. Draft resisters were released from jail and pending prosecutions for draft resistance were dropped. I received a letter from the Australian government telling me there was no longer a warrant for my arrest and that my court convictions and fines had been quashed. Sometime later the last Australian troops were withdrawn from southern Vietnam.

It was an amazing day and I was overjoyed, as it was the end of a long and hard campaign to defeat an unjust system. I also felt our actions were contributing in a small way towards ending this immoral war and the foreign intervention in Vietnam. I hoped it meant a further step on the way to peace and much better days for the struggling and long-suffering Vietnamese people. It was, however, another three years before the last forces of the US Army were driven out and the war finally ended. Thanks and farewell, Gough.

The Beacon ☘



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