

The Forgotten Children

Anna Pha

Unheard voices

“My hope finished now. I don’t have any hope. I feel I will die in detention.” The words of an unaccompanied 17-year-old in the Phosphate Hill Detention Centre, Christmas Island (March 4, 2014). Just one of many expressions of mental anguish of crushed and traumatised children held in arbitrary and indefinite detention quoted in the Human Rights Commission’s (HRC) report *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention 2014*.

“The overarching finding of the Inquiry is that the prolonged, mandatory detention of asylum seeker children causes them significant mental and physical illness and developmental delays, in breach of Australia’s international obligations,” HRC president Professor Gillian Triggs says in the Foreword to the Report.

The Report, released by the government on Wednesday February 11, calls for a Royal Commission into the detention of children under Labor and Coalition governments since 1992, when mandatory detention became policy.

When the HRC began its inquiry, there were 1,138 children in detention. Today there are still 330 children, with 119 of them being held indefinitely on Nauru.

According to departmental figures for children over a 15-month period from 2013-2014, there were:

- 33 assaults involving children
- 128 incidents of actual self-harm (12-17 years of age)
- 171 incidents of threatened self-harm
- 33 incidents of reported sexual assault (the majority involving children)
- 27 incidents of voluntary starvation/hunger strikes.

(Suicide attempts are not recorded separately!)

In addition they have witnessed violence, self-harm and suicide by adults and bullying, abuse and other punitive actions by the private guards.

“I left my country because there was a war and I wanted freedom. I left my country. I came to have a better future, not to sit in a prison. If I remain in this prison, I will not have a good future. I came to become a good man in the future to help poor people ... I am tired of life. I cannot wait much longer. What will happen to us? What are we guilty of? What have we done to be imprisoned?” asks a 13-year-old child in the Blydin Detention Centre, Darwin (12 April 2014)

“I’m just a kid, I haven’t done anything wrong. They are putting me in a jail. We can’t talk with Australian people,” the child adds.

Many children described instances of significant trauma that occurred before they arrived in Australia. For some, the difficult or terrifying boat journey to Australia from Indonesia compounded the horrors that they experienced in their home country.

“My father and brother were killed. I saw death on the way here. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have to be”, one unaccompanied child on Christmas Island told the Inquiry.

A mother of children aged 6 months, 8 and 11 years in the Melbourne Detention Centre, who had made three suicide attempts, reported that she had thoughts of harming her children.

How could anyone not be moved by these other children quoted in the Report.

Since the release of the Report, more than 200 Australian organisations and community groups have combined to sign a joint statement calling all members of the Australian Parliament to take action to end the detention of children once and for all.

“The Government, Opposition and all members of the Australian Parliament must take immediate action to ensure that all children are released from Australian-funded detention centres, in Australia and Nauru, and to ensure that these policies are never repeated,” the statement says.

The report is primarily based on



A drawing by a child in the Christmas Island detention centre in 2014. (Supplied: Australian Human Rights Commission)

interviews with 1,233 children and their parents in detention facilities and the Australian community. The team, led by HRC president Triggs, was accompanied by highly qualified and experienced child psychiatrists, paediatricians and other experts. They visited 11 detention centres including Christmas Island but were denied access to Nauru.

In July 2014, the 56 school-age children detained on the Christmas Island were provided with regular education with a new school. It is funded by the WA government and run by the Catholic Education Office despite the fact many, if not most of the children are Muslim.

Breach of International law

The Report provides a heart-wrenching and deeply disturbing

record of the harm inflicted on so many children by successive Labor and the Coalition governments. It is not a political document. Its focus is on the treatment of and its impact on children in detention.

It proves with a solid body of evidence that “the laws, policies and practices of Labor and Coalition Governments are in serious breach of the rights guaranteed by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.”

“Australia is unique in its treatment of asylum seeker children. No other country mandates the closed and indefinite detention of children when they arrive on our shores,” the Report notes.

“No country in the world, especially not comparable countries such as the UK, Canada, New Zealand and the US, mandates the indefinite

detention of children as the first policy option and then denies them effective access to the courts to challenge the necessity of their detention over months and even years,” Commissioner Triggs said.

Demands

The Commission’s main aims were to tell the stories of “the forgotten children” and “to ensure that ‘never again’ will refugee children be detained in such numbers or for such a length of time or in such damaging conditions.” Its specific recommendations include that:

- all children and their families in detention in Australia and Nauru be released as soon as practicable and that on their release they be given the medical and educational support they need in the future

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Guardian

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A renewable or radioactive future

South Australian Premier Jay Weatherill's announcement that there will be a Royal Commission into the extension of the nuclear industry into enrichment, waste storage and nuclear power has rocked the state and sent shock waves across the country. The Labor Party reversed its anti-uranium mining stance in the 1980s with a promise to limit to three the number of mines extracting and exporting the radioactive material. Kevin Rudd later lifted the cap to five. Widespread security and safety concerns in the community meant that political leaders had to step carefully in advancing the interests of the uranium industry.

Long decades of pressure from the industry via lobbyists, servants in academia, the media and the bureaucracy appear to have changed all that. There have always been advocates of hosting the riskier parts of the nuclear cycle, including nuclear-powered vessels and even nuclear weapons, but their views were considered extreme and hawkish. The SA Premier's choice of an open-ended Royal Commission to inquire into the matter appears to be an effort to make the impending policy shift appear "scientific", "arm's length" and "impartial".

Concerns about likely outcomes of the Royal Commission were not allayed by the appointment of former State Governor, Kevin Scarce, as Commissioner. Mr Scarce is a retired Rear Admiral who has made public comments in favour of the expansion of the nuclear industry. Adelaide-born professor Ian Plimer anticipated the result of the Commission with a suggestion for a nuclear power plant for Port Adelaide. "Nuclear power would provide jobs and Port areas around the world are undergoing rejuvenations and this would just be another rejuvenation. SA desperately needs employment," the professor said. Unfortunately for the jobless supposedly keen to work in the proposed power plant, a geological fault line runs along the adjacent Port River.

There has been speculation that Mr Weatherill, a figure in the ALP's left faction, has shaken off his previous political outlook in favour of an overtly neo-liberal one. Many were stunned by his support of Andrew "Twiggy" Forrest's call for welfare "reform" such as cash-less, restricted social security payments and individual freehold title for Aboriginal people living in remote communities. The latter step could help mining corporations buy up land in the event of a boom in the sector.

The Premier is faced with a bleak economic forecast for the state. US car giant General Motors may well shut down its Holden plant at Elizabeth before the announced closure date of 2017. Thousands of jobs will be lost in an already depressed district of Adelaide – victims of the "free trade" practices initiated by Labor in the 1980s and accelerated at every turn since then. It seems the Adelaide Submarine Corporation will not get the contract to build the next generation of submarines for the Royal Australia Navy. Hopes that SA would become the "defence" state, site for the design and manufacture of the weapons systems required for Australia's role in support of US aggression in the region, have been dashed.

Rather than make SA a hub for renewable energy and other sustainable technologies (the state already derives 26 percent of its energy from wind power), the corporate board rooms are determined to press ahead with the most dangerous "alternative" available. The Murdoch press, which previously defended the state from the imposition of a nuclear waste dump, has changed its tune accordingly. Its pages, usually dominated by climate change denying pens-for-hire, now carry bogus "carbon-free" claims for the water-guzzling, weapons proliferating, tax-payer supported nuclear power industry.

The *Australian Financial Review* refers to opponents of the nuclear industry as the "loony, left-progressive class". The same editorial says the locating a dump for the world's nuclear waste in SA would be an "act of good global citizenship" given that we supply the uranium. The dishonesty of this position is plain. A good global citizen wouldn't have supplied the uranium in the first place. Australian uranium was present in the Daichi reactors at Fukushima when disaster struck in 2011. Australian governments must share responsibility for the hardship caused to hundreds of thousands of people and damage to the environment, including the Pacific Ocean as far away as the US.

The choice is clear: there will be either a renewable or a radioactive future.

PRESS FUND

Ah, promises, promises. After Tony Abbott promised to be more consultative and less gaffe-prone he unilaterally moved the date for the Liberals parliamentary meeting, refused to guarantee that an Australian company could tender to build Navy submarines, attacked the Human Rights Commission's shocking report on asylum seeker children, revealed crucial evidence that may compromise a terrorism trial, outraged Jewish voters with use of the term "holocaust", and sacked his loyal colleague, the government whip! In contrast the *Guardian* team promises to bring you the news behind the news, as it affects ordinary working people. However, we do need your support for the Press Fund, so please send us a contribution for the next edition, if you possibly can. Many thanks to this week's supporters, as follows:

John Clough \$10, KM \$20, Mark Mannion \$5,
Iranian Comrades \$27, "Round Figure" \$10

This week's total: \$72 Progressive total: \$1,114

Union saves hundreds of jobs

The Australian manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) has secured hundreds of high-skilled offshore construction jobs on the Inpex gas project off Darwin, as the Abbott government's maritime visa changes make it far easier for employers to bring in foreign workers.

Offshore contractor Saipem had planned to use the visa change to bring in overseas workers on its pipelaying vessel *Castorone*, with some on a 56 days on, 28 days off roster on far inferior wages.

The move was made possible after Liberal Assistant Immigration Minister Michaela Cash used a technicality to open up a loophole in Australian immigration requirements for maritime industries.

However, a week-long intensive series of negotiations between the AMWU and Saipem in January

yielded a commitment from the company to maintain a 90 percent Australian construction crew on the massive gas project.

Offshore lead organiser Glenn McLaren was joined by WA state secretary Steve McCartney for the talks which took place on the *Casterone*, which at the time lay off Malaysian waters.

This fight by the AMWU saved over 600 Australian jobs on the largest offshore pipelaying project currently underway in the southern hemisphere.

Almost 900 kilometres of pipeline will be put on the ocean floor to carry condensate from the Inpex gas field in the Browse Basin to a processing plant near Darwin.

An attempt to extend the rosters was also resisted after consultations between AMWU leadership and hundreds of union members,

preserving the standard maritime three-week even time rotation.

"At a time of rising unemployment, this latest move by the Abbott government is a kick in the guts for every Australian worker," Mr McCartney said.

"I'm proud we were able to use our leverage as a unionised workforce to keep high skilled jobs right here in Australia and make the company realise it was in its long-term interest to use local labour.

"This is a victory for every Australian who values skilled local jobs and a future for our kids."

The AMWU win came as the Abbott government seeks to ease restrictions on hiring of 457 Visa workers, plus introduce a "short term mobility visa" which would scrap safeguards such as labour market testing and skill requirements. ☼

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- legislation to be enacted ensuring that children may be detained only for health, identity and security checks within a strictly limited period
- an independent guardian should be appointed for unaccompanied children as the Minister "has failed in his responsibility to act in their best interests"
- a Royal Commission be set up to examine the continued use of the 1992 policy of mandatory detention, the use of force by the Commonwealth against children in detention and allegations of sexual assault against these children and to consider remedies for breach of the Commonwealth's duty of care to detained children.

"It's a depressing read, replete with stories of children crying themselves to sleep at night, illustrated with children's drawings of bars, tears and upturned faces, and containing testimony from expert paediatricians that the physical, mental and emotional harm being done to children may in many cases be irreversible," Professor Nick Talley, president of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians said.

"In short, it shows successive governments have clearly failed to

uphold their duty of care towards an extremely vulnerable group of people that has no voice to defend itself, and in so doing have breached the United Nation's International Convention for the Rights of the Child."

Political

"As the medical evidence has mounted over the last eight months of the Inquiry, it has become increasingly difficult to understand the policy of both Labor and Coalition Governments. Both the Hon Chris Bowen MP, as a former Minister for Immigration, and the Hon Scott Morrison MP, the current Minister for Immigration, agreed on oath before the Inquiry that holding children in detention does not deter either asylum seekers or people smugglers. No satisfactory rationale for the prolonged detention of children seeking asylum in Australia has been offered," the Commission says. (Since the time of writing Scott Morrison has been replaced by Peter Dutton.)

In the lead-up to the release of the Report and since, the Murdoch media and government have vented their spleens on the HRC and Gillian Triggs. According to media reports there was even an attempt to persuade her to resign!

Instead of responding to the report's alarming content, the government continued its attack on the

Commission and its president. "The Human Rights Commission ought to be ashamed of itself," PM Tony Abbott said. The report is "blatantly partisan political exercise." He was either lying or hadn't a clue what the report said.

Labor in many respects comes off worse than the Coalition and should hang its head in shame.

"I reckon the Human Rights Commission ought to be sending a note of congratulations to Scott Morrison saying well done, mate," Abbott went on. When asked if he felt any guilt about the children still in detention, Abbott, showing no evidence of his self-professed Christian values saying: "None whatsoever."

The Abbott government should stop playing politics with the lives and futures of children whose only "crime" is to seek our assistance and fully adopt the Report's recommendations.

The Refugee Action Coalition calls for all the immediate closure of Nauru and for all children and their families and for all asylum seekers and refugees to be brought to the mainland, and allowed to live and work in the community.

Commissioner Trigg ends on a personal note:

"Leading this Inquiry has been a life changing experience for me. Although I have been a lawyer for 46 years this Inquiry has taught me how important it is to respect the dignity of every human being and how vulnerable the rule of law can be to abuse, even in a mature democracy like Australia's ...

"The practice of locking up children taints all of us and is contrary to those values we admire in the Australian spirit; a generous hearted welcome to those needing our protection and a fair go. I appeal for a more humane and legally responsible approach to refugees who seek our help."

Guardian readers are urged to read the report and lobby Coalition, Labor, PUP and independent MPs for immediate action on the Report. The Greens already have a strong commitment on this issue. The full report can be found on the Human Rights Commission website (www.humanrights.gov.au) ☼

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On 17 December 2014, the last three of the Cuban Five arrived back in their Cuban homeland after being unjustly imprisoned in the US for 15 years for fighting terrorism.

NSW electricity privatisation heading for trouble

Peter Mac

If the NSW Baird government wins next month's elections it will claim a mandate to dispose of the transmission company Transgrid, as well as 50.4 percent of two other state-owned "poles and wires" infrastructure companies, Ausgrid and Endeavour Energy, via 99-year leases.

However, in an opinion poll last week only 23 percent of respondents supported the plan, (a 6 percent fall), and 67 percent opposed it, (an 8 percent rise), since the scheme was announced in November.

Some 47 percent of respondents indicated they would accept privatisation if the proceeds fund new government infrastructure – but even that figure represents an 8 percent fall.

The government claims that the estimated leasing cost of \$13 billion, plus interest and a federal government contribution, would yield \$20 billion. However, most of that would be used to construct new privately-operated transport infrastructure.

And that includes Sydney's rail network. Sydneysiders have bitterly opposed previous suggestions for privatising the city's rail network, so the government is proceeding in small steps.

It's currently constructing a new privately-operated line from the outer north-west suburbs to Chatswood, north of the city. It proposes to construct another underground line from Chatswood to the city, which would also be privately operated, and funded by sale of the electricity infrastructure.

It's already talking about building a third underground line from the city 16 kilometres southwest to Bankstown, and other lines later. They would all be privately operated and presumably funded by the sale of more government assets.

It is part of the coalition's dream: selling off government assets to fund the introduction of new privately-operated public services, ending up with all services privately owned or operated.

But can the Baird government achieve it?

Of mice and privateers

The recent Queensland elections demonstrated very clear public opposition to privatisation, and the Greens, the Shooters and Fishers Party and Labor have united in support of the Unions NSW anti-privatisation campaign.

A number of commentators have urged the Baird government to stick to its privatisation commitment. Economics professor Gary Sturges argues that the public often opposes the sale of government assets but soon forgets all about it.

The sale of the electricity infrastructure is a different matter. According to a recent opinion poll 75 percent of respondents in South Australia and 67 percent in Victoria believed that electricity privatisation had led to price increases, not reductions.

A poll taken four years ago also indicated support for re-nationalising some industries, including telecommunications (47 percent), Qantas (44 percent) and the Commonwealth Bank (41 percent).

Privatisation advocates point out that after plants were sold in Victoria and South Australia the operators made small reductions in electricity rates. But they could afford to, because the governments had jacked up the rates prior to sale, which made the plants highly tempting for purchasers.

In fact, operation by private firms is inherently less efficient than by the government because each plant must hire its own marketing, personnel and other staff, who were previously all under one managerial roof.

The public knows that government-run organisations must provide the best service for the lowest price, whereas private operation must locate and operate at the point of profit maximisation.

Where things are headed

Private firms that take over power plants usually inherit monopoly or near-monopoly market conditions – a situation beneficial under



public ownership – in which consumers have limited elasticity of demand.

Prices are nominally controlled by the Australian Energy Regulator, but a recent investigation in South Australia revealed that the regulator allows firms to increase their rates when demand falls, to maintain their profit levels.

They're also allowed to pass on state and federal taxes in their prices. They are, in effect, tax exempt; the consumer actually pays the companies' tax.

Moreover, when the Abbott regime removed the carbon tax one South Australian company did not lower its prices, and refused to release information on its pricing and tax strategy. Other firms undoubtedly do the same.

A report commissioned by Unions NSW indicates that privatising the state's electricity infrastructure will probably result in annual price rises from \$38 to \$193 per household over five years.

And the government would lose the "poles and wires" organisations' annual income of \$1.7 billion if they were leased.

Acting in the public interest

Public opposition to privatisation is justifiably greatest in cases where the service is essential, for example electricity generation, railways or water supply. In a 2011 poll, 59 percent of respondents said that private companies were the biggest winners from the sale of Telstra, the Commonwealth Bank and power utilities. Only 26 percent nominated the government and six percent the general public as major beneficiaries.

In NSW the Shooters and Fishers Party, which shares the balance of power in the state's upper house, opposes electricity privatisation, and the government may not win enough seats to get the legislation passed.

Moreover, the Baird government's estimated 56 to 44 percent two-party lead over Labor was determined by distributing preferences taken from the previous election. If new preference figures from the latest poll were substituted, the government's vote would fall to 53 percent and Labor's would rise to 47 percent. A voting swing against

the government is likely, and if it's substantial the government may fall.

Electricity network privatisation has a major bearing on the mitigation of climate change, which requires the phasing out of coal-fired power stations as rapidly as possible. However, private firms that have bought power stations will fight to keep them running indefinitely.

The worst example is Hazelwood, one of the oldest power stations plants in Australia, and the dirtiest. It was expected to cease operations in 2000 but since its sale in 1996 it has been belching away at full blast as its owners seek maximum returns on their investment.

The electricity industry should be taken over by the federal government, but the danger is that this won't happen until after the climate passes the tipping point.

The best thing the people of NSW can do right now is to replace the Coalition with a government that opposes privatisation and genuinely supports the interests of Australia's working families. ✪

Pete's Corner



Preserving Gomerioi grinding grooves

The Gomerioi Traditional Custodians can't help but respond to Paul Jackson, Manager of the Chinese government-owned company Shenhua who are wanting approval for three big pits of open-cut coal mining in the Liverpool Plains.

Respected Elder Uncle Cyril Sampson said "Shenhua is wanting to rip the gut out of our Country. They are wanting to destroy our grinding groove sites which have been there for thousands of years and repeatedly used by generations of our ancestors"

Mr Jackson's public statement made on the December 30, 2014 to the ABC said "We don't want to destroy these Grinding Grooves." The Gomerioi Traditional Custodians say "Well keep your word and leave our sacred grinding grooves alone".

Our community were shocked at Project Manager Paul Jackson's statement to the ABC that said "Shenhua proposes to move the rocks the Grooves are on, and put them back in the same location when the mining pit is rehabilitated, in 17 years."

Mr Jackson's statements suggest some kind of technical feat will be performed in "gently moving the sacred grinding grooves out of the way while they undertake mining only to return them unharmed back in their place in several years to come". Anyone that sees the Hunter and Whitehaven and Boggabri open cut mining activities knows how ridiculous this statement is.

Shenhua failed to tell the public that they intend to cut the grinding grooves up into pieces because the

grinding groove sites are so large they can't be moved as one whole piece.

The truth is that Shenhua wants to carve them up – like a jigsaw puzzle – forever destroying them. The aquifer providing the water which keeps the grinding grooves in their state will also be destroyed and the landscape Shenhua want to return the grooves pieces to will be forever changed and the meaning and purpose of the area lost. How can you declare smashed grinding grooves is not destruction?

How is this valuing our culture and heritage? How is this respecting our sites especially sites of such significance. Have a look at what mines have done to grinding groove sites in the Hunter. Have a look at the grinding grooves moved and placed at the Boggabri Park – it's a sham and it's shameful and it's destructive. Please provide an example of successful removal ... look at the size of the grooves at Shenhua.

Would the Chinese people want to have the Great Wall of China cut up into pieces and then put back into a different landscape because Australia wanted to mine for coal? Or would they send us packing and want to save them? Would they not be outraged?

The Chinese government have laws to protect their relics and cultural property of importance they recognise that the Great Wall of China is not portable – we say to the Chinese People's Republic our grinding grooves are decidedly not portable. Just like their cultural assets Gomerioi



Unhappy with Shenhua: Supporters of the Gomerioi Traditional Custodians protest at Breeza Community Hall.

people have artefacts and places of significance and these need to be saved and protected.

We also refer to Shenhua's own assessment document AECOM 2012 Appendix F2 which clearly states that "the friable nature of the sandstone makes it susceptible to erosion spalls etc" How can Shenhua tell the public that the grooves will be gently moved and put back into place without being broken?

"Mr Jackson also inferred in his ABC article that he did us a favour in finding them (the grooves) which is not the truth. Our Elders worked these farms all their lives and just because we did not talk about the sacred places and objects does not mean that they are not known to us. Also being denied access to our sites does not diminish their value," said respected elder Uncle Dick Talbott.

We haven't worked out if Shenhua are showing a huge dose of ignorance or arrogance with Mr Jackson's public statements such as "We can use it as an education tool for the wider community so we all have a better understanding of the Aboriginal culture. It would really destroy me if we've got the opportunity to do

that, if we chose to hide it away and not do anything with it."

We say "yes Mr Jackson you do have the opportunity to learn about our culture and heritage but to do so, learn about our culture and heritage by listening to our Elders and community and learn the importance of the grinding grooves by leaving them where they are" said Dolly Talbott.

Aunty Helen Humble believes "Mr Jackson and the board of Shenhua your thinking is wrong. Your way of respecting our culture and heritage is considered disrespectful and reflects poor judgement and complete lack of understanding."

We do not believe the average Australian will think it reasonable nor right for you to have approval to destroy such amazing grinding grooves. A company owned by the People's Republic of China simply should not get approval from the NSW government to destroy another country's valuable culture and heritage – Aboriginal culture and heritage.

To infer that somehow Shenhua have done us a favour and will do us a favour in the process of you gouging huge holes in the Liverpool Plains is very upsetting. The location of these

grinding grooves are for a purpose, they are not for you to destroy and they should be saved for both Gomerioi and all other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community appreciation of our culture – the oldest living culture on this planet.

We say, "Sorry Mr Jackson and Shenhua a company of the Chinese government that something got lost in the translation".

GTC Elders and community Dolly Talbott on behalf of the Gomerioi Traditional Custodians
* Aboriginal grinding groove sites are rock depressions of various sizes that were formed by the repeated movement of hard stone artefacts against a softer stone surface. This was done to either sharpen stone hatchet heads, stone wedges, hand held "axes" and wooden artefacts with fire hardened points (such as digging sticks) or to grind secondary material (such as grass seeds). Grinding grooves were almost always located close to a source of water which was used to assist the grinding process [Ed]. ✪

CPA statement concerning threats to the Internet rights of Australians

The Communist Party of Australia condemns ongoing attempts on the part of the federal government to increase surveillance on ordinary Australians and to deny them their right to privacy and other political and human rights.

The current push to legislate for the retention of Internet users' metadata must be defeated. Labor must stop its supine "bi-partisan" compliance with the demands of the Abbott government for more police state powers and stand up for the rights of Australians. Revelations from NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden confirm that the electronic communications of people across the planet are being subjected to mass surveillance and harvested for later analysis. The Australian government must be compelled to protect the rights of the people it purports to represent.

The excuse offered for the mass spying project being put in place

at the moment is that it protects Australians from acts of terrorism. Recent history puts lie to this claim. The perpetrator of the Lindt Café siege could not have done more to draw the attention of the responsible security forces to his violent potential. It is claimed 60 Australians are currently fighting with IS in Syria and Iraq and it has been confirmed that one person left Australia for this purpose using his brother's passport. The recent arrest of two alleged would-be terrorists in Sydney followed a tip-off from a neighbour. Religion is being used for perverse political purposes. If the intention of the Australian government is truly to protect the population from terrorism this can and must be done without trampling on the rights of people to the privacy of their communications and without the construction of a police state. ✪

CPA statement condemning acts of aggression against Venezuela

The Communist Party of Australia stands with the people of Venezuela as they resist yet another attempt on the part of reactionary forces to crush the Bolivarian Revolution begun in the country in 1998. A plot to assassinate President Maduro, which was thwarted last week, is just the latest in a long series of efforts to terrorise the people of the country who have benefited greatly from programs put in place by the governments of presidents Chávez and Maduro.

The expression of the will of the overwhelming majority of the people, particularly poor people, through their democratically-elected

government has been met by acts of economic disruption, outrageous defamation in the mass media, sabotage of the state-owned oil industry, a strike by the business sector, an attempted coup that included the kidnapping of the late president Hugo Chávez in 2002, and a campaign of random, extremely violent acts against innocent members of the public last year.

In recent times there has been a coordinated attempt to create shortages in shops by hoarding of the goods needed by the population. Other forms of sabotage in the sphere of international trade have worsened economic conditions already under threat from the

dramatic drop in the price of oil manipulated on international markets by the US and its allies in the Middle East. In fact the hand of the US can be seen in all the attempts to reverse the revolutionary process entered into by the people of Venezuela in 1998. This includes massive direct funding to pro-US opposition groups. The Communist Party of Australia expresses its solidarity with President Nicolas Maduro, the people of Venezuela and their Bolivarian Revolution and condemns the US administration's policy of "regime change" in the strongest possible terms. ✪

Interest rates down – winners and losers

Anna Pha

The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) recently cut the official interest rate from 2.5 percent to a new record low of 2.25 percent, defying the predictions of many economic commentators. For some it is good news, for others such low rates are proving disastrous.

Interest rates are a key economic lever. They have an impact on every aspect of the economy, including the cost of living, jobs and living standards. There are many and at times contradictory impacts from movements in interest rates.

The decision was made in the context of relative slow economic growth, predictions that unemployment will rise, and surplus capacity in the economy will decline (demand for goods and services is not high enough). Export industries are having a tough time with a plunge in commodity prices (coal, iron ore, etc) and what the RBA sees as an overvalued dollar.

Workers

Lower interest rates reduce the cost of borrowing for investment, such as to start a new business, expand an existing enterprise or update technology to cut costs of production and sack workers.

For workers it makes payments on personal loans, such as to buy a car, cheaper. It can also result in a welcome reduction in monthly home loan repayments on a mortgage and make it easier to pay bills. The RBA want people to spend the savings to boost demand for goods and services, but that is unlikely with all the government cuts that are going on and job insecurity.

But life is never quite that simple.

For example, in Sydney, where there is a shortage of properties and an influx of overseas buyers seeking to invest in Australian real estate, the market is on fire and largely unaffordable for first home buyers. Demand far exceeds supply.

If more people manage to enter the Sydney market as a result of lower interest rates, there are fears it could push up the price of homes even further, fuelling a large bubble that will eventually burst. When interest rates rise and the bubble does burst, the bank evictions begin as people cannot meet mortgage repayments.

In regional areas or cities such as Adelaide where prices are far lower, it might make it possible for more people to break into the market.

Interest rates of course can rise, posing dangers for those who stretched their budgets to get a home loan at a very low rate.

Changes in interest rates also flow on to the rental market – as many rental properties carry mortgages.

Retirees

But for retired workers, lower interest rates can mean good or bad news. If some or all of the lump sum they received on retirement is in fixed term bank deposits, then each drop in interest rates results in a drop in income.

The media talk in terms of a reduction of 0.25 percent (or 25 basis points). This might sound small, but it amounts to a loss of 10 percent in income. Just that one “small” reduction! For a retiree relying on income from fixed term deposits it is a significant loss of income.*

That 10 percent is serious enough. But take the example of a worker who retired six years ago,

and put a large proportion of their lump sum into a five-year fixed term deposit. The official rate then was seven percent and the bank paid 7.5 percent or \$7,500 interest on a \$100,000 deposit.

A similar term deposit taken out today would result in an income of \$3,000 per annum based on a rate of 3.0 percent.** That is a reduction of more than half in their income. For shorter term deposits the interest rates are far lower.

Not surprisingly, with each cut in interest rates more people begin looking at alternative places to put their money where the returns might be higher such as real estate and shares.

With interest rates at a record low

and signals from the RBA that they will go lower, it is not surprising that first home buyers are competing with even more investors and that share prices are rising due to increased demand.

One of the main reasons for the RBA reducing interest rates further was concern over the value of the Australian dollar. It has fallen from over 100 cents to the US dollar to 77 cents in recent years but the RBA would like it to be even lower.

“It remains above most estimates of its fundamental value, particularly given the significant declines in key commodity prices. A lower exchange rate is likely to be needed to achieve balanced growth in the economy,” the RBA Governor said in a statement issued following the announcement of the rate cut.

The theory is that lower interest rates attract fewer investors and reduces demand for the Australian dollar and so its price (value) falls against other currencies. This makes Australian products cheaper for foreign importers and thus boosts our exports, which is the aim.

Conversely, a high dollar makes our exports more expensive (less competitive) and potential customers look elsewhere.

Real winners

At present banks are paying as little as 0.0 to 0.01 percent on some savings accounts and still charging whopping rates of up to 20 percent on credit cards. At the same time they continue to make billions out of fees.

At present the banks are awash with money, they are not all-out competing for local deposits. They can borrow on international markets at a fraction of the price they pay on deposits in Australia. The US Federal rate is 0.13 percent, the Bank of Japan rate 0.10, the European Central Bank 0.05 and the Bank of England 0.50 percent. At time rates have fallen below zero, meaning depositors are paying to park their money.

In general Australian banks are charging between four and five percent interest on new home loans, depending on the type of loan, and pay between two and three percent on fixed term deposits. The gap between the two (margin) is around 2.25 to 2.5 percent. The reality is that the margins (profits) are far larger because of the overseas borrowings.

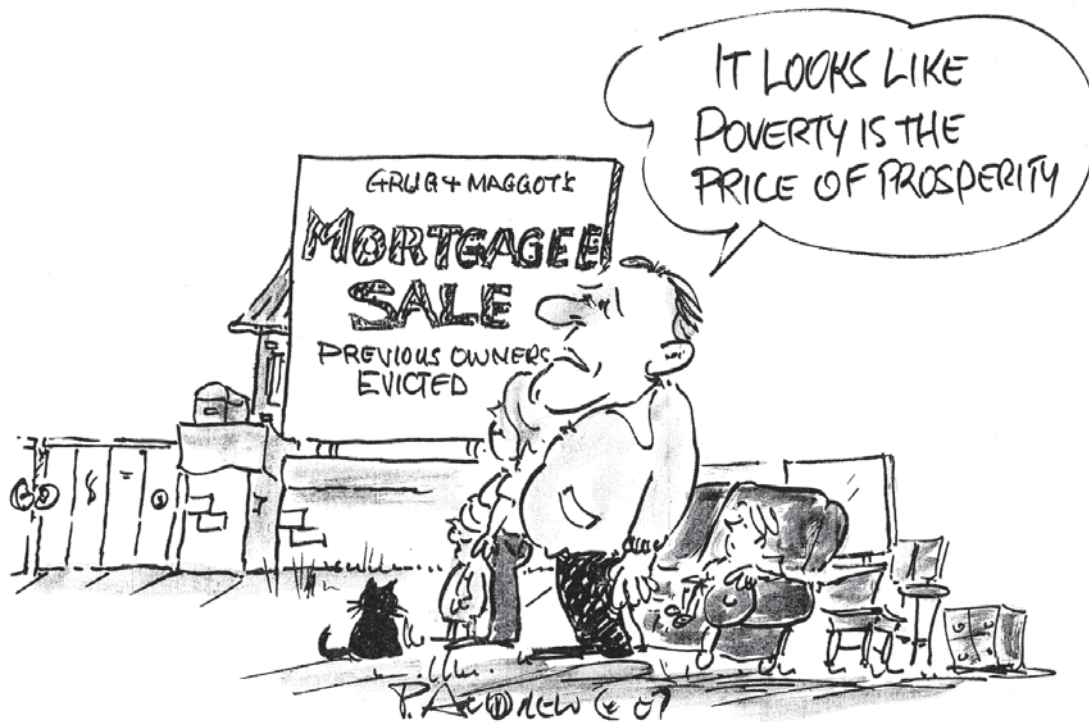
There is speculation that interest rates in Australia are heading downwards too.

Whatever the outcomes for others, the banks stand to make billions more in profits.

* For those who like numbers: 2.5% of \$10,000 is \$250 in interest. 2.25% of \$10,000 is \$225 in interest. Drop in interest income is 250 - 225 = 25. 25 is 10% of 250.

** Interest rates on fixed term deposits tend to be higher than the official rate, and vary considerably with the term of the deposit.

NB, the above is a political article, it should not be used as financial advice. ☹



COAG reviews land rights

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion has pointedly identified the Northern Land Council as a target of an “urgent” investigation by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) into Indigenous land administration and land use.

The investigation was announced in a communiqué at the end of the last COAG meeting in Canberra in October last year:

“... the Commonwealth, the Northern Territory and Queensland will urgently investigate Indigenous land administration and land use to enable traditional owners to readily attract private sector investment and finance to develop their own land with new industries and businesses to provide jobs and economic advancement for Indigenous people.”

The results of the investigation will be reported to the first COAG meeting of this year (a date has not yet been set). The investigation will mean a review of the NT Aboriginal Land Rights Act and the Native Title Act.

“We’ve been tasked with having

a review over the impediments to economic development in northern Australia,” Mr Scullion told the ABC late last year.

“As part of that we will look at all the legislation that has an issue.”

Three weeks before the 2013 federal election, Mr Scullion issued a joint news media statement with Tina MacFarlane, the CLP candidate for Lingiari: “The coalition has no plans to change, amend or review the Aboriginal Land Rights Act if we win government.”

Of course, the Coalition did win Government, and Mr Scullion went on to win the Indigenous Affairs Ministry, and a seat at the Cabinet table. NLC deputy chairman John Daly brandished the Scullion/MacFarlane media release during a news conference at the NLC’s last Full Council meeting at South Alligator.

“Prior to him getting in as the Minister, this here says he wasn’t going to do any review of anything like that without the consent of Traditional Owners and the Land Council,” Mr Daly told reporters. “And this is just another broken promise of this government.”

But Mr Scullion has rejected that charge.

He was scheduled to attend the Full Council meeting, but, at the last minute, sent through a message that he would not be there. He later told the ABC: “First of all, I’ve broken no promise at all and I’ve made it very clear: not only I have no intention, I am not going to support any changes to the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, unless the land councils request it.

“That was the statement I made before the election and that’s the statement I stand with now.”

Further in his interview with the ABC, Mr Scullion made it plain that the operations of the NLC would be very much a focus of the COAG review.

“In terms of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, in my view the only issue that’s a problem is the actual operation of the Act and I think the land councils have got every right to be a bit nervous, particularly the Northern Land Council,” he said.

Land Rights News (Northern Edition) ☹

Sydney

What is happening in Greece?



Tuesday 24 February

6:00pm-7:00pm – 74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills
Port Jackson Branch invites Party members and supporters to hear Comrade Stratos Mavrantonis speak on developments in Greece.

For the full exercise of huma

HAVANA, Cuba, Cuban President **Raul Castro** delivered a speech on January 28, 2015 during the Third Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), in Costa Rica.

**Esteemed President Luis Guillermo Solís;
Esteemed Heads of State or Government
of Latin America and the Caribbean;
Esteemed Heads of delegations and guests;
Ever since the inception of the Community
of Latin American and Caribbean States,
Our America has entered a new stage and
advanced toward independence; sovereignty
over our natural resources; integration
and construction of a new world order; and,
social justice and democracy of the people,
by the people and for the people. There is
a stronger commitment to justice and the
rights of the peoples today than in any other
historical period.**

Together, we make up the third world economy, the area with the second largest oil reserve, and the region with greater biodiversity on the planet with a remarkable concentration of the global mineral resources.

The development of unity in diversity, and of concerted action and respect for our differences shall be our primary purpose and inescapable necessity because the world problems tend to aggravate, and great dangers and robust challenges persist that transcend the national and even the sub-regional potential.

Political and social transformations

In the past decade, economic and social policies and sustained growth have enabled our countries to face the economic global crisis and facilitated a reduction of poverty, unemployment and unequal income distribution.

The deep political and social transformations carried out in various countries of the region have brought dignity to millions of families, which have left poverty behind.

But the Latin American and Caribbean region is still the one showing the greatest disparities. As an average, 20 percent of the lowest income households receive only 5 percent of the total revenues; 167 million people still endure poverty; one in five children under 15 lives in abject poverty; and, the number of illiterates exceeds 35 million.

Half of the youths in our countries fail to complete secondary education or finish their ninth grade, but in the lowest income segment that figure exceeds 78 percent. Actually, two thirds of the new generation does not make it to the university.

Meanwhile the increasing number of victims of organised crime and violence endanger the stability and progress of our nations.

What do the tens of millions of marginalised people think about democracy and human rights? How do they feel about political models? What do they think of election laws? Is this the civil society that international governments and organisations take into account? What would they say if asked about the economic and monetary policies?

There is little that many industrial nations can show our region in such areas since half their youths are unemployed, and the weight of the crisis falls on the workers and students they suppress. On the other hand, they protect bankers, prevent the organisation of trade unions, pay women lower salaries for equal work and apply inhumane policies against

immigrants. Meanwhile, racism, xenophobia, violent extremism and neo-fascist tendencies gain ground, and the people do not vote because they see no alternative to corruption in politics or because they know that election-time promises are soon forgotten.

Economic vision

In order to achieve social inclusion and environmental sustainability, we must come up with our own vision of the economic systems, production and consumption patterns, the relation between economic growth and development, and the efficacy of political models.

We should go beyond structural gaps, ensure a free and high-quality education, provide free and universal healthcare coverage, social security and similar opportunities to all, and the full exercise of all human rights by every person.

In the framework of such endeavours it shall be our primary duty to embrace solidarity with and advocate the interests of the Caribbean, particularly, of Haiti.

A new economic, financial and monetary international order is required where the interests and necessities of the South nations are not only included and given a priority, but also where those imposing neo-liberalism and the concentration of capital cannot prevail.

The post-2015 Development Agenda should offer solutions to the structural problems of the regional economies and produce the changes conducive to a sustainable development.

Likewise, it is indispensable to build a world of peace, without which development is not possible, a world guided by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter and International Law.

The signing by the heads of State or Government of the Proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Peace Zone marked a historic step, and now provides a point of reference for our States' relations with the rest of the world.

Solidarity will be of paramount importance in Our America to advance our common interests.

Strong condemnation

We want to express our strong condemnation of the unjustified and unacceptable unilateral sanctions imposed on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and of the continuous foreign interference intended to create a climate of instability in that sister nation. Cuba, who profoundly knows all these stories because it has endured them during more than 50 years, reaffirms its strongest support to the Bolivarian Revolution and the legitimate government headed by President Nicolás Maduro Moros.

We join the Republic of Argentina in its demand over the Malvinas [Falkland], the South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands, and the surrounding maritime space. We support the South American nation and its President Cristina Fernandez who is facing the attacks of speculative funds and the rulings of venal courts that impinge on the sovereignty of that country.

We reiterate our solidarity with the people and government of Ecuador, and the demands of President Rafael Correa for reparations on account of the environmental damages caused

by the transnational company Chevron in the Ecuadorian Amazonia.

As we have previously said, the Community will be incomplete while Puerto Rico is not a member. The colonial situation of that country is inadmissible, and its Latin American and Caribbean nature are beyond dispute.

Concerning the peace process in Colombia, significant agreements have been reached by the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces-Peoples' Army of that nation at the negotiating table in Havana. Never before has so much progress had been made toward peace. Cuba, as one of the guarantors and the venue of such negotiations, shall continue offering the necessary facilities and contributing as much as possible to end the conflict and build a just and lasting peace in that fraternal nation.

We will provide our resolute support, as we have until now, to the fair claim of the Caribbean nations to receive reparations for the damages caused by slavery and colonialism. And, we shall definitely oppose the decision to deprive these countries of indispensable financial resources under the technocratic pretext of considering them middle-income economies.

We welcome the excellent progress made at the CELAC-China Forum and the region's relations with the BRICS group.

US and NATO

We reaffirm our concern for the huge and growing military expenses imposed on the world by the United States and NATO, as well as for the intent to expand the latter's aggressive presence up to the borders of Russia, a country we are bound to by historical, fraternal and mutually advantageous relations. We state our vigorous opposition to the unilateral and unjust sanctions imposed on that nation.

The increasing aggressiveness of NATO's military doctrine and the development of unconventional wars, with their devastating effects and grave consequences, constitutes a threat to international peace and security.

As to Cuba, the principles of sovereign equality among States and self-determination of the peoples cannot be waived.

The United Nations General Assembly should exercise its power to preserve international peace and security in the face of the Security Council double-standards, excesses and omissions. It should wait no more to secure the full membership of Palestine, whose people count with the solidarity of the Cuban people and government. The Security Council veto providing impunity to Israel's crimes must cease.

Africa, where our peoples have their roots, needs no advice or interference but the transference of financial resources, technology and a fair deal. We shall always defend the legitimate rights of those nations alongside which we fought colonialism and apartheid, and with which we have today fraternal relations and cooperation. We shall never forget their unshakeable solidarity and support.

Cuba will restlessly advocate the just causes and the interests of the South countries, and will be loyal to their common objectives and positions knowing that Humanity is Homeland. The foreign policy of the Revolution will always be faithful to its principles.

Dear friends and colleagues;

Last December 17, we welcomed to our homeland the Cuban counterterrorist fighters Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino and Antonio Guerrero, who alongside Fernando González and René González are to us a source of pride and an example of determination.



Cuban President Raul Castro delivering his speech at the S

The President of the United States admitted the failure of the policy implemented against Cuba for more than 50 years, and the complete isolation it brought to his country as well as the impact of the blockade on our people. Additionally, he ordered the review of the obviously unjustifiable designation of the Island in the List of States Sponsors of International Terrorism.

That same day, he announced the decision to re-establish US diplomatic relations with our government.

Heroic struggle

These changes are the result of nearly a century-and-a-half of heroic struggle and fidelity to its principles by the Cuban people. It has also been possible thanks to the new era we are living in our region, and the sound and brave demand of the governments and peoples of CELAC.

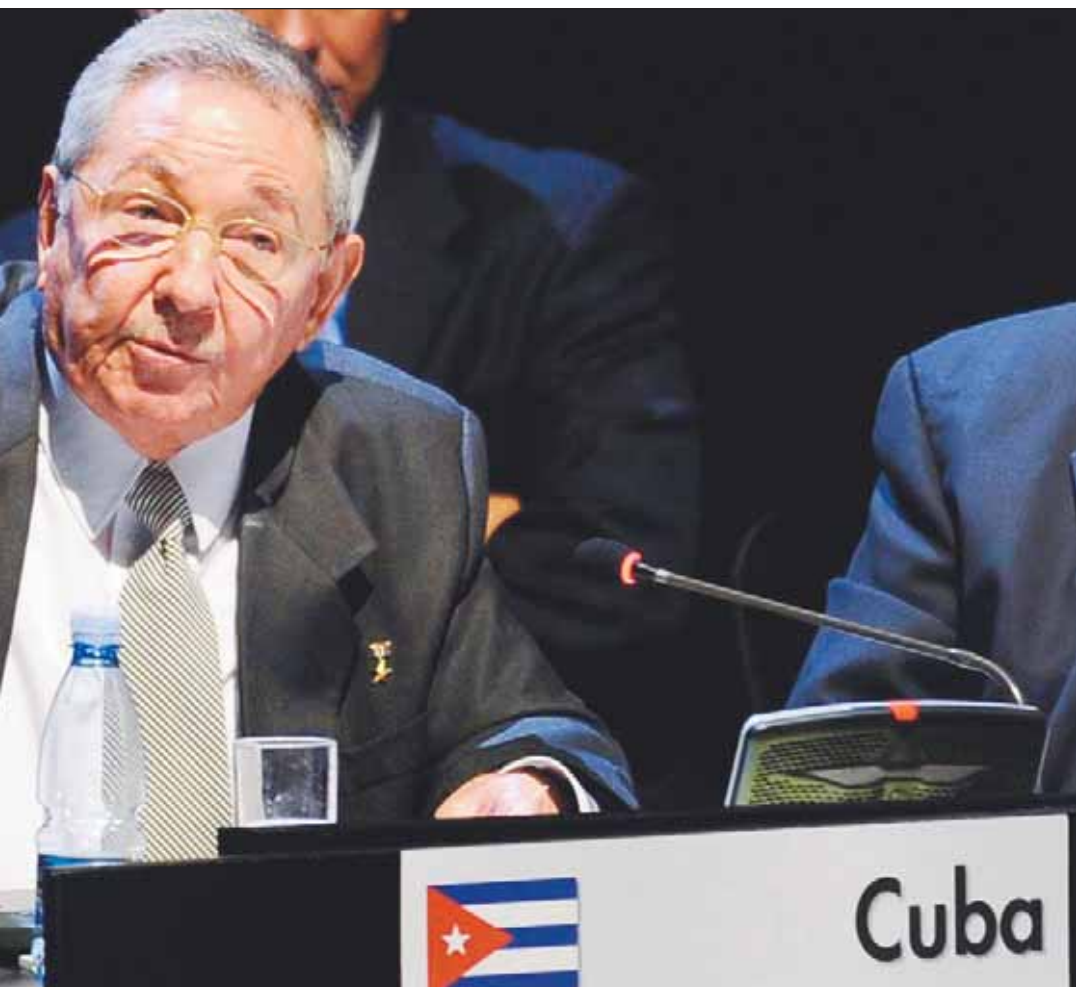
This has come as a vindication to Our America, which has together defended this objective at the United Nations Organisation and in every other forum.

The debates that took place in the Summit of the Americas held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, in 2009, against the background of the ALBA Summit held in Cumaná, Venezuela, led recently elected President Barack Obama to speak of a new beginning with Cuba.

In 2012 Cartagena, Colombia, provided context to a strong discussion and a unanimous and resounding stance against the blockade, an occasion that compelled an important United States official to call it as the great failure of Cartagena or disaster – this is the exact term – and against Cuba's exclusion from such events. In protest, Ecuador had decided not to

***The main issue still stands unresolved.
The economic, commercial and financial blockade
causing enormous human and economic damages to
our country constitutes a violation of
International Law, and must cease.***

n rights



ummit.

attend while Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia, with the support of Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, stated that they would not attend another summit in the absence of Cuba. The Caribbean Community adopted a similar position, and so did Mexico and the other nations present at the meeting. Likewise, before his inauguration, Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela announced his decision to invite Cuba, on equal footing and with full rights, to the 7th Summit of the Americas, and he has acted on that statement. Cuba immediately responded that it would be there.

Martí's assertion that "a just principle from the depth of a cave is more powerful than an army" has been proven right.

Deep appreciation

To everyone here I convey Cuba's deepest appreciation.

To the 188 States that vote against the blockade at the United Nations, to those that raise a similar demand in the General Assembly and International summits and conferences, and to all the popular movements, political forces, parliaments and personalities who laboured restlessly to that end I express the sincere gratitude of our nation.

To the American people that recently manifested its growing opposition to the policy of blockade and hostility lasting more than five decades I also reiterate our appreciation and friendly feelings.

These results prove that governments with profound differences can find solutions to problems, through a respectful dialogue and exchanges based on sovereign equality and reciprocity to the benefit of their respective nations.

As I have repeatedly affirmed, both Cuba

and the United States should learn the art of civilised coexistence based on respect for differences between our governments, and on cooperation in areas of common interest that may contribute to tackling the challenges facing the hemisphere and the world.

However, no one should expect that to achieve that Cuba would renounce its ideals of independence and social justice or abandon any of our principles, or give an inch in the defence of our national sovereignty.

We shall not yield to provocations but neither shall we accept any indication of advices or pressures in matters concerning our internal affairs. We have made great sacrifices and taken major risks to earn that sovereign right.

Can diplomatic relations be re-established before financial services cut off as a result of the financial blockade are restored to the Cuban Interests Section and its Consular Offices in Washington? How can the re-establishment of diplomatic relations be explained without rescinding Cuba from the List of States Sponsors of International Terrorism? What will the behaviour of the US diplomats in Havana be from now on concerning the observance of the standards set by the International Conventions for Diplomatic and Consular Relations? This is what our delegation said to the State Department during last week's discussions, and more meetings will be necessary to deal with these issues.

Normalisation

We have shared with the President of the United States our disposition to move forward to the normalisation of bilateral relations, once diplomatic relations have been re-established. This involves the mutual adoption of measures to improve the climate between the two

countries, the resolution of other pending issues, and advances in cooperation.

The current situation opens up a modest opportunity for the hemisphere to find new and better forms of cooperation that can benefit the two Americas. This would help in the solution of pressing problems and the opening of new avenues.

The text of the Proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Peace Zone becomes an indispensable platform to that end, including the recognition that every State has the inalienable right to choose its political, economic, social and cultural system without interference from any other State, an unwavering principle of International Law.

The main issue still stands unresolved. The economic, commercial and financial blockade causing enormous human and economic damages to our country constitutes a violation of International Law, and must cease.

I remember a memorandum of April 1960 from Assistant Secretary Mallory where he said that in the absence of an effective political opposition in Cuba, a situation of hunger, suffering and despair should be created to bring about the ousting of the revolutionary government. Now, the objective seems to be fostering an artificial political opposition by economic, political and communication means.

The re-establishment of diplomatic relations is the beginning of a process toward the normalisation of bilateral relations, but this will not be possible while the blockade remains in effect; the territory illegally occupied by the Guantánamo Naval Base is not returned; the radio and television broadcasts breaching international rules and regulations do not cease; and, adequate compensation is not paid to our people for the human and economic damages sustained.

It would not be ethical, fair or acceptable to ask Cuba anything in exchange. If these issues are not resolved, a diplomatic rapprochement between Cuba and the United States would not make sense.

It can neither be expected of Cuba to negotiate the above mentioned absolutely sovereign issues related to its internal affairs.

It was possible to advance in the recent negotiations because we treated each other with respect, and as equals. Future progress demands that this remains so.

The blockade

We have followed with interest the announcement made by the President of the United States of some executive decisions aimed at modifying certain aspects concerning the implementation of the blockade.

The measures made public so far are very limited. The prohibition stands with regards to credits and the use of the dollar in our international financial transactions; the individual travels of Americans with license for so-called people-to-people exchanges are prevented and conditioned to subversive purposes; and maritime travels are also forbidden. Another standing prohibition, among many others, restricts the acquisition in third markets of equipment or technology with more than 10 percent of American input as well as the US importation of goods containing Cuban raw materials.

President Barack Obama could use with determination his extensive executive powers to substantially modify the implementation of the blockade. This is something he can do even without Congressional approval.

He could allow other sectors of the economy to do what he has authorised in the field of

telecommunications with the clear objective of exercising political influence in Cuba.

His decision to promote a debate with Congress towards the removal of the blockade is significant.

On the other hand, the spokespersons of the US government have clearly stated that the methods are changing but not the objectives of their policy, and insisted in actions that interfere with our internal affairs, something we will not accept. The American counterparts should not pretend to relate with Cuban society as if a sovereign government did not exist in the Island.

No one would even dream that the new policy announced accepts the existence of a Socialist Revolution 90 miles away from Florida.

There is the wish that the so-called civil society is present at the Summit of the Americas in Panama; that is a wish that Cuba has always shared. We protest what happened at the World Trade Organisation Conference in Seattle, at the Summits of the Americas in Miami and Quebec, at the Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen or at the G-7 and IMF meetings, where civil society was confined tens of miles away from the venues, and kept behind steel fences and under brutal police repression.

Civil society

Of course, the Cuban civil society will attend, and I hope there will be no restrictions against our country's non-governmental organisations, which are not interested in any status at the OAS but are definitely recognised by the United Nations.

I hope to see in Panama the popular movements and NGOs that advocate nuclear disarmament and environmental protection; those that oppose neo-liberalism; the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Indignant of this region; the university and secondary school students; the peasants, trade unions, original peoples, and organisations that oppose the schist contamination; the advocates of immigrants' rights; those who denounce torture and extrajudicial executions, police brutality and racist practices; that demand equal pay for women for equal work; and those advocating reparation for damages from transnational companies.

The announcements of last December 17 have elicited world recognition and extensive support for President Obama in his own country, however, certain forces in the United States will try to derail this process that is just beginning. They are also the enemies of a US fair relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean, the same that jeopardise the bilateral relations of many countries from our region with that nation. They are always blackmailing and exercising pressure.

We are aware that the path to the removal of the blockade will be long and difficult and will require the support, mobilisation and resolute action of every person of goodwill in the United States and the world; the approval by the UN General Assembly in its next session of the resolution demanding the end of the blockade; and, especially, the concerted action of Our America.

Esteemed Heads of State or Government;
Dear friends;

We congratulate Costa Rica and President Solís and his government for the leadership of CELAC. We welcome the presidency of Ecuador and will fully support President Correa as the leader of the Community through 2015.

Thank you, very much. ✪

The announcements of last December 17 have elicited world recognition and extensive support for President Obama in his own country, however, certain forces in the United States will try to derail this process that is just beginning.

Ceasefire may spare Poroshenko

Finian Cunningham

A ceasefire in the Ukraine war has been brokered after marathon talks in the Belarus capital, Minsk, last week. Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the breakthrough along with his German and French counterparts following 17 hours of intense negotiations that went on through the night. At one point, the peace bid seemed doomed, with Kiev President Petro Poroshenko and the eastern Ukraine separatist leaders both saying that they would not sign up to an accord.

Many questions remain, such as the status of autonomy in the eastern Donbas region and will the Kiev forces honour this truce unlike previous ones? However, a tentative ceasefire was agreed to commence on February 15 at midnight. French President Francois Hollande said of the result: "It is a relief for Europe".

But perhaps the biggest relief will be felt by Poroshenko. His attendance at Minsk was notable for appearing to have an added gear of zeal to clinch a deal. That zeal may be not so much out of humanitarian concerns for his countrymen, as out of personal reasons for his own political survival.

Poroshenko's belated keenness for some good political news is understandable – given numerous reports that the knives are out among disgruntled paramilitary leaders that shore up the Kiev regime. They feel that the oligarch-turned-president and his army General Staff have been waging a disastrous campaign in the east.

Another constituency of seething discontent that needs to be placated is the wider Ukrainian population who are disgusted by the seemingly endless war and cronyism among the new Kiev rulers.

Anger among ordinary Ukrainian citizens is mounting – many of whom were initially supportive of the Maidan protests at the end of 2013 – but who are now battling against skyrocketing inflation, deteriorating social conditions and what they see as a futile, bloody war that is whirling like a meat-grinder.

Energy shortages, utility bills going through the roof, and increasing hardship are pitted against an increasingly heavy-handed regime whose figurehead, Poroshenko, took office last June.

Poroshenko, it is recalled,

promised back then that the conflict in the eastern region would be over within a matter of weeks. Eight months on, the violence has escalated, along with the body count of Kiev's dead and maimed soldiers, many of whom are being forced into the ranks to cover for withering casualties. The latest mobilisation – the fourth such round – has extended service age to men of 60 years old.

While many Ukrainians in the capital Kiev are facing food shortages from soaring prices, one product seems more than abundant in the shops – the Roshen brand of chocolates that made Poroshenko a billionaire in his former business life.

That little observational quirk has reportedly angered many Ukrainians in the capital and in the western region, who are presumed to be loyal to the Kiev regime. Poroshenko, like several other oligarch figures, seems to be doing very well out of the "new Ukraine" while the majority of citizens are experiencing privation, or conscription into ramshackle armed forces that are being slaughtered in the east by the more highly motivated ethnic-Russian separatist militias.

Another oligarch figure who seems to be doing very well is Igor Kolomoisky. The owner of Privat Bank became governor of Dnipropetrovsk thanks to the patronage of the Kiev regime, which seized power last February with the covert help of the American CIA. Kolomoisky is the sponsor of the Dnipro Battalion, one of many volunteer brigades that augment the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF). These battalions are paramilitary outfits that don Nazi regalia and are accused of gross human rights violations against the ethnic Russian population in the eastern regions. Ironically, Kolomoisky is of Jewish heritage and holds dual Israeli citizenship.

One of the wealthiest individuals in Ukraine, along with Poroshenko, Kolomoisky is reckoned to have accumulated even more wealth over the past year's turmoil by using his newfound paramilitary power to illegally expropriate businesses from rivals. In one tawdry episode, the Dnipro governor reportedly made a financial killing by selling US\$3.5 million-worth of fake body armour to the Kiev ministry of defence. The supposedly bullet-proof vests turned out to be useless.

Unknown numbers of young volunteers and conscripts have doubtless lost their lives during firefights



Russia's President Vladimir Putin, France's President François Hollande, Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel on a break during the peace talks in Minsk.

wearing the dud body armour sold by Kolomoisky.

To many Ukrainians the likes of Poroshenko and Kolomoisky are no different from the old regime of the ousted President Viktor Yanukovich, who was plagued with allegations of corruption and cronyism. That was a big factor behind the popular protests that centred on Kiev's Maidan Square in November 2013. Of course, those demonstrations were expediently hijacked by the US-backed neo-Nazi Svoboda and Right Sector paramilitaries, which then went on to launch a violent coup against Yanukovich on February 22, 2014.

For too many ordinary Ukrainians nothing much has changed. New regime – same old oligarchs.

The way ordinary people see it corrupt oligarchs are still in power and making a killing on the back of their misery. Indeed, the social situation of the "new Ukraine" has become a whole lot worse. The ultra-nationalist regime has plunged the state into spiralling debt and is squandering resources on a seemingly pointless war against ethnic Russians, whom the Russophobic regime labels as "sub-humans and terrorists".

Moreover, Poroshenko, Kolomoisky and other oligarch businessmen are not new faces. They made

their money under previous regimes. Poroshenko served as foreign and trade ministers under both the Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich administrations. The former came out of the US-inspired so-called Orange Revolution in 2004, but was soon widely reviled as a byword for sleaze and cronyism. Poroshenko and other oligarchs are thus seen as having their snouts back in the trough – albeit under the guise of a "pro-European, pro-NATO" so-called new direction for the country.

The current Kiev parliament is desperately trying to staunch a financial crisis, which may see the state default on unpaid international loans this year. This is in spite of the latest IMF-promised bailout announced last week of US\$40 billion. The parliament, dominated by rightwing ideologues under Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk who owes his position to CIA and US State Department leverage, is reportedly moving to legislate a Cyprus-style assets seizure on ordinary citizens, as well as impose swingeing tax hikes. These drastic measures are in large part prompted by the dire fiscal shortfalls that have arisen from the military offensive in the eastern Donbas region. Some estimates put the military cost to Kiev of US\$8 million a day from its war in the east. The country is already up to US\$100 billion in foreign debt.

But this war "adventurism" is stirring an increasing revolt among the hard-pressed populace – and in the territories that are under the nominal control of the Western-backed Kiev junta. Not only are people paying for the regime's trigger-happy jingoism through their pockets; they are paying with their very lives. The latest onslaught in the eastern region has taken hundreds of (some say over 2,000) lives among Kiev forces in the past month alone. The surge in violence can be attributed to the Kiev regime's refusal to implement the ceasefire that was first brokered last September in Minsk. Although, Washington and its European allies misattribute the blame for this violence to "Russian-backed aggression".

Thousands of young men of service age have fled to neighbouring countries claiming that they are

seeking work in seasonal agriculture in Russia, Moldova and elsewhere. Many others have resorted to bribing doctors to write fake disability assessments in order to avoid military recruitment. Several towns and villages in the west and southwest have mounted protests and forcibly ejected would-be recruitment officers, declaring that they refuse to be part of the army and its war in the east.

Even within the ranks of serving personnel there are growing reports of mechanised units experiencing sudden breakdowns of vehicles and equipment – usually around the time of these units being about to be sent to the front lines. The word is that disillusioned soldiers are quietly sabotaging their own equipment, rather than being thrown into battle zones to be used as cannon fodder. Their reluctance to serve is also underscored by recent commands from Kiev to officers at the front to shoot deserters on-sight.

The seething rancour is not just among regular troops of the UAF. The neo-Nazi paramilitary battalions and the Right Sector are also increasingly loathing of what they see as the "parasite oligarchs" and the incompetent General Staff of the UAF. Kiev has sacked three defence ministers over the past year.

Well, the war is not going well at all, as the body count among Kiev forces testifies.

The tactical withdrawal by the Kiev General Staff to protect the office of the president is not out of fear of advancing "Russian-backed militia". It is out of fear that the Right Sector and its neo-Nazi associates are making ready for a putsch to get rid of Poroshenko.

The self-proclaimed heirs to Nazi hero Stepan Bandera no doubt feel it is their right to rule by dint of ideological and racial purity, as well as from having provided the muscle in the first place to pull off the US-engineered coup in Kiev last year.

No wonder then that Poroshenko went to Minsk this week with a keen focus on finding a peace deal over eastern Ukraine and to generate some good news for a change. His political survival and fat assets depend on it. *Information Clearing House* ☛



Melbourne: 10am, Victorian Trades Hall, Carlton

Sydney: 12.30pm, Parliament House, Sydney

Adelaide: 12pm, Light Square, Adelaide

Canberra: 12.15pm, New Parliament House, Canberra

Perth: 12.30pm, Parliament House, West Perth

Brisbane: 12pm, Parliament House, Brisbane

Townsville: 4.30pm, 340 Ross River Road, Cranbrook

Mackay: 4.30pm, 2/21 Milton Street, Mackay

Hobart: 12.30pm, Franklin Square, Hobart

Launceston: 8am, Prince's Square, Launceston

Darwin: 4.30pm, Bennett Park, Darwin

Canada's blank cheque for Israel

Juliana Farha

The announcement that John Baird is to stand down as Canada's foreign minister came about a year too late for Gaza. For it was Baird who had gleefully embodied Canada's ugly stance on last summer's Israeli attack.

Not content simply to ignore the slaughter of sleeping children and unarmed civilians fleeing while waving white flags, Baird and his Conservative Party boss, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, rose to the unconditional defence of Israel, pretending the Palestinian question originated with Hamas, implying parity between the two "sides," smoke-screening the long-standing siege of Gaza and blaming the dead for their own annihilation.

Curiously, some pundits in Canada's mainstream press who seemed happy with Baird's sledgehammer statecraft during his tenure, which includes cutting all diplomatic ties with Iran, have just now begun questioning his approach to Palestine.

Writing in *The Globe and Mail*, for instance, Middle East correspondent Patrick Martin observes that "There were times, when John Baird was foreign minister that people weren't quite sure in what country's cabinet he served."

"Baird, for all his intelligence and charm, chose not to untangle the Arab-Israeli complexities and help build a bridge between the parties," Martin adds, "but to take a side, that of Israel, to which he gave *carte blanche*."

While many would say these observations are far too little and much too late, there's no doubt this view is widely shared by Palestinians and their supporters.

Saeb Erekat, chief negotiator for the Palestinian Authority, wrote an opinion piece headlined "It is John Baird who needs to apologise to the Palestinian people." According to Erekat, the Western-backed PA "has been engaged in a diplomatic effort to obtain those very same ideals Canadians hold dear – to achieve freedom and dignity. We have been working tirelessly to exercise our right to self-determination and establish a state of our own – a state that lives in peace and security with its neighbours, including Israel."

In practice, as many Palestinian critics of the PA have pointed out, this has meant making endless concessions to Israel on fundamental issues such as settlements and Jerusalem, as well as collaborating closely with Israeli occupation forces against any form of Palestinian resistance.

"Instead of rewarding the Palestinians for their insistence on pursuing peace and for their deep commitment to the stability and security of the region," Erekat added, "Mr

Baird has chosen to deride and stand against Palestinians at every corner."

An absent opposition

One could be forgiven for thinking that free-flying spittle seems rather un-Canadian, and admittedly the international media have bigger fish to fry than documenting the increasingly cynical immorality of the country's foreign policy under Harper and his sidekick Baird.

And while we're at it, it's only fair to note that their ill-considered and ahistorical views went virtually unchallenged by either of the country's putative "opposition" parties. There's the formerly progressive New Democratic Party, one of whose legislators, Sana Hassainia, quit over her party's failure to condemn Israeli aggression in Gaza, and was subsequently subjected to a smear campaign.

And then there's the formerly centrist Liberal Party, now led by Justin Trudeau, whose father, the late former Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, was the only real statesman to have led Canada during my lifetime.

My Lebanese-Canadian grandparents were so loyal to the pro-immigrant Liberals of their day, they kept a framed picture of their local Member of Parliament on the mantelpiece alongside family photos.

In fact, at the height of last summer's Gaza onslaught, a group of eight Liberal and Conservative MPs embarked on a "fact-finding mission" to Israel sponsored by the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs.

Not one of those MPs – who remain mute to this day on Israel's targeting of UNRWA schools, the four-figure Palestinian death toll and Israel's near-daily ceasefire violations – set foot in Gaza on this quest for "facts." Instead, their time was spent visiting injured Israeli soldiers to offer sympathy and condolences.

Still, I confess to a soft spot for the former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien, whose swan song consisted of refusing the invitation by US President George W Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair to help invade Iraq.

Contrast that with Baird's ennobling *cri de coeur* the announcement on 18 January of a formal pact between Canada and Israel to fight efforts to boycott Israel.

As *The Electronic Intifada* has reported, the move was denounced by Palestine's Boycott National Committee, the steering group for the global boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, which accused Canada of "further deepening its collaboration with Israel's occupation and launching a shameful, propagandistic attack on free speech in the process."

"Aversion to justice"

The pact with Israel came on the heels of Baird's pronouncement that the Palestinian bid to join the International Criminal Court (ICC) was "a huge mistake." This view was challenged forcefully by Paul Heinbecker, the country's last ambassador to sit in the UN Security Council and a foreign policy advisor to former Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

Describing the ICC as "a court of last resort," Heinbecker writes that "Ottawa's bluster in response to the Palestinian initiative looks more like an aversion to justice than a devotion to principle."

There was precedent, of course. On July 16, just a week after Israel's 51-day-long summer assault on Gaza began, Harper's Conservative party released the video *Through Fire and Water, Canada Will Stand with You*, a two-and-half-minute-long blank cheque for any acts of terror or criminality Israel might undertake.

To the beat of military drums and a backdrop of flags waving in slow motion, Harper offered this context for Canada's unconditional support: "At the great turning points of history, Canada has consistently chosen – often to our great cost – to stand with others who oppose injustice and to confront the dark forces of the world."

Those unfamiliar with Canadian history might wonder about the "turning points" to which Harper refers. Perhaps he's talking about the resolution of the 1956 Suez Crisis, which earned Lester B Pearson, the Canadian president of the United Nations General Assembly, the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957.

In fact, just six weeks after the release of *Through Fire and Water*, B'nai Brith, an influential Canadian Jewish and pro-Israel organisation, nominated Harper for the same prize to widespread outrage.

The comparison might seem risible until one considers Pearson's proactive role in helping to create Israel in the first place. Before he took the helm at the UN General Assembly, Pearson had chaired the UN Special Committee on Palestine which supported existing plans to carve up the land, and rejected a one-state solution proposed by the Arab Higher Committee in which all religious and ethnic groups would live side by side and be entitled to equal rights.

The bigger question is whether Canadians at large will recognise how far the country is shifting away from a growing consensus on Israeli aggression and Palestinian rights, and whether they'll prioritise rehabilitating Canada's global standing.

The Electronic Intifada ✪



Region Briefs

The Vietnamese Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism recently held a meeting in Hanoi, discussing practical solutions to protect and promote ethnic minorities' cultural values. Thirty-nine delegates from five ethnic-minority groups (population under 1,000) participated in the meeting. Vietnamese ethnic minorities are in a disadvantaged position in terms of protecting their cultural heritage. They have been losing their languages, costumes, as well as their way of life and unique villages models, although their living standards have been improved in recent years. The meeting agreed to develop the necessary policies to increase the population of ethnic minorities, create more employment opportunities, and improve their access to education and healthcare. The Lunar New Year is the most important festival across many Asian countries.

At a recent Politburo meeting on financial and economic affairs, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for the central government's economic plan to be fully implemented. The plan covers water and food security, infrastructure construction and urbanisation. He stressed that "urbanisation does not mean making urban and rural areas to look the same". The urbanisation process should be steered according to the situation in localities. He added that the government would invest more in infrastructure construction and environmental protection. Moreover, the Chinese central government and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region's local government will invest more than A\$54 million in 2015 to upgrade the water supply system in the region and, by the end of the year, 440,000 students and teachers plus 3.4 million residents in the region's rural and pastoral areas will have access to safe drinking water.

Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo extended Japanese military's UN operations in South Sudan for another six months. It sparked concern and criticism of the government's true intentions of militarising the country. This is particularly so following the government's decision to send troops overseas in future hostage-rescue operations, because of the recent incident in which ISIS executed two Japanese hostages. The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) opposed the government's military deployment on foreign soil. It claimed that "Japan should learn lessons from pre-war aggression that started by using the pretext of protecting Japanese nationals". For example, imperialist Japan used the excuse of protecting Japanese to launch a war against China. For these reasons the JCP opposed any motion to send military overseas for rescue operations.

A conflict broke out in the Indian-controlled Kashmir region and police have imposed a curfew on Pattan town. Police fired dozens of tear-gas smoke shells to disperse hundreds of protesters who were mourning the death of a 20-year-old civilian, killed by a police officer without any provocation. The angry protesters demanded an end to India's rule in the region and called on the government to punish the officer involved in the killing. A legacy of British colonialism is that Kashmir has become a region that is divided and destabilised by conflicts. The region is under the control of Pakistan and India which have nuclear weapons, but neither country has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that restricts the use of nuclear weapons.

Cuba

Call for the 10th International May Day Brigade

April 27 to May 10, 2015

The Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples and its travel Agency Amistur Cuba S.A, invites you to participate in the 10th edition of the international brigade, on the occasion of the international workers' day.

For full program see www.cpa.org.au/whats-on

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



email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

The hard road to compo

This briefly is my story. Diagnosed with blood clots and DVT March 2011. Accepted by WorkCover as work related. Suspended by WorkCover July 2012, for failing to comply with rehabilitation organised by WorkCover claiming a clearance which did not exist. WorkCover ordered to reinstate and reimburse me by Industrial Commission. Cleared to return to work September 2011 by vascular

specialists, refused reinstatement by employers, (Downer Edi Mining).

Claimed discrimination which has led from a Compulsory Conference in July 2013, to a Tribunal in November 2013. There has not been a ruling made from this Tribunal as yet. Have had doctors investigated for issuing false and misleading information and statements, and have had cause to sack and have investigated several lawyers. Have been corresponding with a Supreme Court judge who assured me that a ruling was imminent. This was months ago.

My case, or specifically my injury, which is listed as work-related has not been investigated, reported, recorded or listed as an LTI. I can show that if I did not have income protection at the time of my injury WorkCover would not have accepted my case as work-related. I have proof of this. Prior to WorkCover accepting my case, it was shown that my employers, WorkCover and others were aware of predisposing

conditions which affected the circulation.

I was not tested for this prior to WorkCover's acceptance of my claim. The fact is I do have a predisposing condition, which I had been tested for privately. They all knew of this possibility before acceptance, and I know of others in the industry who were refused compensation, citing this condition.

These people did not have income protection. I am completely convinced that I am and have been involved unwittingly in a conspiracy involving my employers, WorkCover, Q Comp, doctors, lawyers, health and safety officers, the Mines Department, the mining industry and the government.

As I have mentioned this has been ongoing since 2011 and I am still awaiting a ruling from the QCAT Tribunal of November 2013. I am hoping that you will take my situation seriously, as I want to expose the system for what it is, and protect others of the working class against

the deceit and cover ups perpetuated by the employers and sanctioned by government agencies like WorkCover.

Leonard Pelling
Sydney

Goosestep makeover at Customs

Thousands of public servants at the Immigration Department and Customs service will have to get through a physical test first if they hope to get a job with the new 14,000-strong department.

Push-ups, squats and shuttle-runs are the order of the day if they want to be prepared to "man the ramparts

and protect our borders" according to Mike Pezzullo, the department boss.

Customs officers will carry sidearms.

There will also be a crack-down on second jobs, social media use and sloppy appearances. The "Border force Basic Fitness Assessment" is the latest surprise for those immigration public servants as their department is taken over by the smaller Customs service.

Private sector will be getting some money by providing coaches to put the public servants thought their paces. Goose-stepping instructions will be provided later, I suppose.

Mati English
Sydney

Something to say?
Write to the Editor!

email: tpearson@cpa.org.au

Culture & Life

by Rob Gowland

War or education, who'd work for Amazon?

Under capitalism, working people work because they must if they are to put food on the table for themselves and their families. If their work is also intellectually stimulating and culturally rewarding that is an entirely fortuitous advantage, but few actually enjoy such an advantage.

For most people, the attitude to work can be summed up in this quote from Bruce Grocott: "I have long been of the opinion that if work were such a splendid thing the rich would have kept more of it for themselves."

Instead, the rich have chosen to keep for themselves the bulk of the wealth created by the labour of those who work for a living. Not content with that (for the rich are never content with their riches), they are assiduously telling those same workers that workers in developed countries are over-paid and need to work harder to be "competitive". Also, they must work for more years and retire not only later but on a greatly reduced pension, preferably one they have had to finance themselves.

And yet blind Freddy can see that there is plenty of money around. Look at the billionaires' mansions they make TV shows about, look at the absurd amounts such people pay for works of art that they then lock in their bank vaults as an "investment".

Every year the world spends \$1.7 trillion (yes, trillion) on weapons systems the better to kill people with. And this at a time when according to UNESCO and UNICEF one in five adolescents globally is not attending school or an education program because none is provided

for them or they cannot afford to go because their family needs them to work (see paragraph one).

According to the UN report *Fixing the Broken Promise of Education For All*, a staggering 63 million adolescents (children aged between 12 and 15) are not attending school. One in ten primary school-age children do not attend any kind of school, however elementary.

There are currently 121 million children who have never started school or who have dropped out (mainly because of poverty and the need to help with the family income). These children are particularly vulnerable to criminal gangs, human trafficking, marginalisation and exclusion.

And yet NATO's military budget is \$1.2 trillion a year.

Bought a book from Amazon recently? For Christmas, maybe? Spare a thought for Amazon's warehouse employees in Germany, who have been involved in industrial action against the global retail sales giant.

Germany is Amazon's second largest market after the USA. In 2013 Amazon's warehouse workers in Germany struck against the company's inhumane working conditions but the strike was largely unsuccessful. However, Amazon took fright and took steps to "protect" itself. It did not change its work practices however; instead, it built three new warehouses "offshore" – in Poland and the Czech Republic. Amazon pays its Polish workers €3 an hour as opposed to €9 an hour in Germany.



"Workers who break out sobbing or cursing because they cannot maintain the intense effort" required by the company "are fired on the spot" (*Workers' World, USA*).

And what is the complaint of the German service sector union, Ver.di, against Amazon in Germany? Well, listen and see what you think. Amazon workers in Germany are classified as "logistical workers" rather than retail workers. The difference? €4 an hour. Since their work is definitely retail Ver.di wants them reclassified and paid appropriately.

The workers who assemble the orders in the Amazon warehouses are called "pickers", and their work is timed to the *second* to squeeze every last drop out of the workers' labour. Not only must they walk up to 25 kilometres a shift, but they must find each item, load it and go on to the next task in the few seconds allotted for it. They are not allowed to talk to each other. They are regularly assigned to work ten hours instead of eight and they don't get paid for the time spent going through security checks at the end of their shift.

"Workers who break out sobbing or cursing because they cannot maintain the intense effort" required by the company "are fired on the spot" (*Workers' World, USA*).

Buy a book through Amazon? I'll look for a bookshop and buy it the old fashioned way, thank you.

And talking of old-fashioned things, did you know that many African countries still pay colonial tax to France, even though they nominally gained their independence decades ago? It all dates back to 1958, when the Sékou Touré government of Guinea sought to secede from French administration.

The French colonial elite were furious and on their way out destroyed as much of the country's infrastructure – and any other "benefits of civilisation" – as they could, so that other French colonies would think twice about trying to gain independence from "la Belle France".

The French left Guinea wrecked: schools, nurseries, public administration buildings were crumbled; cars, books, medical facilities, research instruments, tractors – were all crushed or otherwise sabotaged; horses and cows in the farms were killed and food in warehouses was burned or poisoned. Very cultured people, the French colonialists.

Not surprisingly, subsequent African countries seeking independence from French colonial rule were persuaded to pay an annual "debt" to France in "compensation" for the economic loss of the colony. There was no talk of France paying the former colonial possession compensation for the raw materials ripped out of the colony and shipped to France for the enrichment of French capitalists, of course.

Instead, the former colonies had to pay France huge amounts of compensation to gain their independence: in Togo, for example, the debt repayments amounted to 40 percent of GDP. More importantly, they are still being paid today!

No wonder France is so quick to send troops into its former African possessions whenever there is "armed conflict" or "restlessness". French capital has a lot at stake. ☺



Rob Gowland
previews
ABC & SBS
Public Television

Sunday February 22 –
Saturday February 28

The new six-part British comedy series *Toast Of London* (SBS 2 Sundays from February 22 at 9.30 pm) follows the absurdist adventures of Steven Toast (Mark Berry), an eccentric middle aged actor sleeping with a rival thespian's wife. Matt Berry, who achieved a certain prominence with his surreal BBC3 sketch show *Snuff Box*, must be doing something right: his new show has been commissioned for a third series by Channel 4.

Channel 4 head of comedy, Phil Clarke, said: "Channel 4 has always backed original comedy, the type of shows you wouldn't find anywhere else, and *Toast Of London* represents a significant new chapter in that story, and in our comedy heritage."

I take that with a grain of salt, but the show is written by Berry and Arthur Mathews, co-creator of *Father Ted*, and that series was certainly original (and very funny). Made by Objective Productions, *Toast Of London* won the prize for Best Sitcom at the prestigious *Rose d'Or* awards last year.

In the premiere episode, things seem to be looking up for Steven. Not only has he won a Best Actor Award, but he's also getting more than a bit of attention from the ladies. But Toast's agent Jane Plough's lack of computer skills, and a rogue psychopath (of course), threaten to derail his good fortune.

"Karate is a form of martial arts in which people who have had years and years of training can, using only their hands and feet, make some of the worst movies in the history of the world." – Dave Barry (Dave Barry is a Pulitzer Prize-winning American author and columnist, who wrote a nationally syndicated humour column for *The Miami Herald* from 1983 to 2005.)

As far as I am concerned, Barry's comment just about sums up all the nonsensical kung-fu movies starring the greatly over-rated Jackie Chan. For the undiscriminating, however, those who don't expect the scripts of films to have more depth than a

menu, Jackie Chan has a following, and I suppose it's for them that Marc Fennell is presenting his "action-packed line-up" of Chan movies on SBS.

This week's offering is the 1986 fantasy-adventure, *Armour Of God* (SBS 2 Wednesday February 25 at 8.30 pm), in which Jackie Chan stars as Asian Hawk, an Indiana Jones-style adventurer who discovers a mysterious sword in Africa, part of the legendary Armour of God – a magical outfit dating back to the Crusades. But wouldn't you know it? A band of Satan-worshipping monks kidnap his ex-girlfriend Lorelei, demanding the sword as ransom. This not-exactly-demanding piece was also directed by Jackie Chan, so he has only himself to blame.

When, on Saturday March 29, 2014, same-sex marriage became legal in England and Wales, the participants in one of the first gay weddings to take place decided to do the whole thing as a musical. The result is *Our Gay Wedding: The Musical* (ABC2 Wednesday February 25 at 9.30 pm), thereby (apparently unconsciously) confirming many straight people's stereotypes of what it means to be gay.

That the occasion was in fact historic is shown by some of the serious insertions and projections on a screen in the hall where the ceremony takes place. Just as same-sex marriage becomes legal in more and more countries, in some it is still not only illegal but punishable by death.

The occasion is described by the ABC's publicist as a witty take on the standard conventions of the wedding ceremony, but I found it sub-par as a musical and decidedly twee. The adjective that comes most readily to mind to describe the whole project is "camp", and surely that was not the effect intended?

The six-part series *How We Got To Now* (ABC Thursdays from February 26 at 9.30 pm) tells the stories of the unlikely people whose passion for problem solving led to astonishing practical solutions and inventions that changed the world. This US documentary series could have been a world-beater, if only it had been made by Ken Burns (*Jazz*, *The Civil War*). But it wasn't. It was made by "world-renowned innovation expert, successful web entrepreneur and bestselling author" Steven Johnson.

Johnson's delivery as the program's anchor mixes gimmicky, bland and banal. The series was made for an American audience which may account for Johnson's very obvious belief that his audience knows absolutely nothing and understands little more.

History, for Johnson, is a series of acts by remarkable individuals.



James Norton as Sidney Chambers, Robson Green as Geordie Keating – *Grantchester* (ABC Saturdays from February 28 at 8.30 pm).

Movements don't rate a mention. Although his series for the most part charts the development of public infrastructure, Johnson is firmly committed to private enterprise. The first episode, dealing with the provision of clean drinking water and sewerage systems, is very US-centric. American viewers could be excused after watching this program for thinking that the US invented the sewerage system.

It is a pity, because it could have been really fascinating if done better.

The new six-part drama series *Grantchester* (ABC Saturdays from February 28 at 8.30 pm) is a classic crime and detection set-up: an amateur detective (in this case a vicar) teamed up uneasily with a professional (a police inspector). The vicar is played by James Norton and the copper by Robson Green (who throws himself into the part – without a fishing rod in sight).

The series has been given an added challenge (for cast and crew) by being set in the 1950s. Very little traffic, much use of trains and bicycles, skirts no higher than mid-calf and women's hair full of waves – it was a different world. It's a disconcerting experience to see the era you grew up in portrayed on TV as some kind of colourful "olden times". And yet, for young people, the 1950s probably does seem like ancient history. Ah, me.

As for *Grantchester*, based on the first episode, it could become a popular series in the vein of other amateur and professional combinations, like *Father Brown* or *Miss Marple*. It all depends on the quality of the mystery writing. I look forward to the next episode. ☺

Perth Marx in Soho

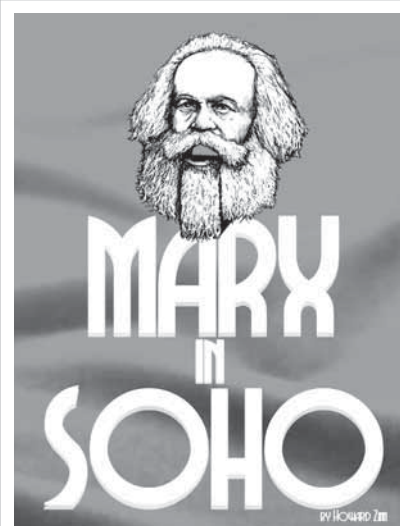
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Sarita So.

Performed by
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74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010
Ph: 02 9699 8844 Fax: 02 9699 9833
Email: guardian@cpa.org.au

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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

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The re-colonisation of Africa by agribusiness

Jim Goodman

As global agribusiness interests look to expand their profits with the financial backing of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), various "charitable" foundations and the political backing of the more "developed" countries of the world (the G-8), Africa is the obvious target to be "saved" and "developed". Corporate profit, Western governments gain control.

Most of the world's food is grown by small scale farmers. While it is called "traditional" agriculture, it is never static and farmers constantly adapt. This traditional agriculture relies on a varied and changing mix of crops, a polyculture, which provides a balanced diet, is affordable for local farmers and can accommodate changing local conditions.

The Green Revolution relied on increasing acreages of monocultures, mostly cereal grains, which also increased the use of herbicides, insecticides and fertilisers as well as new varieties of high yielding crops. Inputs that small farmers, those who fed the people, were never meant to afford.

It was an unsustainable system that called for too many inputs, too much machinery and too much energy. Credit was an essential part of the Green Revolution – creating debts that could never be repaid. And it did nothing to empower women, who grow a considerable portion of the world's food. It gave them no access to education, no power, and made it more difficult for them to maintain the rights to their land. Most importantly, the Green Revolution did not end hunger.

The Green Revolution never met expectations in Africa. This was for many reasons, including: civil wars, corrupt governments, governments that often could not work together, inaccessibility of water for irrigation, very diverse soil types, a lack of infrastructure and the sheer breadth of the continent. Perhaps Africa was lucky, while the Green Revolution was put forth as a solution to feed the hungry, it was also focused on permanently allowing Western governments to dominate politics and national economies – a new brand of colonialism.

Global agribusiness

The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) seems to have all the answers. Started by the Bill and Melinda Gates and Rockefeller Foundations and fronted by African dignitaries, their goals for Africa appear to be remarkably similar to those of the first Green Revolution, increasing agricultural production through increased inputs, monoculture farming, production of grain crops for the global market and little in the way of societal change to empower small scale farmers, women or the poor.

In a new twist to the old Green Revolution, AGRA is focusing on private control rather than public – more profit, less oversight. A prime example, private seed companies will produce and sell their "improved" seed varieties to farmers, rather than giving farmers access to publicly developed seeds.

While most countries in Africa have no commercial plantings of genetically modified (GM or GMO) crops, many are conducting trials, aided by and politically pushed by Western governments. While AGRA claims their



"Africa can feed Africa. Africa should feed Africa. And I believe that Africa will feed Africa."

partners are not currently selling GM seeds in Africa, the push is clearly there.

The Gates Foundation would like their association with AGRA to appear as a strictly philanthropic venture, but, it appears that as Monsanto stands to profit so does the Gates Foundation's endowment.

Patented seeds

AGRA states that "only about one quarter of Africa's small-holder farmers have access to good seeds" – and good seeds, in the eyes of AGRA funders and partners, are GM seeds, seeds that must be purchased every year, not farmer-saved seeds. Traditional seed laws that allow saving and exchange between farmers are "outdated" according to AGRA and they continue to push for changes in seed laws that would protect patented seed.

In Ghana, the national parliament has given full support to the Plant Breeders Bill, which would restrict seed saving and swapping. According to the Ghana National Association of Farmers and Fishermen, "This system aims to compel farmers to purchase seeds for every planting season." This bill, being pushed by AGRA, the G-8, USAID and corporate agribusiness, will make it difficult to find any seed other than GM seed. For bio-technology companies like Monsanto, Africa is the new frontier. Lots of land, lots of people, lots of foreign investment money, and governments willing to push their agenda. It all adds up to lots of profit.

AGRA may think they have all the answers, but the problem is, they never asked the questions, they never asked the people of Africa or the farmers what they wanted. This is colonialism, not democracy.

As Mariann Bassey Orovwuje of the Environmental Rights Action (ERA)/Friends of the Earth Nigeria (FoEN) noted at a Town Hall Forum in Seattle last October, "If you are helping me, ask me the kind of help I need."

Mercia Andrews, of the Trust for

Community Outreach and Education (TCOE) in South Africa, sees AGRA and the Green Revolution as "another phase of colonialism."

"What we need," she stated, "is not more charity and more investment of the kind that's being imposed on us, we need solidarity, we need learning together from you, from the peasant farmers, from the food movement, all these small markets that exist here, from the community to community movement. People to people solidarity, not corporate takeover."

Gates Foundation

Mariam Mayet, director of the African Centre for Biosafety (Acbio), felt that "peasant farming systems have become reviled by the like of Gates as backwards and responsible for poverty and starvation in Africa. It's almost as if there is a concerted effort to make these systems obsolete, to do away with them, they are ugly, they are backward they have to go and they have to go now." She noted that "I want you take home the message that there are African farmer organisations that are outraged, we are angry because these decisions have been made – imposed on us in a very patronising, patriarchal, violent way, like we are children, that they have designed a solution for us as to how they can fix up what is broken."

In his address to the Triennial Forum for Research in Africa General Assembly on July 18, 2013, Dr Kanayo Nwanze, president of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), stated that "Africa can feed Africa. Africa should feed Africa. And I believe that Africa will feed Africa." And, interestingly enough, he didn't once mention GMOs.

Just as AGRA would force its program on Africa, Nwanze felt that the decline of African agriculture, in large part, was due to structural adjustment programs forced on many of the continent's nations by the World Bank. And cutting to the heart of the Green Revolution he noted that "if we set our sights only on improving productivity, there is a very real danger that

we will grow more food in Africa without feeding more people."

He stressed that "results must be measured NOT by higher yields alone, but by reduced poverty, improved nutrition, cohesive societies and healthy ecosystems. And, agricultural development must involve women who are too often ... the most disadvantaged members of rural societies."

While IFAD has not always been on the right side of agricultural change in Africa, Nwanze clearly articulated a vision much different than that of the original Green Revolution or of AGRA's idea of progress in Africa. "We can only hope he is sincere, it is important to acknowledge that Africans can exploit Africans, just as Western governments and corporations can. Democracy and food sovereignty should determine the future of Africa, not rich Africans or Western corporations."

AGRA believes progress is large scale farming, mono-cultures, "improved" GM seed, and a further industrialised agricultural system. However, none of these have ended hunger. This style of agriculture has not and will not feed the world, though this is what we are constantly told to believe.

In his book, *Farmageddon*, Brewster Kneen notes that "In the name of progress, these new powers would like us to believe that there is no alternative to their biotechnological project. They are simply the agents of destiny. We should adjust to their rule with gratitude for their leadership and their efforts on our behalf, whether we asked for it or not."

Colonialism is patronising, patriarchal and violent, and to believe that AGRA's vision for Africa, Africa's people, its farmers, or the continent itself is anything other than a new colonialism designed to benefit corporate agribusiness and the partners of AGRA while it ultimately impoverishes the people and the culture of Africa is not just laughable, but unequivocally misguided and dangerous.

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Communist Party of Australia

Guardian

Website: www.cpa.org.au/guardian

Email: guardian@cpa.org.au

Central Committee:

General Secretary: Bob Britton
Party President: Vinnie Molina
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010
P: 02 9699 8844 F: 02 9699 9833

Website: www.cpa.org.au

Email: cpa@cpa.org.au

Sydney District Committee:

Wayne Sonter
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010
P: 02 9699 8844 F: 02 9699 9833

Newcastle Branch:

newcastle@cpa.org.au

Riverina Branch:

Allan Hamilton
2/57 Cooper St Cootamundra 2590
riverina@cpa.org.au

Melbourne Branch:

Andrew Irving
viccpa@netspace.net.au
Box 3 Room 0 Trades Hall
Lygon St Carlton Sth 3053
P: 03 9639 1550 F: 03 9639 4199

SA State Committee:

Bob Britton,
PO Box 612, Port Adelaide BC,
SA 5015 Ph: 0418 894 366
www.adelaidecommunists.org
Email: sa@cpa.org.au

West Australian Branch:

Vinnie Molina perth@cpa.org.au
PO Box 98 North Perth WA 6906
P: 0419 812 872

Brisbane Branch:

PO Box 33, Camp Hill, Qld 4152
P: 0449 202 189
cpabris@live.com.au

Tasmania Branch:

Bob Britton tas@cpa.org.au
P: 0418 894 366