



# Insurance companies declare war on Medicare



Anna Pha

Several thousand people took part in rallies and marches across Australia in defence of Medicare on January 4 and 11. Members of trade unions, Greens, Communist Party, and other left parties, Young Labor, and the ALP were amongst those taking part. The message to the Abbott government was loud and clear: "Hands off Medicare".

The actions were in response to leaks that the National Commission of Audit is considering a number of measures that could see the destruction of Medicare and Americanisation of Australia's health system. The outcome would be a two-tier system, managed and controlled by insurance companies, with hefty insurance premiums and fees.

The private health insurance (PHI) companies are pushing for a compulsory fee ("co-payment") of \$6 for patients visiting bulkbilling GPs. Bulkbilling is not all that is threatened. The PHI companies want to cover gap (out-of-pocket) payments for visits to GPs and other medical practitioners and other services covered by Medicare. At present the private health funds are restricted to hospital and "extras" such as optometry, physiotherapy, psychology, speech therapy, dental, etc, when not covered by Medicare.

Terry Barnes, former adviser to Tony Abbott when Health Minister in the Howard government, is again in the driving seat. In a submission to the National Commission of Audit on behalf of the Australian Centre for Health Research (ACHR), Barnes called for the \$6 co-payment for GP visits, a four-year freeze on Medicare rebates for GPs (to make bulk-billing economically unsustainable) and other measures to enable the private health insurance industry to take over Medicare.

The ACHR claims to be an independent think tank. It was set up by one of the largest private health funds, Australian Unity, and its membership includes major private health funds, private hospital groups and the Pharmacy Guild of Australia. Its directors are all private sector, and include representatives of Australian Unity, BUPA, Cabrini Health, Epworth HealthCare and others with experience in funds management, insurance, financial services and pharmacy industries.

Those pushing for the co-payment claim it is to reduce the cost of payments made to doctors (Medicare rebate) and reduce the number of visits to GPs by stopping overservicing.

The accusations of overservicing are absurd – 19 out of 100,000 doctors have been found to be overservicing, hardly a reason to hit patients! The health system suffers from gross underservicing in the area of primary care for critical groups such as nursing home, housebound, palliative care and mental health patients.

The co-payment would certainly reduce the number of GP visits. The most vulnerable, the chronically ill, pensioners, families and others on low to medium incomes would be hit hardest. When short of cash they wait as long as possible before seeing a doctor, not attend for regular screening for blood pressure, diabetes, delay their pap smear or prostate examination, etc.

The resultant decrease in early intervention and routine testing would result in more and mostly avoidable hospitalisations far outweighing any savings. A \$5 or \$6 fee to visit the GP might save \$170 million but this is peanuts compared with the likely billion or more dollars in additional expenses as a result of fewer GP visits.

The Doctors' Reform Society (DRS), the

Australian Medical Association and College of General Practitioners have all spoken out against the proposals.

## Thin edge of the wedge

"These costs add up and most of my patients have difficulties already affording medication and other care. This will be another deterrent in seeking care," Doctors Reform Society (DRS) vice president Dr Tracy Schrader said. "This won't just stop at \$6 either. These fees escalate."

The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) illustrates this process. The fee (co-payment) for prescriptions under the PBS was free for pensioners until a \$2.50 co-payment was introduced in 1990. After 25 scripts, they were free in any year. Today, pensioners must pay \$6 a script, and the threshold kicks in at \$360 – 60 scripts.

For non-concessional card-holders, singles and families, the prescription price crept up from \$2.50 in 1979 to \$36.90 a standard script in 2014, with a threshold of \$1,421.20 – 38 standard scripts.

These co-payments are already beyond many on low incomes and families. Their abolition would improve health outcomes, and also result in savings in hospital admissions and other services.

"Price signals do not work in health care. This is not cups of coffee or luxury items you're dealing with here. This is people's lives and health. People don't need to be hit with a financial hammer when seeking care. Preventative care, screening and chronic illness management will all be impacted," Dr Schrader said, "and down the line more illness that could have been dealt with more efficiently in the primary care setting.

"Free at the point of service is a fundamental

principle of universal health care and Medicare. This will only create bureaucratic chaos and won't save money. It will be more costs for the sick and less well-off and less tax for the wealthy," said Dr Schrader.

"Introducing a co-payment in emergency departments would create an administrative nightmare. The practicalities are almost unthinkable. Who collects and when? Would you be sent a bill if unable to pay at the time? Would debt collectors be sent after people unable to pay? Remember back in the early 'seventies before Medibank/Medicare, failure to pay medical bills was the main reason for imprisonment for debt in South Australia."

"The Doctors Reform Society is shocked to hear that the Health Minister Mr Dutton sees no problem with the trialling of private health insurance covering co-payments for GPs," said DRS president Dr Con Costa. "Co-payments will increase, the rich will pay via their insurance, taxpayers will pay more through the PHI rebate, and those 55 percent of Australians who can't afford PHI will miss out."

Dr Costa told the *Guardian* that it was not just about a co-payments. "There is a whole raft of measures designed to attack Medicare and the primary health care system in Australia."

## Primary care and GPs critical

Dr Costa explained that GPs are the gatekeepers, the first port of call for patients. They are free to make decisions with their patients for treatment, referral for tests or to specialists, hospitalisation, etc. It is a highly cost efficient system, based on a high level of trust and the needs of the patient foremost. Bulkbilling ensures GPs are universally accessible and holds down the fees charged by non-bulkbilling doctors.

Continued on page 2

3 Asylum seeker struggle enters dangerous phase

4 Perth rally to save Medicare

7 Julian Assange and the milkman's horse

10 Culture & Life Carry on spying

## Guardian

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Abbott's culture war  
over national curriculum

The Abbott government has opened a new front in the "culture wars" currently being waged in the corporate media and public institutions by reactionary forces. Education Minister Christopher Pyne has ordered a review of the national schools curriculum unveiled by the Gillard government in 2010. According to the Liberals, the curriculum is the reason Australian students have slipped slightly on international performance tables in recent years. Inadequate funding for public education is not mentioned. Moral "relativism", an ideologically-driven left "bias", a focus on Asia, Indigenous rights and sustainability are cited as major reasons for an alleged decline in student ability. And the government has chosen just the right people to "fix" it.

Kevin Donnelly and Professor Ken Wiltshire have been appointed to head the review. Pyne wants an "orthodox" curriculum, "balanced in content, free of partisan bias and deals with real-world issues". Abbott has complained that the current curriculum doesn't emphasise enough the role of business in the development of the country and that Labor prime ministers and the unions get too much praise.

Mr Donnelly and Professor Wiltshire would be inclined to agree. Kevin Donnelly has a long association with Coalition pet education projects and Ken Wiltshire's claims to fame was an article in *The Australian* in 2010 putting a very thin argument as to why independent members Tony Windsor, Rob Oakshott and Bob Katter should support a minority Coalition government rather than a Labor one. The fact that the Coalition got more votes than Labor in the relevant electorates was the long and the short of it. The Professor of Public Funding at the University of Queensland Business School has also been a strong critic of Labor's schools funding reforms.

Kevin Donnelly is keen to dismiss suggestions that the outcomes of his review have been predetermined. Heaven forbid! A recent piece by him in *The Sydney Morning Herald* entitled "Western values must be at core of school reforms" engages critics. He said the review will be open and transparent and will even call for public submissions. It is unlikely that any submissions would persuade Donnelly to another point of view about the role of education in a society like Australia. He has several conservative axes to grind.

Donnelly's appointment has been controversial and deserves to be even more so. He heads the Education Standards Institute which "favours an education system based on standards, equity, diversity and choice and the values and institutions that promote liberty, democracy, an open and free society and a commitment to Christian beliefs and values," according to its website. He is a former teacher in Victoria and a senior research fellow at the Australian Catholic University.

A very embarrassing item on Kevin Donnelly's CV is his time at tobacco company Phillip Morris producing an education program called "I've Got the Power" for the federal government. It dealt with peer pressure and decision making but omitted to mention smoking as one of the crucial challenges to be faced by young people. The omission was rectified in a later versions distributed to Aboriginal students. More than 1,500 students in Australia and New Zealand got the information pack.

Mr Donnelly also advised the Howard government on the Discovering Democracy civics program ordered originally by Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating. Former education minister Amanda Vanstone announced in 2005 that Donnelly's Education Standards Institute (engaged under its trading name of Impetus Consultants) had been paid \$165,997 to give its particular brand of advice to the Coalition government since 1996. Donnelly opposes same sex marriage. Like the PM, he has called for the Bible to be taught in schools. He favours rote learning and constant evaluation. He dislikes the Australian Education Union and has contempt for multiculturalism. "The cultural left has taken the long march through the education system and enforced its biased, ideological world view on the schools," he said last November.

Mr Donnelly's appointment to the review of the national curriculum, to make it "robust", restore "balance" and remove "bias" shows just how driven the federal government is to actually removing any vestiges of those attributes still surviving within the education system. In its place Abbott and other zealots for the "Judeo-Christian" tradition, limited bourgeois democracy and capitalist markets, including the "market" for education, are preparing the alternative of their dreams.

## PRESS FUND

What a start to the new year! The Abbott government's obsession with secrecy can't conceal its intention to privatise everything it can lay its hands on (including the management of the Australian public service), to imprison asylum seekers in hideous, remote detention centres, to increase spending on war preparations, to savagely reduce workers' wages and conditions, and to wreck the environment wherever this would result in someone making a buck. The *Guardian* team is up and running. However, we're off to a bit of a slow start, so we'd really appreciate your contribution to the Press Fund, which helps us cover our operating costs, before our next edition. We also offer our thanks to those who have contributed to the Fund since we last went to press, as follows:

Mark Mannion \$5, "Round Figure" \$10, Dennis White \$25

Progressive total: \$40

Insurance companies  
declare war on  
Medicare

Continued from page 1

Patients attending non-bulkbilling GPs can be out of pocket \$40 to \$80 or more. When it comes to specialists, charging hundreds of dollars a visit, the gap can run into the hundreds. At present the private health insurance companies are not allowed to provide gap insurance for medical services.

"Insurance companies are behind the push to put the squeeze on primary care and bulkbilling so they can enter the primary care market. It is insurance companies versus GPs and patients," Dr Costa warned.

They are lobbying a very friendly Coalition to let them in. Once the door is open to gap insurance for GP, specialist and other medical services, the fees will rocket, especially if bulkbilling has been destroyed.

But that is not all the PHI and private hospitals are after. "They want to replace our system with the US model of managed health care with insurance companies running the system. They will decide which GP you see, which emergency department you can go to. Like the workers' compensation system, the GP will have to get permission to do anything," Dr Costa explained.

"It is an attack on the independence and liberty of GPs, an attack on patients. Australians have always chosen who they would see as their doctor."

The US managed health system eats up 18 percent of GDP, and still

leaves millions without cover. Even with cover, people are forced to mortgage their homes for surgery or just go without and suffer the consequences. Surgery and other treatments require the authorisation of insurance company bean counters who have their eyes on profits, not the interests of patients.

The OECD recognises Australia as having one of the best and most cost efficient health systems amongst the industrialised nations. Our life expectancy, low rate of still births and other statistics confirm the quality of care. This is at stake.

That is not to say that there are not areas where it could be improved. As mentioned above, there are huge gaps in servicing to specific groups in the community.

Lack of funding is not the real issue. The agenda is political and ideological: public versus private, GPs and their patients versus insurance companies. Does Australia want a two-tier system based on wealth or universal health care based on need?

There is no shortage of money. The question is how it is raised and distributed. The government could take a tougher stand in negotiations with the big pharmaceutical companies and save an estimated \$1.2 billion. Why for example, is the government paying \$19.32 for a box of 30, 40 milligram atorvastatin tablets when in Britain the wholesale price is \$2.84 and in New Zealand \$2.01?

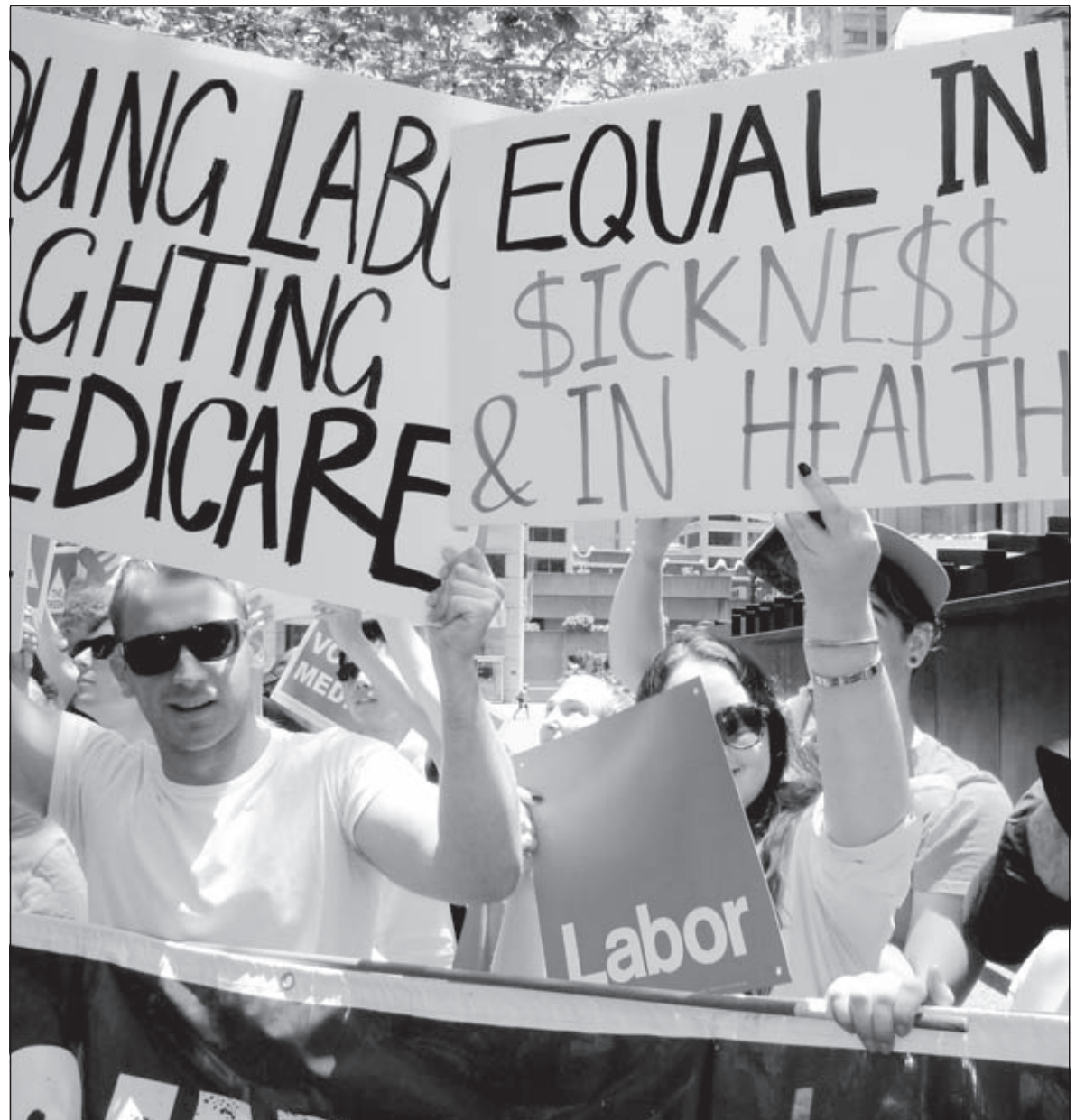
The private health insurance

rebate of between 30 and 40 percent (depending on age) should be abolished. It is costing close to \$6 billion and will rise again with the latest whopping increases in PHI premiums. It is nothing short of corporate welfare, money transferred from the public hospital system, to prop up an otherwise unsustainable and inefficient private hospital system and line the coffers of the insurance industry.

Instead of cutting corporate taxes, the government should be increasing them and imposing higher rates on super profits. Cuts could be made to Australia's bloated military budget without harming our security.

The Communist Party of Australia believes Medicare and other public health services should be funded through central revenue. The principles of free at-point-of-delivery (no fees), universal access, public provision, quality care and independence of GPs and other providers are non-negotiable.

Health Minister Dutton has failed to rule out the co-payment or entry of private health insurance into primary health care. In practice, the Coalition has never supported Medicare. The Coalition and its mates will have control of both Houses of Parliament from July. It is imperative that the campaign to defeat the insurance companies is built as quickly and broadly as possible. ✪



Sydney rally. (Photos: Bernadette Smith)

# Asylum seeker struggle enters dangerous phase

Peter Mac

**Over the last six weeks a number of highly disturbing developments have taken place, which threaten the lives and hopes of asylum seekers, have severely damaged Australia's relations with its nearest neighbour, Indonesia, and now carry the risk of military confrontation with that country.**

On December 13 an asylum seeker boat was intercepted near Ashmore Reef by the Australian Navy and forced out of Australian territorial waters, after the passengers had been given communications equipment and supplies. Out of fuel, on December 19 it ran aground on the coast of an Indonesian island. The crew and passengers were rescued by local villagers.

Reports immediately surfaced that the Navy had actually escorted the boat into Indonesian waters, in violation of that nation's sovereignty. On Boxing Day another boat was forced back, once again into Indonesian waters according to unofficial reports.

On December 28 Immigration Minister Scott Morrison failed to appear for his weekly media briefing, which was expected to deal with the "turn-back" incident of December 13. These events had provided a very thin trickle of official information on the asylum seeker issue. However, Morrison then ceased the briefings altogether, and just produced a weekly printed news bulletin.

On January 1 another asylum seeker boat was intercepted by the Navy near Darwin and forced back to Indonesia. The passengers claimed they were mistreated by Navy personnel during the process.

On January 8 Morrison declared: "It is not the policy or practice of the Australian government to violate Indonesian territorial sovereignty. Any suggestion to the contrary is false."

However, the very next day he was forced to admit that the Navy had actually entered Indonesian waters on several occasions. He

then stated this was contrary to the government's intentions and those responsible would be dealt with. In short, he blamed the Navy for carrying out his own policy.

On January 10 the government indicated that the Australian Army's General Hurley had reached an understanding with his Indonesian counterpart General Moeldoko, under which Indonesia would accept the "turn-back" policy.

However, General Moeldoko and the Indonesian government hotly denied this immediately. They pointed out, quite reasonably, that equipping and refuelling an asylum seeker boat and then forcing it into another nation's territorial waters is, in effect, people smuggling.

On January 12 the news broke that the government had used a lifeboat to force 56 asylum seekers back to Indonesia, after the Navy intercepted their wooden fishing vessel near Christmas Island. Aware of the turn-back policy, some of the passengers caused the leaking boat to flounder. The Navy rescued them and transferred them to a customs vessel, which took them to a point within sight of Christmas Island.

They were then told they had to board the lifeboat in order to be ferried to the island. However, when they had done so they were taken close to the Indonesian coast and advised they had to return to Indonesia, because they only had enough fuel to get there, and not enough to reach Australia.

A customs officer then threw them a four-language booklet which told them that anyone who captained the boat and tried to reach Australia would be prosecuted and imprisoned.

## The price of opportunism

Reports have now surfaced that the Australian Navy fired shots into the air in order to force at least one asylum seeker boat to return to Indonesia. On January 19 it was also revealed that Navy personnel had been stripped of normal workplace



safety protection and obligations. That is normally only done when the country is on a war footing.

That initiative removes the obligation of Navy personnel to defend themselves publicly against accusations of abusing asylum seekers. As General Hurley stated, Navy personnel would "not face individual criminal sanctions under the Act for giving effect to government policy." It would also help minimise public scrutiny of the policy.

Secondly, although we're obviously not at war, the Australian Navy may well find itself in military action as a result of border incursions. Last week the Indonesian government demanded an end to the turn-back policy and warned it intended to use a frigate to patrol its coastal waters.

Their anger is well justified. The "turn-back" initiatives actions followed hard on the heels of revelations that Australia spied on the Indonesian government, and even

tapped the private phone calls of President Yudhoyono and his wife.

On receiving news of the lifeboat escapee Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa commented icily: "It's one thing to turn back the actual boats on which they have been travelling, but another issue when they are transferred onto another boat and facilitated and told to go in that direction".

The Abbott government's implementation of its asylum seeker policies has been characterised by deception, lies, bullying, cowardice and recklessness. The worst aspects of the Howard government's failed policies have now been replicated under the Abbott regime, together with a horribly augmented "Pacific solution", cruel temporary visa arrangements, and a failure to process applications for asylum.

Asylum seeker detention centres in Manus Island and Nauru are now grossly overcrowded and lack

adequate sanitation or equipment. As a result mental breakdowns, suicide attempts, lips sewn together in protest, and riots are becoming commonplace. Yet mainland detention centres are being closed down.

The UN has warned that Australia may be declared in breach of the International Refugee Convention, to which it is a signatory, because of the "turn-back" policy. The Abbott government seems to expect Indonesia to accept the policy meekly. It certainly won't. However, it might adopt the policy itself, which offers the horrifying prospect of asylum seekers being "batted" back and forth across Torres Strait, or else just abandoned to die at sea.

Those appalling possibilities, and the growing chance of military conflict with our nearest neighbour, are two very good reasons why we should oppose the Abbott government's appalling asylum seeker policies. And there are lots of others. ☒

## Pete's Corner

"Internally, people are a bit insecure. Someone can undermine your office very easily from within your own party".



WATER  
NOT GOLD

Stop mining abuses in El Salvador, the Philippines and beyond

**RALLY at OceanaGold Offices  
Friday 31 January at 12 noon  
250 Collins Street, Melbourne**

Australian Company, OceanaGold is suing the El Salvador Government through PacificRim for \$315 million. The same Australian company is causing environmental damage and Human Rights abuses in the Philippines

# Perth rally to save Medicare



Richard Titelius

**On a sweltering hot afternoon 150 people rallied in the shade of Stirling Gardens in the CBD of Perth to protest the federal government's Commission of Audit proposal to levy a co-payment for bulkbilled GP visits.**

The rally was organised by the Curtin University Guild and Emma Norton from the Guild was the MC for the event held on January 11.

The event was also well represented by banners and members from a number of blue and white colour unions including the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, CFMEU, United Voice and Community and Public Sector Union/Civil Service Association.

The first speaker was Jane Rawls from the Doctors Reform Society who said, "The proposed budgetary saving would hit those hardest who

can least afford it – those on low and fixed incomes." Though pensioners would be exempt added Rawls, "People who are cancer sufferers and with mental health issues would also be hard hit as these people needed a lot of primary care and would deter them from seeking the care that these illnesses require." If the imposition of the levy means that they begin to come only when they are in crisis then this would overload the public health system.

Rawls, who is a doctor, said that she could foresee the "bureaucratic nightmare it would become and inevitably open the door to further increases in the levy."

Dr Rawls added that part of the solution involved more resources being allocated to preventative health care and health promotion and address causes such as homelessness and mental health issues.

Greens Senator Scott Ludlam

addressed the rally to remind people that the levy would be a roadblock to looking after a person's health and amounted to a fundamental attack on accessible health care which would affect the most vulnerable in our society.

Western Australian ALP Senator Sue Lyons said, "There is so much to be angry and upset about this proposal – especially when one considers that when the ALP government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam attempted to introduce the legislation to establish Medicare in 1975, it was rejected three times by the Liberal controlled Senate. They were then no friends of universal health care and continue their attacks today". Lyons recalled bringing up her children during the subsequent eight years of the Fraser Liberal government and the social and economic cost that this put on bringing up her family. Lyons called on those in attendance

at the rally to "spread the word out in the community" as it would only be "a wave of community support that would save Medicare and the public health system."

Carolyn Smith – WA branch secretary of United Voice, which has many members employed in the public health system, told the rally that unions are sometimes the only barrier to an unwanted change – a change which would lead to the average family not being able to afford primary health care. "Today," added Smith, "it is getting harder to find bulk billing doctors which puts pressure on the emergency departments of public hospitals." There was also the suggestion made in the days after the announcement of the proposal for the levy for bulk billed GP visits that the levy or a fee could extend to visits to public hospital emergency wards.

Emma Norton, from Curtin University Student Guild, summed

up the feeling of many at the rally when she said that this attack by Abbott was a demonstration of the very worst of neo-liberalism. However, Norton did not spare the ALP from criticism when she said that the Gillard (ALP) government set the pace on these attacks with cuts to payments to single mothers in the early part of 2013 and showed that they were part of the same agenda as the present government.

The Communist Party of Australia calls on workers and the community to defend Medicare and the public health system but also that scrutiny needs to be applied to private health insurance and health service companies which were directing the debate and influencing public policies on the issues of Medicare, the levy and rebates for those taking out private health insurance. ★

## Cutbacks threat to legal services

Darren Coyne

**Aboriginal legal services across the country have warned they will be forced to reduce frontline services as a result of planned federal government cutbacks. Critics say the government's move to slash funding by \$43.1 million to the legal assistance sector will lead to an increase in imprisonment rates, especially for Indigenous people.**

The Law Council of Australia has attacked the reductions, saying instead of cutting funding, the government should be increasing legal assistance and justice reinvestment programs.

"These cuts will ultimately create a net burden for the economy and work counter to the government's objectives," Law Council president Michael Colbran said. Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia CEO Dennis Eggington told the *Koori Mail* newspaper that the funding cuts

would particularly affect education and policy development.

"When the cuts come in we will lose our ability to influence government around new legislation and policies," he said. "Here in WA we have legislation and policies that are directly and indirectly discriminating against Aboriginal people, which means more of our people get caught up in the legal system.

"In many cases the ultimate punishment is jail so we won't have the ability to respond in a proactive and informed way to government."

Mr Eggington said the funding cuts would also limit the service's ability to run education programs in communities and schools.

"Lastly, we will also lose frontline services," he said. "There is no doubt the levels of cuts will have to come from frontline services including family, civil or criminal law."

Meanwhile, the National Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Legal Service has already been told

it will have to deal with \$3.6 million in cuts over the next three years. National convenor Antoinette Braybrook said Aboriginal women were 34 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family-violence-related assault than other Australian women.

### "Playing politics"

"We know from the statistics that rates of family violence are increasing, but instead of addressing this national crisis, governments are cutting our funding and restricting our services," she said. "They are playing politics with the safety of our women and children.

"The government claims that funding will be taken from policy and law reform programs, and frontline services will not be impacted. Clearly our government doesn't understand how FVPLS services operate. There is simply no such funding provided for individual services to engage in policy and law reform.

"Services will have no choice but to cut back frontline service delivery given that this is where services direct their funding."

Australian Democrats South Australian district president Jeanie Walker said the funding cuts were "a crushing blow". She called on South Australian Premier Jay Weatherill to contact the federal government and demand that the funding be reinstated.

Western Australian state Labor frontbencher Ben Wyatt has taken Prime Minister Tony Abbott's key Indigenous advisor, Warren Mundine, to task over comments he made about the cuts.

In a comment piece in *The Australian* newspaper, Mr Mundine had argued it was unrealistic to expect that Indigenous affairs spending would be immune to budget cuts.

Mr Mundine had argued that removing inefficiency, duplication, bureaucracy and red tape would lead to lower spending. He said it

was unrealistic to expect that he, and the Indigenous Advisory Council that he leads, could "cast a force field" over Indigenous spending to exempt it from the broader budget agenda.

Mr Wyatt agreed, but said he expected Mr Mundine to remind the government of the real consequences of its decisions. "I worry that he sees his role more as a defender of the government than an advocate for Aboriginal Australians," he wrote.

He said cutting funding from legal aid risked the obvious – that more Aboriginal people would end up in prison. "Mr Mundine was correct to identify the responsibility of state governments to increase diversionary options, but it was his responsibility to ensure the Abbott government bore financial and moral responsibility for the consequences of its decisions," Mr Wyatt said.

*Koori Mail* ★

# The Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement

## Don't trade away health

AFTINET\*

**The Australian government negotiating a trade agreement spanning 12 countries in the Pacific. But the deal is not about trade and poses real threats to public health.**

The Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) involves Australia, the US, New Zealand, Canada, Peru, Chile, Mexico, Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, Japan and Vietnam. The negotiations are shrouded in secrecy, but limited public education and leaked documents show that the agenda on health and medicines is being set by giant US pharmaceutical and tobacco corporations, and threatens to:

- increase patent rights leading to higher medicine prices
- undermine our Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS)
- give special rights for corporations to sue governments for damages
- restrict government public health regulations for food labelling

After three years of negotiations the pressure is on to sign the deal this year. We need to ensure that the

Australian government rejects any proposals which would affect the affordability of medicines and retains the ability to regulate in the interest of public health.

Pharmaceutical companies already have patent rights to charge high monopoly prices for new medicines for 20 years before we can access cheaper generic medicines. However, US trade negotiators, on behalf of pharmaceutical companies, are demanding stronger patent rights in the TPPA.

This would further delay the availability of cheaper medicines. Australians would have to pay higher prices for medicines, and in developing countries new medicines would become unaffordable.

In the US, where there is no national system to regulate the price of medicines, the wholesale prices of new medicines are three to ten times higher than the prices in Australia. This makes retail prices even higher, and many people cannot afford to buy medicines.

Through the Australian PBS, health experts compare the price and effectiveness of new medicines with

the price of cheaper generic medicines to assess their health effects. They then regulate the wholesale and retail prices of many medicines in Australia, so that pensioners pay no more than \$5.90 and others no more than \$36.10 for important medicines.

As well as keeping the prices of medicines low for consumers, the lower wholesale price reduces the cost to the taxpayer. This makes the PBS more sustainable in the long term.

However, US-based pharmaceutical companies argue that the PBS is a barrier to trade, and oppose these schemes because they receive a lower wholesale price for their medicines. US trade negotiators have proposed changes which would restrict price comparisons, such as those which are used in the PBS to make medicines affordable.

The Australian government should not agree to these proposals, which would lead to higher costs for both consumers and governments.

Large tobacco companies like Philip Morris are pushing for the inclusion of special rights for corporations in the TPPA which would

allow foreign investors to sue governments for damages if their investments have been harmed by a particular law or policy, even if the law or policy protects public health.

Known as investor-state dispute settlement, or ISDS, disputes are heard by international investment tribunals, not domestic courts. These tribunals give priority to investor rights rather than what is in the public interest.

ISDS is already being used to undermine Australia's democratic legislation. The Philip Morris tobacco company is trying to use an obscure 1993 Australia-Hong Kong investment agreement to sue the Australian government for millions of dollars of damages in an international tribunal over the plain packaging legislation.

The case is ongoing, despite the fact that the Australian High Court found that the law was a public health measure and companies were not entitled to compensation under Australian law.

The Abbott government's trade policy is to negotiate on ISDS.

### Take action!

The AFTINET has resources you can use to:

- send a message to the Trade Minister
- talk to your local Member of Parliament
- discuss the TPPA with friends, relatives and workmates
- hold a local meeting

\*Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network ✪

Film review by Jim Lane

## The Wolf of Wall Street

**The Wolf of Wall Street is an ugly, unforgivable movie of shameful practices and sociopathic tendencies. How else, of course, would you make a movie about Wall Street finance?**

Jordan Belfort, according to the movie taken from his book, didn't only disrespect and take advantage of trusting investors. He literally hated them. He curses and derides them all the way through the film. He steals their money and uses it for prostitutes and drugs. He teaches other people to do the same things for the same reasons.

Even after he goes to federal prison, depicted as a Club Fed resort, he continues bragging that he's rich and he's in a place where money can buy anything.

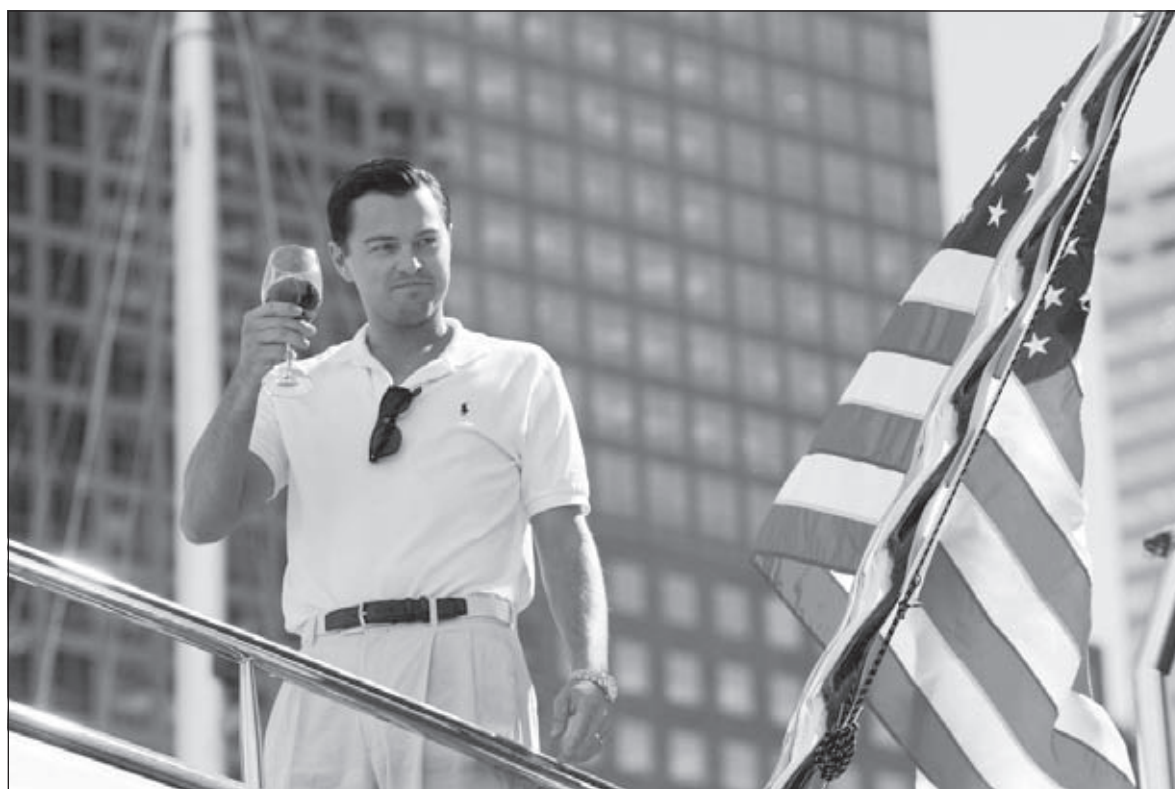
Jordan's nastiness is graphically depicted for three hours on the screen. Leonardo DiCaprio, portraying Jordan, explains every sordid detail in voice-over. There's lots of sex, seads of drugs, tons of cruelty, and legions of stealing. Calling it "over the top" is a major understatement.

The *New York Daily News* says that some countries won't let Jordan's movie be shown there. In others it's being censored. The same newspaper also says that the federal government made some gestures toward taking his fee for the movie rights, but they gave up. Wikipedia says he received US\$1,000,000 for his story, so he didn't just profit from his activities, he's still profiting!

Is the movie well done? Of course it's well done! It's Martin Scorsese! There are a lot of laughs and some very tantalising sex scenes. One hardly realises the extra length of the film as each scene vies with the last one for biggest impression.

So one could, if they wanted to, relate to this real Wall Street financial predator, Jordan Belfort, as the hero of a very entertaining saturnalia of a movie. But it's hard to avoid a gnawing feeling that the ticket stub in one's pocket is proof positive that we're not Jordan. We're some of the suckers he hustled!

*People's World* ✪



Leonardo DiCaprio as Jordan Belfort.



The Abbott government has not lost any time in implementing its declared "open for business" policy. Open for big business, of course at the expense of the environment. Environment Minister Greg Hunt is rushing through environmental approvals at the rate of more than one a day. Among the approvals was the highly controversial \$1.4bn expansion of the Abbot Point coal terminal which had been vigorously criticised by environmental groups which are calling for the world-heritage listed Great Barrier Reef to be protected from the dredging spoils needed to expand the harbour.

NSW Assistant Police Commissioner Mark Murdoch said last week that takeaway liquor sales were undermining tough measures applied to pubs and clubs in the fight against alcohol-fuelled violence. It is one of the many components that add to the sum total of causes leading to excessive drinking and drunken violence that follows. Big retailers are way ahead in supplying liquor – and at very low prices, too. One usually does not think of Woolworths as a liquor shop but in NSW its bottle shop empire has increased by 100 percent over the past five years to more than 350 stores. Woolworths owns the Dan Murphy's and BWS chains and is the country's largest packaged liquor retailer. Recently Liverpool council rejected Woolworths' proposal to open a Dan Murphy's store opposite a school at Moorebank. It did so because it was also opposed by doctors, police and parents. Woolworths' argument for opening a bottle shop opposite a school and exposing children to alcohol advertising was that it would help protect children from "the seductive powers of capitalism". This particular bit of wisdom comes from a British psychology academic who claims that "early exposure to any form of advertising is vital to protect young minds against the seductive powers of capitalism".

"It's hillbilly mining. It's not good enough," said Justin O'Brien, chief executive of the Gundjeihmi Aboriginal Corporation, which represents the Mirarr people. He was commenting on yet another accident at Ranger uranium mine where more than one million litres of mud, water, sulphuric acid and radioactive liquid spilled into grassed areas and into the mine's storm-water and drainage systems. The mine's operator, Energy Resources Australia claimed that no one was hurt and there was no impact on the Kakadu National Park. There have been more than 120 incidents at Ranger and some of them were so serious that even the Howard government threatened to shut the mine after a Senate Committee inquiry found a "persistent pattern of under-performance and non-compliance". The Mirarr people live at Mudginberri, on Magela Creek. It is seven kilometres downstream from the mine and the creek flows past the mine and into the community where people use it for fishing and drink the water from the creek. No wonder they are worried about the latest radioactive spill.

# Rebranding Syria's Al-Qaeda brigades

Phil Greave

**In the space of a week, two new formations of armed rebels mysteriously appeared across the mass-media lexicon and declared war on the dominant extremists through the usual "activist" social media accounts. The new brigades have virtually no historical record in the conflict, and appear to be largely a creation of the impotent exile opposition and its Western sponsors. An abundance of reports relay stories of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) simply abandoning their posts and being turned over by this supposedly "moderate" new force.**

Yet, in reality, the most predominant militia in Syria – those of a Salafi-Wahhabi fundamentalist bent, who now fight under the umbrella of the Islamic Front (IF), and are led by Hassan Abboud of Ahrar al-Sham, and Zahran Alloush of Liwa al-Islam – have made a concerted effort to avoid sowing discord between themselves and the overt Al-Qaeda affiliates of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN).

## New narrative

The new narrative emerging draws heavily from the Sahwa (Awakening) in Iraq, in which Sunni tribes from the western province of Anbar took up arms against, and eventually defeated, the Al-Qaeda insurgency that followed the US invasion and occupation of that country. Western and Gulf media are now attempting to reinvigorate the rebels' public image by concocting a portrayal of brave "moderates" taking on the extremists within ISIS. Yet contrary to the Syria-Sahwa narrative, the vast majority of opposition forces, as much as one can generalise, have in fact been shown to share far more in common with their extremist equivalents than they have differences, particularly in regards to their reciprocal – and sectarian-laden – religiopolitical ideologies.

According to Western and Gulf propagandists, Jabhat al-Nusra ostensibly represent the "homegrown" Syrian Al-Qaeda branch. Whereas in actual fact, the claim is entirely false; JaN's militia hold a distinct foreign contingent and many of its commanders have also been found to be of foreign descent – particularly Iraqi. Jabhat al-Nusra, therefore, should be correctly viewed as a semi-Syrian militia at most, built and sustained by ISIS and its former incarnation: the Islamic State of Iraq, (ISI) also formerly known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

The ideologically aligned Salafi-Jihadists of Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and more recently ISIS, have formed the spearhead of the insurgency throughout the entire Syrian crisis, leading offensives against Syrian army installations, whilst also having enough manpower, funds and materiel to attack, encamp and militarily fortify civilian areas across the country. Most notably in Raqqah, which has become a virtual Al-Qaeda statelet under the control of either Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS.

Examples of the dominant role fundamentalists have played in the insurgency are abundant, during an interview with *Time* magazine, Ahrar al-Sham fighters – who, as we have seen through a plethora of evidence, are inextricably linked to Jabhat al-Nusra – freely admit they were planning a violent insurgency in Syria well before any peaceful protests occurred in 2011, and that recruits with underlying sectarian agendas made efforts to sanitise and mask their true Jihadist cause during the earlier phases of the conflict in order to win over the Syrian population. What is more, a recent report in the *National* relayed much the same admissions from supposed "FSA" rebels operating in the south of Syria around Dar'aa.

The rebels interviewed admitted that "They [JaN] offer their services and cooperate with us, they are better armed than we are, they have suicide bombers and know how to make car bombs." Rebel sources went on to say that "the FSA and Al Nusra join together for operations but they have an agreement to let the FSA lead

for public reasons, because they don't want to frighten Jordan or the West".

## Public image

During the interview rebels further elaborate on the efforts made to boost the public image of the western-backed imaginary moderates saying that "operations that were really carried out by Al Nusra are publicly presented by the FSA as their own," and that supposed moderate FSA fighters "say that Al Nusra fighters are really from the FSA to enable them to move more easily across borders". The reports bolster earlier analyses that contradict the dominant narrative, often dismissed as "conspiracy theory", which indicated such actions were being undertaken, and that the armed groups responsible for the initial violence in March-April 2011 were indeed religious fundamentalists, not the secular "freedom fighters" endlessly lionised by the lackeys of Western governments and media.

Such candid rebel admissions once again expose the falsehoods that liberal opportunists rely on when blindly repeating the imperialist narrative of a peaceful protest movement simply morphing into an Al-Qaeda-led insurgency. In reality, the generally small and legitimate protests calling for reform were used as a fig leaf by Syria's various internal and external enemies to hide the extremist-led militant insurgency they were orchestrating and colluding with.

As evidenced in numerous interviews and statements from Abboud and Alloush, the Islamic Front is not by any stretch of the imagination a "moderate" force opposed to JaN, ISIS, or Al-Qaeda ideology in general (unless one utilises the doublespeak of the US State Department when describing their "moderate" Wahhabi-Salafi monarchical clients in the Gulf). Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa a-Islam and other various proto-Salafi militia operating under the umbrella of the Islamic Front have repeatedly fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and taken part in offensives that have targeted towns and villages on the specific criteria of the sect of the civilian inhabitants.

## Barbarity

The massacres committed upon the civilian residents of Latakia provide just one recent example of such sectarian barbarity – committed not only by the extreme elements, but with the full cooperation and participation of supposed moderate "FSA" militia. A more recent example of the Islamic Front cooperating with its Al-Qaeda affiliates came in December, when the IF took part in the attack and ensuing massacre of civilians in the workers' district of Adra, Damascus – another rebel war-crime almost totally omitted from Western media, regardless of the fact the BBC's chief foreign correspondent was a mere 20 miles away while the massacres were occurring.

When framed in the correct context, it becomes clear that the vast majority of rebels in Syria are in fact ideologically allied to the very Al-Qaeda affiliates the media is trying to portray them as opposed to. A recent communiqué from the political head of the IF, and leader of Ahrar al-Sham, Hassan Abboud, was disingenuously portrayed as an Islamic Front "warning" to ISIS. Opposition-friendly media outlets and analysts are in effect conflating the Islamic Front with imaginary "moderates" and in turn attempting to portray them as ideological opponents to their more extreme Al-Qaeda counterparts.

This narrative is turning reality on its head, as Abboud's recent statement is actually a "warning" against discord with ISIS. Abboud encourages the Syrian population to treat the Muhajirin (foreign jihadists busy murdering Syrians) "kindly", and further encourages ISIS to emulate the "more healthy" manner of their supposed "home-grown" incarnation Jabhat al-Nusra. Accordingly, one can safely conclude that Abboud, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Islam, and the various Salafi militia operating under the umbrella of the Islamic Front – the largest



***Insurgencies in the Arab and Muslim world provide copious amounts of evidence to show that invariably the United States and its Saudi partners have always utilised, fomented, and sponsored reactionary forces.***

militant force of the opposition – have close to zero ideological disparity with ISIS or JaN.

Even if what seem to be inflated reports of discord and infighting between the Islamic Front and the supremacist ideologues in ISIS were to result in a considerable loss for the latter, it would simply be replaced at the top of the fundamentalist food-chain by the next militia willing to impose its barbarity and coercion in the most effective way. This is ultimately the inherent nature of fundamentalist militant insurgencies; they are designed, indoctrinated, equipped, and funded to impose upon states and peoples through murder, coercion and fear, not through the appeal of a popular political doctrine and the mass support of the people.

The simple facts that the insurgency as a whole is under no central hierarchy, and holds little to no support inside Syria and is therefore susceptible to becoming reliant and subordinate to its foreign patrons, are clear indications that it will not be cohesive, regardless of the varying shades of fundamentalism the dominant groups have attempted to enforce.

## Sponsored forces

The historical record of Western-backed insurgencies in the Arab and Muslim world provides copious amounts of evidence to show that invariably the United States and its Saudi partners have always utilised, fomented, and sponsored reactionary forces to meet geopolitical ends, particularly when subverting or attacking nationalist governments that refuse to abide by the Anglo-American capitalist order – with disastrous consequences for the countries in which the fundamentalist proxies are set upon.

One needs only to glance at the very recent history of Libya to negate the establishment falsehood that if the Syrian government had been overthrown quickly the fundamentalists would not have gained in strength. Again, this

is turning the historical record on its head, as the joint NATO-Al-Qaeda war on Libya has once again shown; the swift overthrow of a state's government and leadership inevitably results in reactionary fundamentalists taking advantage of the power vacuum left behind.

The US-Saudi-backed insurgency in Afghanistan during the 1980s, which fought against the Soviet-backed Communist government, provides perhaps the definitive example of the type of proxies the United States and Saudi Arabia choose to employ to destroy target states. As with Syria and Libya, the original "Afghan Arab" insurgency – which helped to create and empower Al-Qaeda, Bin Laden, Hekmatyar, the Haqqani network and a host of other fundamentalist militancy – was wrought with infighting, extremism, warlordism, and reaction, this trend has continued in virtually every state the US and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners have targeted for "liberation" via jihadist proxies.

Perpetual infighting evidenced throughout the Syrian insurgency is in fact a result of the long-standing fragmentation of the various opposition forces, their varying degrees of fundamentalism, and the battle to win influence, arms, and funds through foreign donors and exploitation.

The evidence-free narratives of supposed existential disparity between what actually represent ideological allies, the patterns of ever-changing nomenclature and rebel rebranding, and the efforts to scapegoat the most overtly extreme elements for the systematic crimes of the opposition as a whole, are nothing more than public relations exercises, designed to whitewash the massive crimes of the "rebels", whilst extricating the Western elite and their GCC partners from the criminal act of sponsoring extremists for geopolitical ends.

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# The truly unbelievable story of Julian Assange and the milkman's horse



Peter Mac

Since his last public appearance there have been persistent reports that Julian Assange, the Australian founder of WikiLeaks, has secretly left the Ecuadorian embassy in London. Faced with arrest after publishing a number of highly embarrassing diplomatic cables, Assange sought diplomatic asylum there in 2012.

Several months ago the Metropolitan Police received an anonymous report that Assange planned to leave the embassy disguised as a milkman. They swooped, but the “fugitive” turned out to be the milkman himself. The police hastily apologised after the Milk Carters’ Union threatened to ban milk deliveries to police canteens across Britain.

According to an unnamed source, after the fiasco of the milkman’s arrest a group of Assange’s supporters hatched a ridiculous plan to assist his exit by staging a fake milk delivery. The group is said to have links to the notorious Australian practical joker team the “Chasers”, who gatecrashed the Sydney G8 meeting several years ago.

For some obscure historical reason early morning milk deliveries are still made by horse and cart in this part of London. The group intended to utilise a mechanical “horse” recently used as a stage prop in a play about horses in the First World War; with the head and neck covered with a vinyl skin, and the rest of the body with a blanket. They entertained the naïve hope the police wouldn’t spot the difference, and wouldn’t notice when Assange took the place of the second plotter at the rear of the horse.

It was nonsense of course. Although the prop is remarkably convincing on stage, and

the street is rather badly lit, the scheme was doomed to failure. Indeed, given the edgy mood of the police, it was potentially suicidal.

However, in an extraordinary twist of fate a number of factors intervened in favour of the plotters.

## The best laid plans

The chosen morning was very cold, with an unusually thick fog. About three am the police officer at the embassy entrance retreated to the more comfortable police lookout in a building across the street.

The same officer had been disciplined for an excess of zeal during the milkman’s arrest. Still smarting from the reprimand, he was indisposed to pay attention to the stunningly boring job of watching a doorway for hours on end.

And finally, he assumed that if Assange fled, he would walk or run from the front door, the only exit. The police had made the front of the building a no-parking area to assist their view. However, they made an exception for milk deliveries, and the low-slung milk cart obscures the view of the bottom half of the door from the police lookout.

According to our informant, an embassy official opened the door to receive the milk crate, whereupon Assange crawled between his legs to the milk cart and somehow managed to take the place of the rear-guard plotter in the fog. The best laid plans of mice and policemen gang aft aglay.

The plotter whose position Assange had taken remained sprawled in the embassy doorway, feigning intoxication with a small bottle of very good scotch. The guard officer accosted him, but let him go after confiscating the scotch.

As he later reported to his superiors, the real milkman arrived shortly afterwards. However,

he swore blind (as it were) that Assange hadn’t appeared – which from his point of view was technically correct. The Chief Inspector was uneasy, but with no evidence to the contrary he decided the episode was just a prank, and no further action was taken.

A week or so later the police received another tip-off, this time that Assange intended to leave disguised as the cleaning lady. They now suspected a leg-pull, but couldn’t afford to ignore the information. Sure enough, in due course the cleaning lady, who admittedly did bear some fleeting resemblance to Assange, was arrested as she left.

Unfortunately, she later suffered a nervous breakdown as a result. However, she made a remarkably swift recovery, sued the Met and was awarded substantial damages.

## Secrets rule, OK?

Julian Assange was the subject of a recent heated media interview given by Gladys Nost, the cabinet minister responsible for national security. Ms Nost is known to her small circle of friends as “Glas”, for short. The combination of her nickname and surname is particularly ironic because neither the current government nor the governments of other Western nations have shown any tendency to implement the policy of “glasnost” or open government that they demanded from the former Soviet Union.

Indeed, individuals who have attempted to implement the policy have been subjected to savage reprisals. Bradley Manning, the US soldier who passed the secret cables to WikiLeaks, is undergoing a court-martial, after being held in solitary confinement for two years.

Assange is threatened with deportation to face highly dubious charges of sexual

misconduct in Sweden, from where it is very likely he would be transported to the US to face prosecution for releasing the cables. Edward Snowden, another US whistleblower, has been forced to seek asylum in Russia, after facing similar charges.

In Australia, Assange’s birthplace, the Abbott government has resorted to an extraordinary level of secrecy regarding a series of highly controversial policies, particularly relating to the treatment of asylum seekers. The government has refused to say what happened to asylum seeker boats that attempted to reach Australia but were forced back to international waters by the Australian Navy.

Nor will it confirm that ASIO, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, has forced a bank to cancel the account of Mamdouh Habib, an Australian citizen taken captive by US forces in Afghanistan. Habib is currently trying to get the Egyptian government to admit he was transported there and tortured, after his capture.

At the London media interview Ms Nost maintained a tight-lipped silence when a *Times* reporter suggested the public had a right to the information in the cables, which related in part to US war crimes, and that perhaps members of the previous government should be prosecuted for covering things up.

But what about the current whereabouts of Julian Assange? At the media interview one journalist mentioned a report in the UK *Guardian* that Assange is now living in a very nice hacienda somewhere in South America. Ms Nost replied with a snarl that he shouldn’t believe anything he read in the *Guardian* article concerning the current whereabouts of Julian Assange.

And neither should you. ✪

# ICC receives "devastating" dossier on British war crimes

Felicity Arbuthnot

A "devastating" 250-page document: "The Responsibility of UK Officials for War Crimes Involving Systematic Detainee Abuse in Iraq from 2003-2008", has been "presented to the International Criminal Court, and could result in some of Britain's leading defence figures facing prosecution for "systematic war crimes" the (London) *Independent* has revealed.

The dossier charges that "those who bear the greatest responsibility" for alleged war crimes "include individuals at the highest levels" of the British Army and political system.

Among those named, states the *Independent*, are two former Defence Ministry supremos, Geoff Hoon and Adam Ingram, Defence Secretary and Minister of State for the Armed Forces, respectively, under Tony Blair's premiership, during the planning and invasion of Iraq and for most of the UK's occupation. General Sir Peter Wall, head of the British Army is also named.

Shocking allegations have been compiled from the testimonies of 400 Iraqis: "representing thousands of allegations of mistreatment amounting to war crimes of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment."

The document, lodged with the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague on January 11, 2013, "calls for an investigation into the

alleged war crimes, under Article 15 of the Rome Statute" and is the result of some years of work by Birmingham based Public Interest Lawyers and the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR.). The submission "is the most detailed ever submitted to the ICC's Office of the Prosecutor on war crimes allegedly committed by British forces in Iraq."

In 2006 the ICC opined that: "There was a reasonable basis to believe that crimes within the jurisdiction of the court had been committed, namely wilful killing and inhuman treatment." However, since the claims were less than 20 cases, prosecutors declined to mount an investigation.

Subsequently: "Hundreds of other claims have come to light, prompting consideration of the complaint now. It is the start of a process which could result in British politicians and generals being put in the dock on war-crimes charges." The: "pattern of abusive treatment by UK services personnel in Iraq continued over almost six years of military operations." When is a crime not a crime, one wonders, when it is "only" in double figures?

Evidence is presented of "Systematic use of brutal violence, that at times resulted in the death of detainees, while in the custody of UK Services Personnel." The two law bodies claim: "There is evidence of brutality combined with cruelty and forms of sadism, including sexual abuse, and



sexual and religious humiliation", with widespread use of "hooding", prisoners forced in to excruciating "stress positions, sleep deprivation, noise bombardment and deprivation of food and water."

All such techniques were banned under the government of Edward Heath in 1972, after being used in Northern Ireland. Claims are that these legally outlawed techniques were used: "in a variety of different UK facilities (in Iraq) ... from 2003 to 2008." (Incidentally, after September 2007, the British stated that only a small military contingency remained, assisting in training Iraqis.)

Alleged tortuous treatment was compounded, seemingly, by "failures to follow-up on or ensure accountability for ending such practices became a cause of further abuse. The obvious conclusion is that such mistreatment was systematic."

The *Independent* quotes Professor William Schabas, human rights

law expert: "What this application does is throw down the challenge to the court to show there are no double standards. There is definitely a case for an investigation by the ICC." He suggested that "there's no doubt" of war crimes committed by British forces in Iraq. "People should be worried."

The UK Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office both state that any allegations of abuse have been, or are being investigated through various, including legal channels, with William Hague emphasising that there was no need for the ICC to become involved.

The ICC as a body has also come under fire, accused of only putting on trial, or investigating largely Africans and ignoring other alleged human rights abuses.

ECCHR Secretary General, Wolfgang Kaleck told the *Independent*: "With the current communication to the ICC we want to move

forward the criminal prosecution against those political and military leaders in the UK who bear the most responsibility for systematic torture in Iraq", adding: "The International Criminal Court in The Hague is the last resort for victims of torture and mistreatment to achieve justice."

"Double standards in international criminal justice must end. War crimes and other severe violations of human rights must be investigated and prosecuted, regardless of whether they are committed by the most powerful."

According to Phil Shiner of Public Interest Lawyers, the actions of British officials in high places, involved in the invasion, planning, execution and occupation, are to come under investigation. "I think we easily meet the threshold for these issues to be looked at, I would be gobsmacked and bitterly disappointed if they don't look at this." *Information Clearing House* ♣

## Spending limit "risks aiding fascist cause"

Paddy McGuffin

Anti-fascist campaign Hope Not Hate warned last week that the Lobbying Bill still poses a major threat to the fight against the British National Party (BNP) despite a welcome Lords victory. Campaign co-ordinator Nick Lowles praised members of the upper house who voted 237 to 194 to exempt some charity staff costs from pre-election spending limits included in the law.

Ministers had announced a series of changes last week to appease voluntary sector critics of the "anti-lobbying" Bill, which heavily targets trade union activities.

Peers backed an amendment by Lord Harries of Pentregarth which would remove the "background staff costs" associated with holding events such as press conferences and rallies from the spending thresholds.

But Mr Lowles warned that the law still restricted charities and campaigning organisations to a tiny fraction of the amount that fascist parties such as the BNP are being allowed to spend promoting their message of hate.

"The £9,750 spending limit for

constituency-based campaigning is deemed by the vast majority of NGOs as unworkable and by the Electoral Commission as unenforceable," he said.

"Being made to spend only two percent of what the BNP and other political parties can spend in vulnerable local communities is both unfair and dangerous."

Major fears also remain over the "union-bashing" nature of the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party campaigning and Trade Union Bill. Unions face limits on campaigning as well as a draconian regime that would force them to hand over their membership lists.

Trade Union Congress general secretary Frances O'Grady warned: "The government may have suffered another humiliating defeat on the Lobbying Bill in the Lords last night, but the threat to freedom of speech and the ability to campaign against racist organisations like the BNP remains real."

"Rather than muddling its way through the government should scrap the Bill, and start again with a Bill that actually focuses on lobbyists, rather than curbing civil society organisations." *Morning Star* ♣

## East coast vultures

Ryan Fletcher

**BRITAIN: Blinkered Tories pressed ahead with the sale of profitable publicly owned East Coast mainline with a shortlist of three private bidders unveiled. Among them were partnerships between some of the big transport firms already running other sham-bolic and overpriced rail routes across Britain.**

Tory Rail Minister Stephen Hammond confirmed that the franchise will be handed to either First Group plc, Keolis/Eurostar or Stagecoach/Virgin.

Unions and other groups have been campaigning for months to halt re-privatisation of the franchise, which has been publicly run since 2009.

Previous private operator National Express "handed back the keys" after defaulting on a payment that had been due to the government.

Under public ownership it has scored the highest ratings for punctuality and customer satisfaction of any long-distance route. It was also

the only rail franchise to announce price freezes or below-inflation rises on many of its 2014 fares.

And it has made big returns for the taxpayer too, with around £800 million being returned to the government. But the government has been racing to re-privatise the line before the next election in what rail union RMT said was "an ideologically motivated decision."

The new franchise is scheduled to start early next year.

Mr Hammond brazened out criticism of the sell-off plans. "For our railways to continue to grow we need strong private-sector partners who can invest and innovate in ways that deliver a world-class service," he blustered.

However, rail union TSSA said the sell-off was "nothing short of economic vandalism by a Chancellor who does not want voters to know the truth."

"It is a public-sector success story," said general secretary Manuel Cortes.

"It has been the cheapest franchise to run for the past five years and it has produced the greatest

return to taxpayers, over £600 million.

"By selling it off before the election, he wants to hide those facts."

RMT general secretary Bob Crow said: "This government is prepared to take a third gamble on its big-business friends in a desperate bid to privatise the East Coast mainline before the election, even though they are well aware that the whole reckless exercise will cost the British public hundreds of millions of pounds in lost income."

And train drivers' union Aslef general secretary Mick Whelan said he was "disappointed but not surprised."

He said: "In their rush to re-privatise, the government has trampled over the views of the people who live along the East Coast route, who it promised to consult and the stakeholders, who want to keep the East Coast in public ownership and they will lose a public-sector comparator against which we can judge the performance of the private operators." *Morning Star* ♣



# War from above

Richard Hugus

**Drone aircraft, which we first heard of as weapons of war used by the United States in foreign lands, are now poised for a full-scale invasion of the skies above the US itself. On December 30, 2013 the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) announced its choices for drone testing in six states around the country – Alaska, Nevada, New York, North Dakota, Texas and Virginia.**

These six states may in turn do their testing in more than one location. For example, according to the *Anchorage Daily News*, drone testing centred in Alaska at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks will be called “the ‘Pan-Pacific Unmanned Aircraft Systems Test Range Complex’”. It includes six flight ranges in Alaska, four in Hawaii and three in Oregon.” According to the *Honolulu Star Advertiser* “the Pohakuloa Training Area on Hawaii island, the Pacific Missile Range Facility on Kauai and even the island of Niihau have been included in discussions of places where the testing could occur.”

According to the *East Oregonian*, drone testing is likely to involve a former military base in Pendleton, Port of Tillamook, and Warm Springs. Likewise, the New York

operation will be run from the former Griffiss Air Force base in Rome, NY and, according to the *Cape Cod Times*, will also include the former Otis Air Base on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The *Times* reports that “the Cape site had the support of the state’s congressional delegation, a statewide military asset commission and business leaders” and that “among the institutions involved in the bid are Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Rochester Institute of Technology.”

What this story reveals is the creation of a huge web of Department of Defence-connected Universities, businesses, corporations, defence contractors, and former and current Pentagon facilities spread all over the country. Included in this web are the many and various chambers of commerce, their boosters in the press, and numerous comprador “officials” anxious to bring federal money into their districts, at the expense of all the other people who live in them.

Almost no news coverage has appeared that would imply the FAA decision was anything but a boon for the economy and the advent of a wonderful and inevitable new technology.

There is little news about the down side to hosting drones in all these areas of the country, each with

a populace that has simply not been consulted. Drones first came to our attention at the beginning of “the war on terror”. We learned of them first as weapons for highly illegal, cowardly, and indiscriminate “targeted killings” in foreign lands. These weapons have murdered countless innocent people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia pursuant to “kill lists” drawn up every week by the CIA and Pentagon, and approved by the White House.

These weapons fulfil the US Air Force’s fantasy of “death from above,” carried out by pilots working in the security and comfort of US bases who, acting as judge, jury, and executioner, destroy supposed enemies from computer consoles as if it were a video game.

The cowardliness of wars of aggression being conducted against innocent people in dirt-poor lands by unseen “UAV pilots” in air-conditioned offices thousands of kilometres away cannot be over-emphasised.

This is what unmanned aircraft have brought so far to the reputation of the United States – a new low in the entire universe of human ethics. Murder abroad is but the advance of capitalism at home. Wedding parties in Afghanistan have been decimated so that Amazon can deliver CDs and smart phones to our door by drone.

Nor is there news about the introduction of drones domestically as yet another assault on privacy and the human right to be free from surveillance. Domestic law enforcement agencies are just as anxious to spy on the US population and target people they call criminals as the Pentagon and CIA have been to spy on the rest of the world and kill people they call terrorists.

It isn’t enough that our phones and computers have been turned by the NSA into astounding instruments of surveillance, that everything we say and do on these instruments is being harvested and stored, and that surveillance cameras are mounted at almost every business and public space. Now the national security state wants to have remote-controlled cameras videotaping us full-time from the sky.

The police hope to have drones able to fire “non-lethal weapons” at people they deem to be involved in criminal activity so that they too can play God. Without question, non-lethal weapons will soon become lethal weapons and the US will be trying and executing citizens at home as it has done elsewhere without even a hint of due process.

The domestic military bases which are being revived by this brave new technology originally went out

of business because there was nothing for them to do in the fulfilment of their original purpose – defending the country.

Otis Air Base, now called “Joint Base Cape Cod”, is a case in point. It used to patrol the skies for Russian aircraft along the northeast coast and ended up being a disaster for the community in which it was situated because it polluted the local groundwater and sole-source drinking water aquifer with millions of gallons of dumped jet fuel and cleaning solvents.

It sent fighter jets to intercept the two planes hijacked to New York on September 11, 2001, but ended up being part of a ploy to let those planes actually reach the twin towers before they got there. This base and many others have been parasites on the communities around them. They will continue in that role in their new incarnation as hosts to drone spying and drone warfare.

The war has come home. The people orchestrating this war – the global elite – have no particular allegiance to the United States. From their point of view, its land and its people must be brought under control, just like everywhere else. How sad it is to see the scramble to welcome them.

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# Quito youth meeting

Lisa Bergman

**QUITO, ECUADOR: Just hours after the passing of Nelson Mandela in December, over 8,000 youth from around the globe began gathering at the 18th World Festival of Youth and Students in Quito, Ecuador.**

During the Quito festival’s opening days, beautiful music, banners, and singing filled the air as young people entered the festival’s main venue, Quito’s Parque Bicentenario. There were samba drummers, Andean flutists, Ecuadorian punk bands, and dancing to accompany all as the festival began.

In the opening ceremonies, the young people from each country gathered to march with their delegations. The groups from Cuba, Colombia, Russia, and Ecuador stood out as particularly large and well coordinated. At the opening ceremony stage, nearly every speaker made reference to the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela, and made calls to the youth movement to continue the struggles for equality and peace in his name.

President Rafael Correa came to address the gathering at the end of the ceremony. In a passionate speech, the president repeated multiple times that there can be no peace in the world without justice. He welcomed the youth of the world to Ecuador, and encouraged them to exchange with each other and push for equality in their communities.

Correa’s speech was all the more dramatic because the rain that began falling at the beginning of his talk became heavier and heavier, until the president and everyone in his company on the stage were completely drenched. However, Correa carried on as if it were the sunniest day in June.

In the days that followed, the festival delegates attended workshops on a broad variety of topics, and exchanged ideas and gifts with each other at the festival’s “Friendship Fair”.

Discussion sessions were held on youth unemployment, sexual and

reproductive rights, ending the US blockade against Cuba, access to higher education, racism and xenophobia, and more.

In a special session called the “Anti-Imperialist Tribunal”, delegates offered testimony describing the ways in which corporate and political imperialism are destroying their local communities.

Student organisations from a variety of countries exchanged strategies to preserve quality, public higher education in this age of aggressive privatisation.

In addition to the workshops, there were a number of other resources available to the festival delegates. One tent offered free dental examinations and cleanings. Another shared family planning information and a demonstration on how it feels to be pregnant and how to care for young babies.

Still another hosted displays of Ecuador’s new social programs under the national “Buen Vivir” plan which expands public health services, education, transportation access, and other services.

The Ecuadorian hosts issued a special call to action regarding Chevron’s disgraceful treatment of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Chevron-Texaco dumped billions of gallons of toxic wastewater into rivers and streams, and left over 1,000 large pools of crude oil unmanaged throughout the region.

The result is devastation of the Amazon’s ecosystem, and widespread health tragedies among local Indigenous communities, including birth defects and cancers.

Thirty-four delegates from the US participated. The youth festival movement began in the wake of World War II, when young people across the globe chose to declare international solidarity and peace as the way forward out of the war’s misery.

Mandela himself attended one of the world youth festivals.

*People’s World* ☪

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## The biggest problem

**The biggest problem that confronts answers to stopping climate change is “development” for the non-western world. These second and third world economies which most of the world’s population live in are forced into one type of development which is capitalism. If they try any other type of development such as in Cuba the West pro-actively tries to impoverish their economies.**

So being limited in what type of development they are allowed to have, they only have one option and that is to mimic the West’s development path such as Australia, i.e. pull out 13 billion trees and turn the land over to export profit, the consequences of which also means killing off more mammal species than any previous societies have ever done. This clear-felling is being copied in

Indonesia, the Amazon rainforest as well as the rest of the world.

They also base development on creating a society based on aspirational desires to climb up a materialist ladder where a new middle-class show of their superiority with, as an example, owning their individual private transport (the Ford based car). Clearly none of this is sustainable development and means climate change based on the rest of the world, copying the West’s “development”, is going to get worse.

What is most interesting however is that the Western middle-class environmentalists, either as individuals or through their NGO’s, not understanding imperialist politics believe they have some sense of superiority to demand of the second and third world societies not to destroy their environments. A good example of this scenario is the jailing of Greenpeace activists in Russia.

There is no doubt that the Russian government sees these activists as agents of Western imperialism who are trying to stop them from exploiting the oil from the Arctic seas so as to allow the West to exploit them instead. The Russian capitalist government would be asking the question “why are these Western activists stopping us from exploiting the oil when their own countries are destroying the planet through

fracking and exploiting oil such as Chevron, BP and Shell with the worst examples of oil spills?”. Why aren’t they stopping their own societies who are the architects of climate change and exploitation? A good question.

The socialist government in Bolivia has recently also had to deal with Western NGO interference in its tribal societies where they are trying to lock up their rainforests. The dilemma for the government is that to survive in the world of Western capitalism one has to exploit every asset so as to pull their societies out of poverty and misery. If the only model of development is western capitalism what right does the western middle-class environmentalists have to stop the second and third world societies from also enjoying the decadent lifestyle that they enjoy?

Of course we as communists do not agree with Western capitalism’s development, the Soviet government under Lenin protected swathes of the environment and they could do that because they did not have to deal with a dictatorship of the rich.

Until the Western middle-class environmentalists and their NGO’s understand that they are part of the problem, being naive politically about imperialism and capitalist governments, the world will continue to get hotter. Until they join us and replace Western capitalist

governments controlled by the billionaires with communist governments the rest of the world will demand the same right as the West has to exploit the planet even if it means destroying it.

H Patterson  
Melbourne

## A list and best wishes

- Twenty years ago models weighed six per cent less than the average woman, today they weigh 27 percent less.
- African-Americans are taught in schools that Jefferson was a great man, ignoring the fact that he owned 330 slaves and raped his female slaves.
- The United States sells an average of US\$68 billion in weapons each year to Middle Eastern dictators and monarchies.
- Since September 2001, terrorism has killed 4,300 civilians; the war on terror has killed more than 2 million civilians.
- Americans and Europeans throw away enough edible food to feed every starving person in Africa.
- More bombs were dropped on Vietnam by the US than all the bombs dropped in World War I and II.
- Since 1945 the United States has attempted to overthrow more than

50 foreign governments.

- In India, Coca Cola has deprived locals of water use; up to 9 litres of water are required to make 1 litre of Coca Cola.
- Gandhi never received a Nobel Peace Prize; Obama received a Nobel Peace Prize while his soldiers were “accidentally” killing Iraqi children.
- Germany has paid US\$61.8 Billion to Jewish victims; to this day the US has not paid one dollar to African-Americans for 400 years of brutal slavery.
- If you eat at McDonalds once a week, your chances of being obese go up by 140 percent.
- Pakistan has enough natural resources to light up the country for 500 years, yet 90 percent of its population face 12 to 18 hours of power cuts daily.
- Every year, US\$400 billion is spent on prostitution while all it takes is US\$5 billion to provide poor women with basic reproductive healthcare.
- Since 1992, there have been 124 cases of American professors being reprimanded by their deans for their open support for Palestinians.

Wishing everyone the best in 2014.

Gerry Georgatos  
WA

# Culture & Life

by

Rob Gowland

# Carry on spying

**Have you noticed how the brouhaha over the revelations that America’s spy agencies eavesdropped on everybody’s phone calls, correspondence, conversations and so on, with the willing co-operation of so-called “social media” companies, have quietly been allowed to fade away?**

True, in the USA, President Obama has enacted some milk-sop legislation that is supposed to curb the “excesses” of the intelligence agencies, but which in reality merely adds an annoying level of extra bureaucracy to be negotiated before it’s “business as usual”.

In Britain, the country that leads the world in domestic surveillance, David Cameron’s Tory government has not only refrained from joining the global criticism of US “extraterritorial” surveillance, but has continued to make its GCHQ electronic spying centre in Cheltenham available to support the USA’s NSA bugging program.

You will recall that the global outcry over this US spying spree, disclosed in all its gobsmacking breadth by former NSA employee Edward Snowden, was fended off by US authorities as necessary to fight terrorism. That argument looked a bit threadbare when the victims of this US bugging were revealed to include German Chancellor Angela

Merkel. Bugging her phone would surely reveal nothing about terrorist groups, but it could reveal much about German capitalism’s approach to US plans to dominate the world’s energy resources, about German capital’s response to the US push for free trade agreements (giving the US much-needed market access), and about German imperialism’s own plans for German domination of south-eastern Europe.

Knowing just exactly what your “friends” are doing in the area of international trade can give a government a trillion dollar advantage, something not to be sneezed at.

It was Henry Kissinger who memorably said “America has no friends, only interests”. Today, all around the world, governments that used to be proud to be numbered among those “interests” are now reassessing their relationship with the American superpower. Just what benefits do they get for allowing their rights to be walked on quite so blatantly?

The present US assault on democratic rights and national sovereignty is meant to be the spearhead of a general capitalist assault on working people, on the poor and have-nots, by a system that is staring catastrophe in the face. The richest, most powerful capitalist country, the USA, is watching its economic empire crumble.

By reducing the bulk of the people to the status of peons, the chiefs of the big corporations hope to ride out the coming crisis with minimum discomfort. But the writing is already on the wall.

Just last week, the ABC ran a short news story about China’s financial assets. Pointing to a clutch of high-rise office buildings in one of China’s east-coast cities, the commentator observed that the headquarters of many of the world’s most important and profitable companies were located in China. “And what is more important”, he said, “they are owned by the State.”

And it is an important point: whereas in other countries, big corporations tell the government what to do (“to make business conditions better”), in China the government tells the big corporations where it wants capital invested and in what manner.

The Bank of China has more financial assets than the World Bank and the Bank of Asian Development combined. Every fourth thing manufactured in the world is made in China. In the US, manufacturing – once the mainstay of the country’s economy – is disappearing down the drain. Look at Detroit: once the epitome of ascendant capitalism, now almost a ghost town.

US imperialism is in deep

trouble. More and more countries are writing their international contracts in currencies other than US dollars, once the universal choice for such transactions. Now, with the US owing trillions of dollars, making it the world’s biggest debtor nation by far, foreign governments have become fearful that a crash could wipe out their foreign reserves as well as the US government’s.

It was this potential global threat that prompted Chinese economist Liu Chang in October of last year to call for the “de-Americanisation of the world”. I imagine that did not go down well in Washington!

In all this economic turmoil, there is a growing possibility of an alliance of sorts between the increasingly significant BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the EU countries. The latter of course are having all sorts of problems of their own, with austerity measures, raging unemployment and no sign of improvement in the future.

Meanwhile, in Ukraine, the right-wing have been staging mass rallies demanding the government join the EU as a way of overcoming their economic difficulties. The people of Spain, Portugal, France and Greece would probably wonder at the wisdom of that particular approach! (The Right in Ukraine is, of course,

more interested in avoiding closer ties to Russia than in whether the EU is really the economic nirvana that they are claiming it is.)

If an alliance between the BRICS countries and the EU were to replace the USA as the dominant economic force in the world, the world would still be predominantly capitalist. But there would be a mix of economies, and it would be a multi-polar world. And that would be a big step forward from where we are now.

In the meantime, however, imperialism is fighting to protect its foothold on power, and that means continued surveillance, continued spying on unions, revolutionaries, even vaguely progressive politicians, governments and movements everywhere around the world, in fact any one any where who might help or hinder US interests. But people, all over the world, have come out in a remarkable show of support for Edward Snowden and against US spying.

In Australia, we have our own spy scandal as we learn of the role of this country’s Signals Directorate in spying on impoverished East Timor in order to more easily steal that country’s natural gas reserves. How morally bankrupt can Australian capitalism get? ☛





Sunday January 26 –  
Saturday February 1

The two-hour thriller *Mystery Road* (ABC1 Sunday January 26 at 8.30pm) was written and directed by Ivan Sen. Set in outback northern NSW, it is the story of an Indigenous detective, Jay Swan (Aaron Pederson), who returns to the town to be handed the case of a murdered teen-age girl found under a truck over-pass.

Writer-director Sen strives for a brooding “psychological thriller” atmosphere and most of the time pulls it off. Just occasionally the longeurs become a little obvious. Also just occasionally one is moved to wonder just how many American thrillers set in small towns (so-called “American gothic”) he has seen. With his gun-toting hero, white police who are either indifferent, hostile or mixed up in something, an Aboriginal population who are surprisingly uninterested in helping, “Alienation” is stamped rather large all over the cast.

A little less negativity in the writing would have made this a first rate outback thriller. As it is, it's not too bad, just a little un-recognisable as country NSW.

The cast also includes Hugo Weaving, Ryan Kwanten, Tasma Walton, Jack Thompson and David Field.

There is a popular right-wing belief that the courts and the

justice system are “soft on criminals”. The Murdoch media and its various clones are always expressing outrage at magistrates for “putting criminals back on the streets” and for generally being “too lenient”. Not too long ago these same people would have been crying “bring back hanging” or “bring back flogging”. Fortunately, for all their volubility, they are a minority.

*Guardian* readers, however, know that the legal system is *by design* biased against the working class and other distressed sectors of society. It is supposed to protect them but it is protection only grudgingly given, and if it clashes with the interests of the moneyed classes then we all know who loses out.

This mixture of fostered prejudice and genuine inadequacies has in modern times led many crime writers to present the law not as a protector of our rights but as a hindrance to “real crime fighting”. Popularised by the movie *Dirty Harry* (which was not by any means the first cop movie to display an anti-social attitude), the depiction of police as vigilantes who will not let the law get in the way of them “getting their man” has become almost the norm.

*By Any Means* (ABC1 Tuesdays at 9.30pm) follows the adventures of just such a mythical right-wing fantasy police unit, “a clandestine department living on the edge and playing the criminal elite at their own game, existing in the grey area between the letter of the law and true justice”. It is made by Red Planet Pictures for the BBC.

Although the members of this unit are at all times supposed to be on the side of the angels – they only go after real villains who have somehow escaped the law – they care nothing for the rules of evidence, for civil rights, or for any of our hard fought-for legal rights. And we are supposed to cheer them on.

The ending of this week's episode – in which they seek to catch a seemingly ordinary middle class couple who have embezzled millions



Warren Brown as Jack Quinn – *By Any Means* (ABC1 Tuesdays at 9.30pm).

of pounds from charity – is a bit pat, but as I have indicated, that is the least of its problems.

Watching *Glamour Model Mum, Baby And Me* (ABC2 Wednesday January 29 at 9.30pm) the question that comes to mind is “Why?” Why did someone think that this was a good subject for a television documentary? I realise that television has an insatiable appetite and that journalistic studies of people in all manner of awkward or bizarre situations are curiously popular at present. Nevertheless ...

We have all seen programs about people attempting to improve their looks through plastic surgery, brain-damaged people looking for a relationship, severely physically disabled people looking for love, young people with sexually transmitted diseases seeking a cure, and have followed the seriously injured or ill through successful (and sometimes unsuccessful) operations. We have

also followed mums-to-be through every stage of their pregnancy (except usually conception).

The argument is that “people want to see programs about real people”, and yes that is true, but why are so few about real *working* people? One seldom sees workers in such programs unless they are way out in the North Sea battling huge seas to fish for prawns or else they are building the world's tallest something or other or trying to move a giant piece of machinery to a site ten kilometres down the road with an underpass in between.

The great documentary filmmakers of the past made poetic, powerful and enthralling documentaries about such seemingly mundane subjects as sorting the mail, railway shunting, cleaning railway tunnels, engine driving and thatching roofs of country cottages. These films celebrated the skills, traditions and solidarity of people *at work*.

The point of interest for the makers of *Glamour Model Mum, Baby And Me* would appear to be that one of the two people in it is “kiss & tell” queen and topless model Alicia Douvall. The other person in it is her 16 year old daughter Georgia.

Alicia, selfish and self-absorbed, has had over a 100 plastic surgery procedures since Georgia was little. She had Georgia when she was 16 and now wants her daughter to be her “best friend” while keeping her under strict curfew lest she go out and do the things that Alicia did at that age. Georgia is intelligent and chaffs under these clearly unreasonable restrictions.

Apart from her mother's tasteless concern with body image, there seems to be nothing of substance here to warrant a film being made about these people. If Georgia's mother *wasn't* a topless model I am sure no film would have been attempted. ☹

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# POLITICS IN THE PUB

February 6  
**SRI LANKA GENOCIDE – PM ABBOTT'S COLLUSION WITH DICTATOR PRESIDENT RAJAPAKSA**  
Gordon Weiss, Former UN spokesperson on Sri Lanka, author of *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and The Last Days of the Tamil Tigers*;  
Emily Howie, Director, Advocacy & Research, Human Rights Law Centre;

February 13  
**WHY THE RENEWAL OF THE ALP DEPENDS ON LABOR WINNING BACK ITS BATTLERS WITH A PROGRESSIVE AGENDA**  
Shaun Wilson, Dr, Sociology Macquarie Uni;  
Amanda Perkins, Union activist;

February 20  
**THE TRANS PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT – NEITHER PARTNERSHIP NOR TRADE – A CORPORATE THREAT TO THE PUBLIC INTEREST**  
Don Edwards, MSF (Doctors without Borders);  
Pat Randal, Research Associate, Sydney Uni and Campaigner Australian Fair Trade & Investment Network;

February 27  
**A FOREIGN AGENCY INTERFERENCE – ISRAEL VERSUS THE AUSTRALIAN SUPPORTERS OF THE BDS**  
Jake Lynch, Director, Centre Peace & Conflict Studies, Sydney Uni;  
Cathy Peters, Committee for Justice & Peace in Palestine, former Marrickville Councillor;

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Editorial Office  
74 Buckingham St, Surry Hills, 2010  
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Email: guardian@cpa.org.au

Editor: Tom Pearson

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# University, or a cold, faceless corporation

Samia Ayyash and Brandon Baxter

Last December 10, thousands of students at the University of Michigan woke up to find mock eviction notices posted to their dormitory rooms. The notices were a direct action carried out by Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), aimed at presenting the truth about Israeli housing demolitions in occupied Palestine.

The goal of the action was to engage the campus community, students and faculty alike, in a discussion about our complicity in human rights abuses abroad. Our university has significant stocks invested in companies that support, facilitate and profit from the illegal Israeli occupation.

## Mobilising students

Dell supplies tens of thousands of computers to the Israeli military. General Electric supplies engines for Israel's Apache assault helicopters used in extrajudicial assassinations of political opponents that also have led to the deaths of countless Palestinian civilians in the vicinity.

Heidelberg Cement operates a quarry in the occupied West Bank providing supplies for the construction of illegal settlements. Hewlett-Packard provides biometric monitoring for checkpoints, including several in the occupied West Bank.

In these four companies alone, our

university's shares were valued at approximately US\$1.7 million as of 2012.

SAFE spent months contemplating which action would best achieve our aim, and created a plan to raise ongoing awareness – and, ultimately, direct action. With the mock eviction initiative, we believe we successfully accomplished this goal, as many student leaders and administrators have reached out to us in solidarity.

In the past few years, our university has not seen Palestinian solidarity activism of this scale and nature due to a passivity in the student body. This was bred by fear of social, political and academic repercussions.

SAFE understood these concerns, and after weeks of reflection we chose to go forward with our action to reinvigorate the campus climate. We aimed to foster a dialogue that could mobilise people and challenge the preconceived notions held by some of our peers.

## University or corporation?

In passing out eviction notices, we knew that we would be targeting a population of mostly new students. Our motivation was to break down the norms of institutionalised activism on campus that cater to people's comfort – such as fliers promoting apolitical events, or weekly film screenings that are scarcely attended by those outside the student groups sponsoring them.

We have intentionally exposed students to a new way of approaching an uncomfortable

situation through direct engagement and action. Education should involve people stepping out of their comfort zones.

Using the Twitter hashtag #UMMockEviction, activists and students sparked lively online discussion about the action and about Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

Our event was part of the larger boycott, divestment and sanctions movement that is calling on the university to divest funds from companies profiting from the illegal Israeli occupation.

As students, we'll pay nearly US\$100,000 or more to this university by the time we graduate. As evidenced by our public university's investment portfolio, our tuition dollars contribute to the continual destruction of Palestinian livelihoods.

As students of moral and social conscience in which our university prides itself, we cannot remain idle in a situation so blatant. Any profit the university earns from such investments of our tuition will have been generated from companies helping Israel violate Palestinian rights.

In March, the University of Michigan's chief investment officer Erik Lundberg stated: "The regents have said the investments should be done based on the merit of return. We try to be blind to social factors" ("Ten things you should know about the University of Michigan's multibillion dollar endowment," The Ann Arbor News, 26 March 2013).

Are we attending a university, or a cold, faceless corporation?

## Israeli war crimes

As a university that claims to uphold values of diversity, social responsibility and global awareness, should our investments not reflect these values?

Our intention was to educate our colleagues about how we are implicated in undermining the internationally recognised rights of Palestinians. But another aim was to demonstrate our collective power and remind the administration that we have the right to stop the university from putting profits over people.

Lundberg's statement suggests that the university is conscious of Israeli war crimes, but chooses to ignore them. Thus, it deserves to be shamed for supporting them.

As Students Allied for Freedom and Equality, we encourage full divestment at the University of Michigan from companies complicit in the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, and from companies that profit from the violation of Palestinian rights and dignity.

Our initiative is not one that could have garnered such success without the solidarity and support of other groups and staff on campus. We hope to see the trend of coalition building and solidarity continue in our joint struggle for justice, human rights and equality in Palestine and elsewhere.

The Electronic Intifada ✪

# Backlash against boycott reeks of hypocrisy

David Letwin

The American Studies Association's recent endorsement of the Palestinian call to boycott Israeli academic institutions is a triumph for the entire boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement. Israel's ongoing crime of apartheid against the Palestinian people – 65 years of ethnic cleansing, colonisation, denial of refugee rights and second-class citizenship, including extension of this brutal regime into the territories occupied since 1967 – has been perpetuated with the full complicity of Israeli academia.

The association's vote powerfully affirms that such racism and injustice must not be legitimised through so-called "engagement" with abetting institutions.

Zionists have been quick to accuse the ASA resolution of violating academic freedom, but this accusation does not stand up to meaningful scrutiny. In fact, it is Israel that systematically denies this right to Palestinians.

And in reality, these attacks have little to do with academic

freedom in the first place. Nor do they reflect an aversion to boycotts *per se*, which Israel and its supporters widely apply, for example, to the entire populations of Gaza and Iran – and now to the ASA itself.

## Targeting Israel

Their real objection is that BDS targets Israel. Rather than admit this outright, however, BDS opponents typically complain of double standards. "Did [the ASA resolution's] authors," wrote editors of *The Washington Post*, "pause to consider China's incarceration of writers and scholars who dare to think and speak out for freedom, or the ethnic groups in China persecuted for refusing to heel to the Beijing masters?"

Writing in *The Huffington Post*, Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan College, stated: "The ASA listens to civil society only when it speaks against Israel. As its scholarly president declared, 'One has to start somewhere.' Not in North Korea, not in Russia or Zimbabwe or China – one has to start with Israel. Really?"

James F Jones, president of Trinity College in Hartford,

Connecticut made a similar point: "In this strange case, why the ASA would propose an academic boycott of Israel and not, for example, of Syria, the Sudan, North Korea, China, Iran, Iraq, or Russia escapes rational thought."

Congressman Eliot Engel stated: "If you must 'start somewhere', then I strongly suggest the ASA turn its attention to Syria, where Bashar al-Assad's forces have indiscriminately shelled universities, killing students even as they sat for exams."

## Desperate

These arguments, however, are merely desperate attempts to distract attention from the fundamentally unjust nature of the Jewish state and trivialize Palestinian suffering.

As writer Mike Marqusee recently pointed out, these arguments are also virtually identical to earlier cries of "hypocrisy" against those who boycotted apartheid South Africa rather than "black dictatorships" elsewhere in Africa.

The logical fallacies here are numerous. First, one injustice never excuses another, nor do opponents

of one injustice have to answer for unrelated injustices.

Second, the BDS movement has never condoned crimes by other regimes to begin with. Third, opponents of the ASA resolution wouldn't support BDS no matter who else it denounced.

And fourth, they would never be making such arguments in the first place, were their own rights at stake.

## True hypocrites

Who, then, are the true hypocrites?

Furthermore, the ASA didn't "propose" the boycott of Israel, as Jones has claimed. Rather, it endorsed an already existing Palestinian call – as Jones *et al* would do were their purported empathy for the oppressed genuine.

Instead, just as hostile whites often condescendingly dismissed black resistance to Jim Crow as the work of "outside agitators," defenders of apartheid-Israel portray BDS as the pathological brainchild of left-wing Western academics and activists. In both cases, the goal is to attack a movement's authenticity and validity.

It didn't work then; it won't work now.

Indeed, more than anything these attacks signify that Israel has lost the battle for moral legitimacy. With Israel increasingly exposed before the world as a racist regime, its supporters now resort to assassinating the character of those – including a growing number of Jews – who demand justice for Palestinians.

These threats notwithstanding, the association's stand is reverberating around the world.

"The ASA boycott of Israel," wrote Palestinian BDS advocate Omar Barghouti, "will be remembered for many years to come as a crucial catalyst in this emancipatory process of reclaiming rights for all who are denied them."

In Palestine, that process must ultimately lead to the end of Zionist apartheid, and, consistent with renewed Palestinian calls, a single democratic state throughout historic Palestine with equal rights for all.

Meanwhile, it is incumbent on all people of conscience to defend – and emulate – the ASA's courageous stand.

The Electronic Intifada ✪



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### Central Committee:

General Secretary: Bob Briton  
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P: 02 9699 8844 F: 02 9699 9833

Website: [www.cpa.org.au](http://www.cpa.org.au)  
Email: [cpa@cpa.org.au](mailto: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](mailto:newcastle@cpa.org.au)

**Riverina Branch:**  
Allan Hamilton  
2/57 Cooper St Cootamundra 2590

**Melbourne Branch:**  
Andrew Irving  
[viccpa@netspace.net.au](mailto: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 Briton,  
PO Box 612, Port Adelaide BC,  
SA 5015 Ph: 0418 894 366  
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Email: [sa@cpa.org.au](mailto:sa@cpa.org.au)

**West Australian Branch:**  
Vinnie Molina [perth@cpa.org.au](mailto: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](mailto:cpabris@live.com.au)

**Tasmania Branch:**  
Bob Briton [tas@cpa.org.au](mailto:tas@cpa.org.au)  
P: 0418 894 366