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Catholic Social Services Victoria

Why We Need a Revolution Now

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Some people have personal trainers: I have my own dominatrix, and I'll be telling you more about Rhonda Galbally a little later. Her introduction, though, did forget one thing, which is that I too spent a day in a wheelchair. It was in Adelaide, in the International year of the Disabled, and we we'd been having a meeting on the seventh floor of a government building in Adelaide.

A young angry man, who knew bloody well that I wasn't sufficiently credentialled on the issue, insisted that I get into his wheelchair. I wheeled myself outside and was masticated by the lift doors, and when I got in to the lift I found I couldn't reach the button. When I got to the bottom and was expectorated into the lobby I looked down a cascade, a Niagara, of steps, and realised that that wasn't on; so I backpedalled - backwheeled – into the carpark, where because I was below the visual threshold I was nearly run over four times. And this was all in the first five minutes.

I got out on to the footpath, where I could see people looking at me oddly and mouthing "I didn't know he was disabled!" And then I came to the lip of the curb, which was, once again, impassable. So I got out and lifted the chair down – and people fell to their knees because they thought they'd witnessed a miracle.

Well, I'm witnessing one here today. I can't believe this crowd. I'm used to going round Australia speaking to heartbreaking conferences of decent people who want to do good things, and we're generally so overwhelmed by the impossibility of the task, particularly in these dark and difficult days, that we slump into a collective depression beyond the reach of even Prozac by the bucket. I've spent the last several years in this state of mind, what with Howard and Hanson and now George Bush, etcetera… it's often been hard to get up in the mornings. But to come here now and see this vast crowd and realise that many others were turned away is terrific, and I congratulate you all. I imagine you're here because you can see some scintilla of hope.

I usually end speeches by trying to cheer up glum audiences with my favourite aphorism. Today I'll begin with it, because then I can get it out of the way and we can have a happy ending instead.

Many years ago Pablo Casals, the great Spanish cellist, was having his eighty-somethingth birthday in Madrid, and they held a press conference for him and the dear old soul came out and was droning on the way elderly people like him and now I do about what a mess the world was. And at some point he obviously heard himself; he stopped, and then said two sentences, which I love, because though they don't at first sight seem to fit together I think you'll eventually agree that they do.

The first sentence reeks of fatalism, and the second has just a hint of audacity and courage. And they're universally applicable to whatever tasks we might face, and most of us are in tasks beyond belief and almost certainly beyond human ability to fix, and he said "**The situation is hopeless. We must take the next step**."

So I'm starting where I usually finish. I notice that my friend Hugh McKay's been here, and so has Joan Kirner, so before I get on to the topic which my dominatrix

has insisted I address, -- I promise, Rhonda, I'll get around to it later – memories come rushing back of Joan Kirner.

Some years ago, when John Howard was not only not Prime Minister but had even been chucked out of the Leadership of the Opposition, Paul Keating and COAG (an ugly acronym for the Council of Australian Governments, made up of representatives of the governments of every State and Territory and of the Commonwealth) decided that we should decide how to celebrate the centenary of Federation, which was then rushing towards us. Joan and I were two of Keating's appointments, and there was a wide variety of strange creatures from the various state and territory governments, almost all of whom were then in ultra-conservative hands. The tension between us was palpable. We weren't a happy committee. And our job was to go right round Australia, hither and yon, and talk to every individual or group who wanted to address us in town halls and community halls and say "On the centenary of Federation, what is it that you want to celebrate?" And so I decided that what I would do was ask every person who came in, at the end of their pitch, "What is it that makes you proud to be an Australian?"

I remember talking to David Malouf, one of Australia's finest novelist. "I'm going to do this, what will people say?"

David said "I think they'll first talk about landscape."

"Really?"

"Yes," he said, "I think they'll try and express their pride in Australia in terms of landscape."

And so at the end of each presentation I'd ask the question, and again and again people would start doing a Dorothea McKellar -- as though the vastness of our country was in some way a metaphor for democracy and freedom, as though eucalypts had the vote. Well, that was nice, but it didn't really get us anywhere. So I'd push on and say "Yes, I concede the eucalypts, but is there anything else that makes you proud to be an Australian?" And the word that became universal, the word that every single person without exception used, was tolerance. We are a tolerant nation, that's what makes us good, that's what makes us better. Now I'm uneasy with the word tolerance, which I see as somewhat patronising: "I will tolerate you" is nowhere near like "I will celebrate you", but it's still better than a poke in the eye with a burnt stick, and it was interesting to have it out on the table in front of our very conservative fellow panellists.

I knew that it was, or at least that it had been, a fib – in 1901 this nation was born in exclusion. People who weren't white weren't socially acceptable, so we erected the White Australia policy to keep out the blacks, the browns and the yellows. We turned against our indigenous population (and in the course of this trip around Australia I discovered something I'd never known – that in South Australia at least aborigines had had citizenship, and with it a limited right of franchise, and that they'd lost the franchise when Australia officially came into being). I realised also that Australia had been intolerant of ideas, that we'd defended ourself not only with barriers like white Australia but also with the most draconian censorship outside Northern Ireland. Feisty bright ideas from the north couldn't get in any more easily than blacks. And at the time, of course, women weren't particularly tolerated – they

were excluded from the democratic process for some years. It was clearly a nonsense that we'd always been tolerant, but it did on the other hand seem that as we rushed towards the centenary we were learning tolerance.

Some of you are old enough to remember the referenda in the late sixties when a majority of Australians in a majority of states voted for what would become the beginning of reconciliation, when all of a sudden we decided that we'd been unconscionable in our attitude to our indigenous population. We began to dismantle white Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, and it was an across-the-board effort by every political party, because they recognised that while Australia was a suicide note for the future – that you couldn't have a little enclave of ten or twelve bright white people living in the world's largest piece of real estate and surrounded by literally billions of people of other colours. It was a regional outrage on a par with apartheid, and ran for much longer. We discovered tolerance. Some of it had been forced upon us by migration patterns, but we were tolerant.

Add to that the revelation that everyone who came to talk to us was, however reluctantly, for the Two R's – Reconciliation and the Republic. Even groups that I thought would oppose them said "Look, we've got to do this, we've got to sign off on them so we can get on with the rest our lives." Even the Country Women's Association told us they would go along with the Republic! They didn't much want to, but they saw it was inevitable and wanted to get it over with.

So at the end of that process Joan and I were able to write a report telling COAG that on the first of January 2001 we should be celebrating (we assumed) reconciliation, and (we presumed) the republic, but (quite certainly) tolerance. Terrific! Great!

Except that between the time we wrote the report and the centenary of Federation something happened.

Bigotry is like anthrax. The spores wait in the earth like little viral timebombs till the right circumstances let them break out, and they broke out, all at once, a couple of Federal elections ago.

Barry Jones is my oldest and dearest friend. Other people have the Internet, I have Barry. If I need to know anything, I just ring BOJ and he tells me. And he also tells me the answers to questions I haven't asked and didn't really need to know -- he bounded up to me once at Tullamarine, for example, and said "Lightning goes up, not down."

I said "Thank you, Barry," and filed the information away. A couple of years later I learned that he was half right. Apparently during a thunderstorm a great static charge builds up and up and all the little verticals on the ground – blades of grass, fenceposts, lampposts, trees, church spires – put up little neon signs saying "Choose me! Choose me!" and then the choice is made and lightning goes both up and down. Everybody thinks that the lightning rod in this case was a certain woman from Ipswich; not so.

A charge of bigotry had begun to develop across the country, and there were plenty of other filaments going up saying "Choose me! Choose me!" Graeme Campbell, for example, a noxious Labor Party member from WA, had one of the biggest swings to him. Wilson Tuckey, one of the most appalling creatures in the

history of Australian politics (and I say that in a purely non-political sense) had the biggest two-party preferred vote of any candidate. In every electorate in this country with a significant aboriginal population, all of which had traditionally been held by Labor, the needle went "Whack!" off the dial and the seat changed hands. Had Pauline not been around it wouldn't really have mattered – it was going to happen anyway. She was only the most famous (and the most singular) of all the possible lightning conductors.

And within ten seconds what she stood for, what she manifested, what she expressed, was appropriated by all the parties. Barry was President of the Labor Party at the time, and I remember he rang me up to say "This election gives voters the following choices –

- if you vote for One Nation, 100% One Nation policies;
- if you vote for Larry Anthony's party, 90% One Nation policies;
- if you vote for the Liberals, 85% One Nation policies;
- and if you vote Labor - 75% One Nation policies.

Some choice!"

I was suddenly living in a country that I didn't recognise, a country where our much-vaunted tolerance had almost evaporated, where the sense of community that I had thought was going to make Australia the testbed for the 21st century had suddenly in deep shtuck. In a world where every second nation on earth seemed to be fracturing along simple lines – north or south, Hutu or Tutsi, Jew and Arab, or whatever – where the Soviet Union had collapsed, where Yugoslavia had fallen victim to its ancient tribalisms, where nation after nation was falling apart, I had thought that at least in the funny sort of country I lived in we all got along reasonably well. Conflicts and tensions there certainly were, and so there should be – it's only through abrasions that you can rub off the rough edges – but I had thought this country would be able to demonstrate an alternative way to run a modern society.

For the last eight years I have been despairing. I despaired of living in a country where the toxicity of bigotry had been released into the environment, had taken hold, and had not let go – as in, for example, the appalling Tampa episode.

At every moment, though, I take comfort in the thought that there are still people who won't cop it – people who insist on being against the government, or the Council, or indeed the Labor Party (after all, when it came to the Tampa the electorate had no choice at all - both Labor and Liberals reacted with identically draconian positions). The country that I love I was finding very hard to like. Something terrible had happened.

I presume that the reason so many people are here is a sense of optimism (mixed, perhaps, with a little desperation; on such a brief acquaintance I won't speculate on the proportions of those two.) Hugh McKay is a brilliant social researcher, and I think he has one important thing terribly correct. He talks of the phenomenon whereby people seem increasingly detached from politics, not wanting to know about it, just drifting off, feeling so alienated from what passes for government and

from what passes as opposition that they just don't care any more. Hugh tells me, incidentally, that from his sampling he sees insufficient evidence of change of heart to bring about a change of government at the next election. As a qualitative, not a quantitative, researcher he thinks that people are still thrilled to bits that the value of their house has doubled, and that the war against terror will provide them with a rationalisation for staying with the current mob.

However, he also says that while families are still shrinking (and pretty soon a majority of older Australians will live alone in households of one), that isolation will be offset by, or create, a deepening desire for a sense of cohesion and a sense of community which will lead to an unprecedented warp and weft of the social fabric and collective effort. In other words, we'll substitute for family another notion of social involvement and perhaps activism. This makes us sound rather like coral polyps about to start building a multi-coloured reef, and that's not a bad thing.

Nobody wants to be an island, and polyps and people both want to create, either profoundly beautiful coral reefs or social structures of increasing strength and transcendental beauty. But we've both had a bad time –coral polyps have had to contend with crown of thorns starfish, global warming draining them of their vibrance, and waters polluted by farm chemicals, while social reef builders like us have had to contend with the toxicity of recent Australian politics and now globally with the genius of George W. Bush for herding people into pens of prejudice and Disneyfied patriotism.

Mistrust and bigotries, inchoate fears, rafts of resentment have been used to create dysfunction, to break down notions of society and cohesion, and to encourage a fearful and resentful individualism – a lower form of social consciousness which is then further dulled by the crap that passes for mass entertainment and the narcosis of shopping. But throughout this dark era, I have found that on every issue where you ask people to stand up and be counted individuals and organisations can still be created, rallied, or powerfully choreographed, and looking around at the awesome size of this conference and knowing that at least half as many people again wanted to get in, I think it's fair to say that we might be at the beginning of a new revolution.

It's a quiet one. Thus far too quiet. It might be time for the mice to start roaring and remind everyone about the changes that can be brought about when the community coalesces around a cause, focuses on an issue, decides to attack the mighty forces of cynicism and the all-powerful opposition on any issue. For while we have been through a dark period, and whilst we're far from out of it, much has been achieved that we should all be proud of.

It's good to sit up here with Rhonda Galbally, a crazed revolutionary if ever I have seen one. I have a long history of working with Rhonda in a number of campaigns – as my dominatrix, she's whipped me into political shape. There was the case of the disability movement, where with all my good intentions I profoundly misunderstood the nature of the task. Once again, I was hired by COAG to come up with a campaign to launch the International year of Disabled Persons.

Well, I knew all about that. After all, I was a friend of Alan Marshall. I wrote these dazzling scripts about Beethoven, who was deaf, the Stephen Hawkins, who's in a wheelchair and who I had in fact just interviewed for the first time – brilliant people

with disabilities, and my idea was to tell the able-bodied how clever people with disabilities could be.

Then Rhonda, who I'd never met in my life, suddenly appeared in my office, raging at me, and within a couple of weeks we'd become Torville and Dean. And I had to go back and tell all the governments to scrap the campaign that they'd happily approved, and indeed applauded, on the grounds that it was totally and utterly wrong. I don't think that in the whole history of the world anyone had told such a posh panel of Ministers that everything they'd agreed on was tosh, but I knew it was, because Rhonda had showed me. My problem was that I'd had a lot of political influence, but I'd done it from the top down. The great thing about a newspaper column is that it gives you access, and leverage, and I'd managed to set up all the film and cultural bodies mentioned in Rhonda's introduction by talking to a rapid succession of Prime Ministers and Premiers. I'd never been involved in grassroots activism, and didn't know anything about it.

Well, along came Rhonda and gives me buggery. And she made me realise that the people who should be taking decisions about the campaign weren't the clever dicks like me but the disabled communities themselves. So we threw away our glowing sentimental lines and came up with the simple argument 'Break down the Barriers". The barriers were physical, psychological, everywhere. As Rhonda dragged me around the country and forced me to confront issues I realised that organisations which I'd always thought of as progressive and compassionate were in fact little short of gulags for people with disabilities. I was shown around places where, I discovered, disabled people weren't allowed to have sex. It was a series of shattering revelations.

We decided we'd make the year a source of political activism, and we went on to win awards – the Golden Lion at Cannes, that sort of thing. And it taught me that if you want to change things, you do it with people, not to people.

I look back and wonder whether the celebrations we had then were too early, because suddenly you realise that all these years later the same problems still exist. Some have been modified – some good legislation has been passed – but physical access is still difficult, and bigotries and prejudices towards disabled people are still powerful – not perhaps as powerful, but still present.

On no issue I can think of have we achieved a lasting and final victory. It's always a process, not an event. The revolution has to be ongoing. The challenges we're faced with are different from those faced by community activists over the past five decades.

Today we are presented with challenges different from those faced by community activists over the past five decades. For a start, what advocate these days can express a point of view without it being viewed from the prism of right and left or – more correctly - right and centre right politics. Ideas are not judged on their merits but too largely on their politics. Rights are championed or ignored only when and if the political parties sense that a political advantage can be eked out of it. Where there is no advantage there is no change. That's why we need an ongoing revolution. That's why the people in this room need to roar.

Because the best ideas belong to the community. The agenda belongs to the people and we have to fight back and reclaim the debate. In any mature society ideas, opinions, criticisms, and debate are tolerated, and not just tolerated in some disinterested way but encouraged because the community is the eventual winner when people are encouraged to think, to speak out, to dare, to prod, to shake off the shackles of the prevailing left/right, pro/anti conventions and talk about what is best for their community.

In preparing this I thought about some of the battlegrounds of the past where great change was brought about – and where we stand today.

One of those areas was in the Women's (and men's) revolution arising out of the women's rights movement in the early seventies -- where the young Rhonda, along with many of the women and men here today, showed courageous leadership by fighting for equal opportunity for women.

Why the idea of equal rights was regarded as a travesty and the destruction of everything Australia knew to be good and true I'll never know. I still can't fathom the vehemence and the opposition to women being treated as equals and the spurious arguments that were floated to stop it happening.

Women were at the ramparts – and change did come. Most of it begrudgingly, most of it in a mean-spirited minimalist way in which the ground was given up inch by inch by inch, but at least it was taken.

The women's movement empowered itself through the strength of argument, the strength of advocacy and with determination. Women forced people – men and women - to change attitudes about what is a normal family; that women are entitled to the same roles in the workforce as men; that women do have the ability to be leaders and are entitled to the opportunity to lead.

We had these powerful voices calling for change and only the bigoted, the belligerent, the bombastic or the bloody tone-deaf failed to listen. We were seeing social change – slow, but the momentum was turning. Women's rights became an issue, if not the issue.

Now, however, the question that has to be asked is "Are we going backwards?"

While we still have a situation in which women receive only 80 per cent of income for work of equal value; where there are still numerous visible and invisible barriers to women having equal access to participation in all works of life – including work; we have in fact, drifted into a surreal Alice in Wonderland zone where the major players are joined at the hip in an unholy, bi-partisan scramble to protect men's rights.

We have a situation where women who are not staying at home and pumping out one for mummy, one for daddy and one for the green and gold are almost seen as Un-Australian, and where their lack of output can be solely blamed for the ongoing ageing of our country.

At the same time we still can't convince these same men who are so demanding of women to populate or perish there is a need for blanket paid maternity leave.

We still have a situation where a female CEO is considered a freak to be gawked at in the business pages – not because she is a great manager or leader, or thinker - but because she is a woman. Even most of our non-profit boards have men acting as the chair (unless they are broke or small – or both).

Supporting the "equal" rights of men and women is paramount. But again – as a community - we seem to have taken our foot off the advocacy pedal and the result is that rather than a debate over equal rights, equal access, equal opportunity it has instead turned into a pissing competition.

Again it comes down to a simplistic – and divisive version of men versus women, the so-called men's movement turns out to be about he versus she. It's as though we are incapable of having at debate that doesn't get down to a simplistic equation that equal rights for one has to come at the cost of the other. This might suit the politician's need to turn everything into adversarial black and white issues, but it isn't helpful.

It creates the false and ridiculous question of whether the opportunities provided by the liberation of women have gone too far. To even contemplate that suggestion for a moment is to give it far more credence than it deserves.

The revolution was to create a cradle-to-grave equality of opportunity and equality of value. It is far from over. Far, far from over.

As I have said, I experienced the disability rights revolution first-hand during the 1981 International Year of the Disabled Person. I learned a great deal from that experience. It changed my whole life, in fact, and affected how I tackled any political or advocacy role forever after. But I have so say that that task hasn't been sufficiently achieved, either.

We should be seeing people with disabilities popping up everywhere – in jobs, in sports, in politics, as government and corporate leaders – and represented not by the odd one-off success story but by a critical mass.

I thought that by now people with disabilities would have ceased to be the most disadvantaged, impoverished, and discriminated group in society and that the fights for equal access and consideration would be long behind us. That we would be now celebrating the anniversaries of heroic victories rather than saddling up to fight for the same things that we did in the 80s.

Of course, it was ever thus. If you listen to the arguments now swirling around the refugees they're exactly the same crap that was produced in the era of White Australia, and if you listen to the appalling nonsense that was used in the fight about the Republic it was word for word the dialogue you would have heard in nineteenth-century colonial Australia. I am constantly astonished with the way we revisit the past, or are drawn back into it as though by some powerful and implacable force of gravity.

Everything seems to be a series of déjà vu moments. Like Groundhog Day. Where the minute we finish pulling down a wall and stop to draw breath, someone comes along and re-builds it so the only thing you can do is start again.

I was delusional to think the revolution was one that could be won in a short time. There is still systemic discrimination in education, employment, sport and recreation – and lifestyle. We are still haranguing to get kids with disabilities equal standing in sports and to be able to attend schools and have their presence be taken as normal and not an imposition. Where we still have building codes in a number of states, including here in Victoria, which don't guarantee access to every building to those with a disability there is still some way to go to say we have a fair and equitable society.

Going back to that first fiery encounter with Rhonda and the others from the disability rights movement I came to learn more about the unsung but great revolutionary movements, including the self-help movement –groups of ex-prisoners, people with disabilities, single parents, gays, migrants, all fighting for the right to decide what was best for them.

They weren't prepared to sit back and let others decide. Or to wait for others to take up the issues that they felt were important. And there was no way they were going to sit back and be treated as welfare cases.

Their revolution was about rights. It was also about dignity. Not about being granted dignity, but about demanding it – and demonstrating it through their own actions. It was a true revolution and one that brought general legitimacy to the right for equal opportunity, for human rights, for rights to access to everything in society – for people to be able to be intimately involved in the process of deciding the issues that were important to them and to finding solutions that could make a difference.

Again I believed that we had more or less got there. While things could always be improved, still these liberation revolutions were here to stay.

Well, here we are, back to banging away with mentoring programs – back to the middle classes thinking that everything can be solved by philanthropic souls teaching the poor sods how to break out of poverty or how to climb up that ladder of opportunity.

It's getting back to the tired, old charity model. Have we learned nothing? Why do we have bi-partisanship over this issue? Why are both major parties happy to fight for the right for the masses of people needing help to remain needing help and to receive mentoring from charities about how to be middle-class?

Nowhere do I hear any more any sense that people with disadvantage know best what's best for them. Or that they may know best what they need to be able to make the changes to their lives.

It has been a similar story with the fight for people's entitlements for those who do not have the opportunity – and that number seem to be growing. There was a time when welfare was a right and entitlement for those who had been left behind – in some way as compensation for being left out of a jobs market which in most cases they had no control over.

Today you would be considered a fool for even suggesting that people shouldn't have to work for the dole. We have a situation today where some welfare agencies can default people from receiving the dole. We have a situation where the people

who can least afford it are punished for being overpaid by Centrelink. They read about themselves in newspapers as “welfare cheats” who have been caught in a massive “fraud” crackdown. The same newspapers carry stories about politicians taking toyboys overseas in apparent breach of the rules – but that is okayed by Ministerial decree. No talk about “welfare cheats” or crackdowns in that case, just a little bit of fence-mending. The transgressor is referred to “as one of the hardest working people” around.

Oh for the right for everyone to be able to work so hard.

Why are we making the people who have the least amount of power grovel for scraps? Why do they have to prove again and again that they are worthy of this or that measly benefit? Why do we rush to persecute and prosecute instead of asking whether the system is working as it should?

Is the whole issue of social justice passé? Why do we have a competition for the title of who is the toughest on welfare recipients? Why are politicians prepared to fight for the kudos that comes with being tough on those at the bottom of the pile and yet blanch or prevaricate when it comes to taking the same action against those at the top?

It is easy to ask the questions. It is a lot harder to answer them, and I think the enthusiasm for both asking and answering has been missing of late.

I want to state an unpopular truth - that every Australian has a right to NOT be homeless. As a wealthy country it is a disgrace that so many can’t change that situation.

Every Australian has a right to health care, and every Australian has a right to free education – yes, even at tertiary level.

Rhonda Galbally was the only person in Australia to resign from a university council in protest at the 25 per cent increase in HECS fees. Like me, she believes in free university education for everyone who qualifies to get into university.

It amazes me that those who have prospered for so long from the benefits of a free education can so easily - and with so little debate –condemn another generation to have to make such a life-determining decision based on their ability to pay. My radio program recently featured a discussion with a cluster of vice-chancellors, sitting around the studio going on and on giving the nod to increasingly cruel and inappropriate new laws and all agreeing that yes, it was right that people should be asked to pay. I confronted each of them, one at a time, and found that each and every one of them had been beneficiaries of - guess what - free education. Most people in this room have had the benefit of a free tertiary education and know that had it come down to a dollars and cents argument, their lives – and their careers – might have been very different. I couldn’t get to university myself – it just wasn’t a financial possibility; I couldn’t even finish secondary school (but when I grow up I’m going to go back).

While the Opposition makes sport with the Government about its high-taxing status, the reality is that we, as a nation, are still among the lowest taxing countries in the developed world. Surely the debate could be about whether our tax levels are sufficient to ensure the country as a whole enjoys the benefits from economic

growth. Most people, when asked, say they would prefer a better society to a few bob off every week from Peter Costello's tax cuts. Tony Vinson recently produced a report for Jesuit Social Services (and the changes in Australian society, incidentally, can be gauged by the fact that I've moved from being condemned from every Catholic pulpit in Australia on the same Sunday - the congregations being told that it was a sin to read any newspaper that published me - to being in bed with the Jesuits; not only that, I'm now involved in refugee work with Malcolm Fraser. My fellow leftie on the issue is John Hewson, and my best friends on the barricades are Josephite nuns) and that report found that the opportunities for the poorest in our community can be determined not by their own qualities or abilities but by postcodes. That has to change.

At the same time we keep saying that everyone should be enterprising enough to learn or earn even if it's when taking money from community organisations that now find themselves acting as sub-contractors of Government. Perhaps in my next incarnation – I'm dithering with Catholicism, but the attractions of another life will probably mean a deathbed conversion to Buddhism - I'll be able to sell homelessness and make a quid out of that.

On a serious note, once again a revolution that looked as though we were going to treat people with dignity has ground to a halt and gone rapidly into reverse cycle.

Multiculturalism is another area where we appear to have gone in reverse, in a few short years erasing many hard-fought gains.

It was an area that I for one was proud to say was a great success. Australia became what it is because of the waves of migrants that have thankfully washed up our shores (and in the earlier years, of course, many of them were also reffos). We encouraged people and enabled people to maintain their own culture. Instead of trying to make them exactly the same as us we celebrated the fact that they had their own culture as well. And we all gained from it. It set us apart from so many of the divided countries they left behind – as I once said in an Australia Day talk at the National Press Club, the rest of the word was full of San Andrean faults, immovable forces grinding away at each other, while what we had in Australia was more like a bucket full of gravel; such a complicated society, so many ethnicities, that it was our strength.

A lot of people don't believe that any more.

The last few years have been a disgrace. The use of simplistic and divisive propaganda to brand refugees as some sort of evil threat to our national security rather than troubled people deserving of our compassion was a useful political wedge. We have never had a refugee problem. We have had, on average, one thousand boat people per annum for twenty years. That's it! Two British Airways jumbo-loads landing at Mascot will have that many tourists overstaying their visas, but they're not whacked into detention centres. It was always bullshit, the great lie, along with queue-jumping, illegals, and kids overboard – boy, have we had some lies lately.

Was our flirtation with tolerance, simply that – a flirtation?

Surely our strength comes from being a hybrid nation - a bitser nation, or as Michael Oondatje once said, "a mongrel population".

I have written often of the rights of our indigenous people – and again, after slowly making some progress, we seem to have come across an almighty Stop sign. In the 1960s Australia did something that astonished the world, and ourselves; we passed referenda removing Constitutional discrimination against Aboriginals (and very few referenda are passed; a majority of people in a majority of states hardly ever happens, let alone the 90% majority that was achieved here). On the thirtieth anniversary of those referenda I had Faith Bandler in the studio – one of the most beautiful human beings I've ever known, with one of those faces that just radiates goodness – talking about her efforts back in the sixties to get them passed. I asked her "Faith, if that referendum was to be held tomorrow, would it pass?"

She said "No way."

"Is it because we've become more bigoted?"

"No," she said, "but racism has become better organised."

I suppose if the whole debate about indigenous rights stops at the office of a man who can't get his head around the impact he could have by uttering a single five-letter word, what hope have we got of having a real debate about the other issues facing our indigenous people.

When my generation was growing up we knew nothing and cared less about Aboriginal culture – and I am as guilty of that as anybody. I used to spend a lot of my time, for example, going around the world looking at cave paintings. I was fascinated by the Altimira caves, by the Drakensberg caves, by the extraordinary paintings you can find in caves all over Europe, but it never occurred to me to look for them in Australia. Then I was in Munich, at a gallery notorious for being the site of Hitler's exhibition comparing Aryan art with degenerate Jewish art – but Hitler was long gone, and I walked into a hall much bigger than this where all around me on walls and ceilings were facsimiles of Australian cave paintings. I was absolutely overwhelmed by their majesty, by their astonishing mystery and beauty. And it was pretty late in the day for that particular penny to drop for me.

It took a long while, too, to realise that the people who painted them couldn't vote – weren't counted, weren't considered citizens, and apart from a handful of talented types, had no profile and no say. All this while Aboriginal people were dying 20 years younger than the rest of us – as they still are.

Last year I had to chair a government conference in Queensland on the future of social services – what should be happening with pensions, and public transport, and a whole raft of issues which you are going to have to deal with – and a wonderful young woman, a nineteen-year-old called Mandinara Bales, was speaking. I introduced her as gently as I could, because I could see she was nervous. She came to the lectern, and for ten minutes she could not say a word. It was the longest ten minutes of my life. I knew I couldn't interfere, that it would be wrong for me to play paternalistic Uncle Phillip and go over and sort her out, I knew she had to do it for herself.

But something miraculous happened. The old woman who had done the welcome to nation was Mandinara's aunt, and she quietly walked out and stood beside her, not touching her, not saying anything, till Mandinara found her voice. You could have heard a pin drop. A room full of bureaucrats, white experts, was just

dumbstruck. Her simple message was “None of the things you’re talking about matter a damn to my people. You’re talking about wonderful things for the elderly in the Brisbane community, but none of my relatives will ever live that long.”

Some things have changed but a lot hasn’t. The morbidity rate and life expectancy is still horrifying – like Bangladesh, and we are back where we started following the axing of ATSIC. We are left without any alternative structure to give indigenous Australians any sense of control or a say or power over their own lives. The question now is “Do we want to hear those concerns?” As far as both major parties are concerned, the answer is no.

There is a revolution going on -- but it’s well and truly stuck in reverse.

I don’t want to sound like an old grump harking back to the good old days, but I have to wonder what has happened to the revolutions?

They’re probably more important than ever before. The need for community leaders to reclaim the revolution is greater today that it was 20 or 30 years ago, because .the enemy is more powerful today. Who could have imagined that someone as bizarre, as baroque, as ludicrous as Dubya would become the most powerful man on earth? Would you hire that man to do anything? The mind boggles. Reagan was bad enough, but Bush II would make Dan Quayle seem like an intellectual. Around the world his voice is now being heard and his values echoed – in our own case, echoed and amplified.

I don’t know exactly when politicians stopped listening to real communities. Recently, remember, we had the largest demonstrations in human history as millions upon millions around the world marched against the Iraq war. In every country, popular opinion was overwhelmingly against the war. In every country that counted, the people’s leaders simply ignored them. No wonder people switch off, no wonder people feel completely disaffected. Even when you speak out nobody want to listen, and that’s another reason to give up.

The ‘pollies’ now make policy to influence or drive the polls and then, in a self-satisfying, self-fulfilling script, use the same polls to drive their politics. It’s their very own feedback loop.

There seems to be a sense of futility eating into our faith in politics – even in democracy itself – and as a result we seem to be giving up on trying to influence it.

Not everyone. Certainly not everyone, but there is definitely a sense of disengagement, of indifference, And if we don’t arrest it, our ability to affect change, to achieve monumental policy victories and transform communities will be diminished.

It wasn’t always like this. Those courageous, often unpopular leaders of the movements I mentioned earlier, always felt they could change the world. They knew it wasn’t easy, that it was a journey of a thousand steps but they were prepared to take that step and the next one – and the one after that. If they lost a bit of ground, they dusted themselves off and had another go.

Many of those leaders are still kicking around today. I don’t have to look far to see the fire in the eyes of the next generation of change merchants.

The fire in the belly is still there, but we need to breathe some more life into the fires. We need them to blaze, to spread. The flames must be fanned rather than trying to stamp them out.

In many ways revolutionaries today are operating in a tougher environment. It's a climate of terror in more ways than one. Terror is used as the tool to stifle debate, to stifle thought, or to enable appalling laws to pass through parliament or congress.

By chanting the mantra "War against terror" they've managed to bulldoze negative and destructive environmental legislation through congress. Everything that activists like Ralph Nader achieved in earlier decades has been lost – and then some,

Anyone who questions the Government today faces not only the challenge of defending their argument and their chance of funding but themselves.

Today you gave an award to the ABC; I have to tell you that that I am astonished that anybody at the ABC has the guts to do anything. The war against the ABC has been a war of attrition, a nightmare. I have watched the Pre-Emptive Buckle again and again. Even before the government says something to them, ABC management will get into a panic and say "Oh, we can't do that." When colleagues get the sack the response has been Schadenfreude, not manning the barricades. It's been a dispirited and despondent organisation.

We can't let this happen to our public broadcasters, to our universities, to our newspapers. I'm surrounded by journalists who only now have begun to ask questions about the war in Iraq. When it could have made a difference, though, there were no questions, only advocates, urgers, embedded even before the tanks were rolling. This is a major problem.

This is a huge crisis. We've got to stop this. A mature society tolerates different opinions, criticism, and debate – an immature society attacks the messenger rather than debating the ideas.

And yet people are here today from the entire community spectrum. Look around. Leaders are in here from all over the community spectrum – the disability movements, self-help movements, indigenous groups, health groups, welfare, education – sports, the arts, local government, bureaucrats from state and federal government and business - groups from rural and regional Australia.

We're here together, looking not for the things that divide us but for the things that bring us together, the things we can change to build a stronger Australia.

This is a very broad church. As an atheist I mean that in a totally secular way, but it does lift the spirits that in this coming together there are signs that the revolution has not entirely failed, but has been rekindled. The leaders are here among us. What we need to do as a community – as communities - is to support them and to support the search for ideas, for new ideas.

We need to return to the stage where we are not scared of debate, where we are not intimidated out of tackling the big issues. We must reject any attempts to drive wedges amongst us.

Rather than the present situation where politicians set the debate decided upon by pollsters and their own political imperatives, let us set the debate. It means that as a collective we have to fight for each other for the right to fight, we have to protect our democratic right to be heard. This, and this alone, is what makes a civil society.

We can't sit back and say that's not our argument because we have all done that and as a whole, we have all lost out. All our causes have gone backwards. No-one has gained by the fear that in speaking out, our own cause might be disadvantaged. All our causes – all the revolutions, big and small, have been stalled by the divide and conquer ethos of the past decade.

Look, I have to say that the only reason I've survived at the ABC, or indeed at News Limited, is that I keep ranting. I've become too difficult to sack. I'm kept around to demonstrate pluralism. There is hope in this.

Don't give in. Don't give up. Be cheeky. What have you got to lose except your job, your career, your house, your family, and your life? Apart from that it's a lay-down misere.

Several years ago was running the national Australia Day Council, and (in one of the few campaigns where I didn't work with Rhonda) I was encouraging people to submit new preambles to the Australian constitution, because our present constitution is a dirge written by real estate agents. I wrote one myself, and I would like to quote one of the paragraphs I included in that preamble.

> "Rather than fearing difference, we wish to be a people who celebrate it, recognising that diversity can give birth to creativity as much as conflict. Yet we do not seek to be a society that fears even the most vigorous debate, for it is through the testing of ideas, through endless argument and negotiation, that a nation retains its vitality and survives. But let our debates be based on mutual respect and a denial of violence. Australia wants no blood upon the wattle."

We don't want blood on the wattle. But we do want to be able to wave the wattle with pride. We do want to be able to say that we are a country that encourages ideas and the community leaders who have the courage to put them forward.

We want to be a country that takes pride in the way we treat and include those that need our help.

On the centenary of Federation I wanted Australia to celebrate the opposite approaches to those it began with. We began in exclusion, and I wanted to celebrate inclusion – because before that lightning struck we were tantalisingly close to that ideal.

We want to be proud that we are the most progressive nation when it comes to providing opportunities, assistance and access for everyone – no matter their postcode, no matter their level of physical or mental capacity, no matter the colour of their skin, no matter the accent, no matter their age, no matter their sexuality (and, incidentally, I find it extraordinary that Bush and Howard are going on about same-sex marriage – what about their own? Though of course that's a ménage à trios with Tony Blair….)

This is the revolution. A revolution that cannot rest. A revolution that can't be stifled. A revolution that brings into being the just, fair and equal Australia we can all vaguely envisage. We need it now. We need it tomorrow .and I'm afraid we're going to need it the next day and the day after that. And the one after that. Forever. Because the need, and the task, will never end. It is a process, not an event.

We need you. You're the architects of this revolution. You're the leaders that are already making it happen. We need your leadership. We need your fight. I'm sorry, but we need you not to rest. It's a hard task. It's a thankless task. But we need it to happen.

"The situation is hopeless. We must take the next step.".