

Stop laughing - this is serious

Wednesday, January 19, 2005

Moira Rayner

It was a bugger of a start to the new year: my Dad in hospital for the sixth time in six months; the family dog carking it after a final heart attack; the nation wallowing over a tsunami that killed 200 000 and a prime minister waxing magnanimous and righteous over saving the rest; and the implosion of the Opposition topped by the forced resignation of the last would-be prime minister who had an ounce of originality in him. I will never think of Latham without an inner vision of what a conga line of suckholes might look like. I raised my reddened eyes from the stories of factional favourites scrabbling like Russian POWs over the discarded cigarette stubs of defeat, to be transfixed by a political speech of a different kind.

A vaguely familiar, apparently serious politician was telling me, a 'fellow Australian,' that our nation was in peril, a 'creeping tide of un-Australianism eroding our great traditions. . . ' Were Australian diggers fighting for 'tofu sausages' he asked, rhetorically? No, he answered himself: a balanced Australia Day diet should consist of a few nice, juicy lamb chops and beer.

I'm a card-carrying member of the non-meat-eating party, since the morning of 17 January 1977 when I ran over a racehorse goanna and the camp fire that night, when I made the connection between death and the sausages for tea. When Mr Kekovich, as I later learned was his name, went on to warn against 'Your long haired dole bludging types... indulging their pierced tastebuds in all manner of exotic foreign and often vegetarian cuisine...' on an Australia Day barbie I cackled like a kooka. When he added, [I] it's an absolute disgrace. And people ask why we need capital punishment?' I cheered. It is, indeed, part of the Australian way of life to salve third degree barbecue burns in the ice of the esky.

By the time he added that 'The soap-avoiding, pot-smoking hippie vegetarians may disagree with me but they can get stuffed. They know the way to the airport. And if they don't, I'll show them,' I was his. I would have voted for his party as surely as Californian Democrats voted for Arnie.



'For gorsake, stop laughing: this is serious!'

Cartoon by Stan Cros.

The next day I read about the complaints to the Advertising Standards Board by the offended, including vilified vegetarians, and on the twenty eighth anniversary of my conversion to that faith, disowned them. It was satire, people: what distinguishes us from our fellow mammals, the capacity to laugh. I was a Presbyterian before I was a vegetarian. A humourless Bible Class teacher threatened me with Hell once, for sniggering. But if Jesus wept, he laughed as well. It is the ultimate challenge to power, to cock a snook at it.

Life is too damn serious today. We burden ourselves with 'responsibility' without its leavening of levity, at the same time racing to respond to the marketing of lust, gluttony, greed, chronic sadness, anger, envy and pride, once the cardinal sins. It's not eternal damnation we fear, but not meeting someone else's ideal standard of beauty, health or opinions. The cause of Mark Latham's downfall was not so much the sins for which he was lambasted by journalists and colleagues, but his lively use of language and scorn, and the human frailties of poor impulse control, self-absorption and, it looks to me, depression, the weaknesses of all of us.

The modern pantheon of sin ranges from obesity or smoking to being an angry middle-aged woman, or an ailing politician, the latter being evidence of lack of effort, of failing to take politics seriously. I add to it the sin of voting for the party that promised to keep our mortgage rates eternally affordable, the punishment for which is an eternal Howard government. But there are greater wrongs: the cardinal sin of structuring work to take away the leisure of parents and play from children by making them do homework five nights a week from the moment they can grasp a pencil or a Mouse. And is it not a sin to 'continuously assess' permanently part-time employed students in fee-paying, debt-incurring universities instead of giving them the time to think over bad coffee and improper associates such as we enjoyed, thirty years ago? No wonder we wallow in communal grief-making over earthquake and tsunami victims we've never met and wouldn't accept as asylum-seekers. Jesus wept.

But that night I laughed. I don't have to take seriously the link between one poor bastard's diseased gall bladder and his thrice-inflated successor's resemblance to a bullfrog 'filled with ambition' for Australia. Nor does Mark Latham have to justify his decision to stop trying to save the world and the Tasmanian old growth forest for a people who would rather pay off their home loans and take overseas holidays than take a chance. Quitting politics may seem a small tragedy to him now, but it is a big human triumph for his sons, as most women would understand. May he laugh, in time, as much as I did, when I was personally fighting off what Churchill called the Black Dog that night, and I looked up to that ninety second commercial and shrieked.

This is a critical time for pricking pomposity and desperate sadness. There's an old Stan Cross cartoon from the 1930s showing two workers in a desperate situation, one hanging onto a beam by his fingers

with his pants around his ankles, and another bloke hanging onto them, shrieking with laughter: both are dangling over a very, very big drop, and the first bloke is saying, 'For gorsake stop laughing - this is serious.' Life – get on with it, Mark.

About the author

Moira Rayner is the Deputy Managing Director for the Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment Limited, a lawyer and a writer.

Published Comments

What's your opinion? Tell us what you think by adding a comment to offer feedback on this story.

Moira, you have hit the mark (no pun intended), the Media will have us take every incident as having the potential to change the world.

Let us lighten up here and observe that our mental health will always benefit from a good laugh at what others will insist we should take seriously.

As for Mark himself, our loss will be his family's gain.

Michael McKay

Thursday, January 20, 2005

Moira, the pomposity of your class has needed pricking for years - John Howard has done it so effectively I don't know what to add. But to try, let me take issue with the goanna anecdote. If it's good enough for Our Germaine to urge us to become an Aboriginal nation, then it's good enough for you to eat road kill goanna -waste not want not, my dear. Is that Presbyterian enough? But let us move to the Most Pompous One, Edward Gough. Now there is a 'Leader' whose legacy is such a poisoned chalice that it consumes all who seize it, most notably our recent boozy, arm-breaker of media sensation and disappointment. What a legacy! East Timor handed to the Javanese, the Balts handed to the Sovs and the Viets totally disowned - not wanting 'Vietnamese Balts' indeed. His compassion is 'Christ-like' indeed, very much the Great Helmsman and Humanitarian. Not to forget his vicious persecution of the Croats, of course. Now all has turned out for the best.

Communism has collapsed. The Baltic States, Croatia and the East Timorese are free and proud, but Gough's baleful legacy lingers like a carcass blowing in the wind. However, a conga chain of suckholes amongst the pretentious classes - devotees, fellow travellers and useful idiots - continue to adore him. Why? The use, for example, of the term 'comrade' in one so Solonic in self-opinion is hardly seemly, redolent as it is of mass murder, mass starvation, slave labour and the red-hot poker, but it passes without a snicker from the pompous pricking classes. Moira, prick that pomposity, give EGW a serve and I'll take something else you write seriously.

Iain Russell

Thursday, January 20, 2005

Iain, I'll give it a go when the time is ripe, only because nobody is entitled to be worshipped. I've always had a soft spot for those with a big heart and a willingness to tack it to your sleeve, though. Moira Rayner

Moira Rayner

Friday, January 21, 2005

"The pomposity of your class", ouch...takes one to know one, I suppose. Mind you, Moira's delightful piece about a kick-arse ad is one of the least pompous I've read for years. Never could bear EGW's vanity, myself, but I like Latham. What is so bloody terrible about having a go and failing? I've always thought it was to be admired. If the criteria for trying becomes guaranteed success, I'll really start fearing for the future.

Jane Caro

Tuesday, February 08, 2005