



# V *HUMANIST* Viewpoints



Controversial, and not always admired by progressives for his stance on certain issues, Christopher Hitchens will be missed. He died 15 December 2011.

## HUVAT

Humanist Viewpoints Afternoon Talk 4pm  
2nd Sunday each month.

Jan 8 - Brian Edwards "Is There a God?"  
Feb 12 - Victor Bien "The Darwin Economy", and  
John August "Evolutionary Psychiatry"  
Mar 11 - Richard Mills "Dying with Dignity"

Opportunity to socialise over light refreshments.

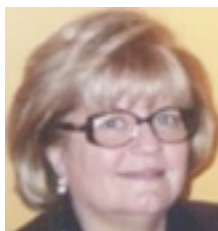
## Also in this issue...

- The Darwin Economy
- Sydney Freethinkers
- Hitchens' place in politics

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## Honorary Secretary Comments

Affie Adagio



Our **SGM** held in November to adopt our new constitution was uneventful thanks to our Legal Liaison Officer, Peter Young's Rules of Debate, which the meeting also adopted. My son Paul Zagoridis, a member of several years was appointed the new Public Officer.

**End of Year Party:** Not many attended but the food was delicious. John's films were enjoyable. His poetry was interesting. I read two proses from my published book, which were well received.

**David Tribe's 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party:** Max Wallace organized David's Lunch at the Harbourside Indian Restaurant. It was attended by 12 Humanists. Max and Meg also arranged for NZ Rationalists to be included by signing a huge birthday card.



Keith Porteus-Wood, Chief Exec Officer, National Secular Society UK, spoke to David via the Wallaces' computer on Skype. This was a memorable moment as David was the initiating President of this Society originally and the friendship is longstanding. The food was delicious, the company was great and David's poetry was mind boggling and one in particular delightfully obscene.

**VALE:** Finally, on a personal note on 1<sup>st</sup> November, my brother, Apollon Polimeris (66) died. He was developmentally disabled and in the same Nursing Home as my mother (91). He had a major epileptic seizure followed by a stroke and he was gone within two hours. He is terribly missed.

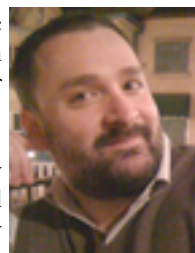
**PLEASE NOTE I NO LONGER CAN BE CONTACTED ON THE TELEPHONE N0. 02 9214 7529**

## Editor Comments

Frank Gomez

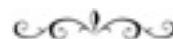
We hope our members celebrated the silly season and new year in their own ways, whether that be spiritually or secularly with events such as Festivus.

I spent my time indulging in lazy activities such as beach, boating and playing video games that are probably far too violent for my own good.



In this edition we get an insight into the history and social activities of the Western Sydney Freethinkers and host a conservative insight into the late Christopher Hitchens.

Victor Bien discusses the role of regulation in maintaining the health of a market economy.



This newsletter is also available electronically as a PDF in colour. Members who want **an additional** electronic colour version by e-mail **at no extra cost** can contact me directly at [frankgomez@me.com](mailto:frankgomez@me.com).

Some members have indicated they would be interested in **only** receiving the electronic copy for future editions to assist the Society in reducing costs and the unnecessary printing of paper. If you are happy to forgo the receipt of the printed version and just receive the electronic version then please make that clear in your email. It is entirely optional and your decision doesn't affect the manner in which you receive all other communications from the Society.

**Subscriptions are due by the 1st of July every year as follows:**

Single \$35, Double \$45, Concession \$20, Viewpoints only \$20

**Please send cheque to Humanist Society of NSW, 10 Shepherd St, Chippendale NSW 2008**

## President's Report John August



Next year the NSW Greens are planning to introduce a Voluntary Euthanasia Bill into Parliament. Along with a few others from the NSW Humanists I was able to attend a function hosted by the Dying With Dignity Group at Parliament House. The room was very full and they managed to get some coverage of comments by Nicholas Cowdery.

Obviously, all the words used are pretty good and descriptive, but Mr. Cowdery outlined a fondness for the term "Voluntary Assisted Suicide" as being clearer and less susceptible to misinterpretation.

For me, the most intriguing story was from Marshall Perron, the First Minister of the Northern Territory, who was the driving force behind the VE legislation. He had inspiration from a philosophical paper on the subject - it was interesting to see how, on occasion, ideas from philosophy can propagate to form a part of legislation.

I hope to collaborate with the DWD group. We anticipate that in 2012 there will be a lot of misinformation from the other side regarding the issue. However, given overseas experience we have a good idea of what will be said and how to counter it - I hope the NSW Humanists will be able to contribute to the effort where we can.

In addition, there's a Parliamentary Inquiry into Ethics Education in NSW, something that was promised to Fred Nile. Mr Nile claims that Christians do not support the ethics education - in fact I know it to be supported by many members of the Uniting Church and other churches too. Interestingly, Nile claims that Sir Henry Parkes ( NSW Premier in the 1870s/80s ) thought that "Secular" education was about keeping denominational teaching outside of classrooms, but allowed for scripture classes - supposedly there was no intention to keep out religious teaching completely.

However, a different view has been suggested to me by Victor Bien, our Treasurer : church schools were overstretched, and the State wanted to take over education - but churches negotiated a deal so that there would be a period of religious instruction. I imagine

Parkes wanted "Secular" to mean no religious education **at all**; but it became something which was **necessary** to get the deal made - a very different progression to the one Fred Nile claims.

We plan to make a submission to the Inquiry. In addition to supporting the initiative in principle, we should be able to challenge Fred Nile's view of history, and reinforce the presence of ethics education in our schools.

Also, recently I've had a few articles published on the Law Crime Politics website. I previously looked at Australia's foreign policy in the context of our live shipments to Indonesia; I incorporated mention of Bougainville, something our former Vice President, Waratah Gillespie, was passionate about. You can find it by going to the site [lawcrimepolitics.com](http://lawcrimepolitics.com) and searching for "Live Animal Abuse".

I also wrote a political commentary on Chomsky, a recent recipient of the Sydney Peace Prize. You can find it :

<http://lawcrimepolitics.com/chomsky-conflicting-elements-foreign-policy>

There's also some other articles if you want to have a look.

Lastly, a personal note. My mother, Ruth August, passed away in late November of cancer. Ruth and myself held the same non-religious viewpoint; she was very critical of the influence of religion, and also was accepting of her condition. She lived to be 83 years old, and lived a full life with lots of travel. Her main desires were not to waste away slowly from disease or in a nursing home. Thankfully, when the cancer had its final recurrence it did not take long in its course.

I remember the times we spent together, travelling overseas and within Australia; I will miss her. I have received condolences from others on the committee, which I am thankful for.

Regards,

John August

President

### CAN YOU HELP?

The Book Room at Humanist House needs book donations (ring David on 4782 1130 and volunteers (please ring Gillian on 9660 9658)



## Letter to the Editor

I wanted to share with you the circumstances of my joining the Humanist Society of NSW, because it is a good news story, and illustrates how a coincidence of circumstances can create outcomes (as opposed to an outcome being perceived the result of some master-plan of a super-natural being).

I had known Affie Adagio for a number of years. We were both habitués of a Kings Cross coffee shop. One day we discussed Humanism, and Affie kindly provided me with some material to read. It seemed to me that “moral” issues in Australia were dominated by the religious, and as a non-believer I felt voiceless in such debates. Yet HumSoc was an organisation of like-minded people of goodwill, who could engage in such debates from a principled basis. So I decided to apply to become a member in May 2010.

It was the worst of times to join HumSoc. It seemed deeply divided, not along ideological lines, but in a struggle for its control. Indeed I was shocked and horrified to learn that one member, who had been elected to the Committee had been interviewed on National Socialist Movement Radio and expressed passionately held views antipathetic to Humanism. It was, however, the best of times to join as I believed I could make a contribution.

Since then I have attended an endless stream of special meetings that convinced me all was not well. Having been born in the country, and having worked there most of my life prior to relocating to Sydney, I was well aware of the League of Rights, and its modus operandi of creating fear, uncertainty and division, hoping to seize power from the ashes of the disillusionment. I was aware of the pernicious nature of such tactics.

Pleasingly at the last Special Meeting a new constitution was adopted and the meeting more civil than previously had been the case.

So now HumSoc can get on with its core function of pursuing issues of importance, including defending the hard won battle for Ethics education in schools as an alternative to religious instruction.

I am filled with hope for the future. I am now proud to tell my friends – “I am a member of the Humanist Society of NSW”.

Yours faithfully

Peter Young,

Potts Point

## Member News

from the membership secretary

Sadly, we report that member Ron Leverett has died. He was our "Peace and Environment" contact, and active on these issues. Members will remember him attending various AGMs and general meetings up to the recent past. Condolences to his family and friends.

Also our condolences to John and Affie for their recent losses.

# Hitchens and the the Left

James G.Wiles

How can a conservative commentator and an orthodox Catholic like me possibly admire Christopher Hitchens? He hated the Pope, smeared Mother Teresa viciously. He even published a book four years ago defending his militant atheism called *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Then Christopher Hitchens debated around the world on that very topic. Then he co-wrote and edited a book about the debates.

In between those two books, there was a third one, about the war in Iraq and his support of it - which had caused him to break with many of the friends of his youth. All in all, Christopher Hitchens wrote 17 books, including his collected essays, *Arguably*, which was re-issued this year. He was 61.

First, there was the man's work ethic, already mentioned above. In fact, the book total doesn't do full justice to Christopher Hitchens' output. He was, for many years, a working journalist too. And a weekly columnist. After his move to the United States in 1981 -- and especially after the emergence of cable -- Hitchens also became a TV regular. Then there's the quality of his stuff.

Christopher Hitchens was, in the best sense, a public intellectual -- but he was also an *homme engage*. Hitchens took part in the public controversies of his time. As an occasional foreign correspondent, he also went out and got himself shot at. On his last trip to Beirut, he nearly got kidnapped and probably tortured and killed.

At the height of the Bill Clinton impeachment investigation, Christopher Hitchens wrote and walked into the offices of the House Judiciary Committee an evidentiary affidavit supporting the President's impeachment.

After that was all over, of course, he wrote a book about it. The title? "No One Left to Lie to: the Values of the Worst Family." Now that Chelsea Clinton has made her debut on network television, you might want to get it out again and re-read it.

One might say the man thought, read, talked, acted, thought and wrote. In that order -- usually while drinking and smoking.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Christopher Hitchens didn't blink at the idea of turning his own final illness into clear, cool prose.

At the high mid-point of his career, Christopher Hitchens suddenly found himself in a similar situation. His deeply-moving last essay in the current issue of *Vanity Fair* has been widely discussed - especially after Hitchens' weekly column for *Slate* failed to appear last week. It offers an unflinching look at how his spiritual and emotional experience of intense suffering with terminal cancer has disproved the truth of Nietzsche's philosophy.

VF was the venue for Christopher Hitchens' serious journalism for many years, while the books poured forth. His political stuff appeared in the *Nation*, for Hitchens - son of a British WW II --naval officer -- was also a man of the left from his Oxford University days. He began as a *soixante-huitard*. By the '70's, he was a full-blown Trotskyite. Along the way he accumulated many arrests. This pattern continued after Hitchens set off as a foreign correspondent to report on fascism in Spain, Portugal and Greece.

Hitch's political odyssey -- carried out in public -- was the third thing I admired. He thought and experienced his way to what I view as the valid side of many important public issues. And he carried more than a few people with him. The course of his personal life may have influenced him too. By the time of the Clinton impeachment, Hitchens had been living and working in the States for many years. He had also married an American and started a second family with her.

Fourth, of course, was the fascinating Hitchens family itself. Christopher Hitchens' brother, Peter, is a columnist for London's *Daily Mail*. He's likewise a writer of several political books. *The Abolition of Britain* is probably the best known in this country.

After his mother's suicide (in the midst of a family scandal which she caused), Hitchens discovered that his mother had been Jewish. That revelation -- and the break with the Clintons and their allies -- started him on a course of self-examination. The ultimate result was the autobiography.

Next, Christopher Hitchens loved a good fight, especially a public controversy. This, in some ways, made Hitchens akin to an earlier controversialist and journalist, H.L. Mencken -- although Hitchens' range was not so broad. It was of Mencken that Walter Lippman, wrote: "[he] is splendidly and exultantly and contagiously alive. He calls you a swine and an imbecile and it increases your will to live."

Christopher Hitchens appears to have had that effect on many of his targets too. Although certainly not Holy Mother Church or the Clintons (what an odd pairing!). Or the Islamists. Not to mention the Dali Lama.

Finally, and perhaps most shockingly in a former Trotskyite, Hitchens came to realize that he loved the United States. After we were attacked on 9/11, he became an American citizen. Hitchens also took up the ideological cudgels against the anti-American left. He joined another British émigré who was making a spiritual and political journey -- Andrew Sullivan -- in supporting the American military response to 9/11.

In doing so, he was forced by his former comrades-in-arms on the left -- such as Gore Vidal, who used to call Hitchens "my Dauphin" -- to choose a side. Hitchens did. Ours -- mostly. Like Michael Kelly -- the Atlantic Magazine editor-in-chief and brilliant columnist who became the first American war correspondent killed in action in Iraq -- Christopher Hitchens believed that regimes who subjected their peoples to living life with their "face under a boot" were worthy targets for American power.

It was while on tour in 2010 promoting his autobiography, *Hitch-22*, that Hitchens first learned he had the most severe form of esophageal cancer. It was a death sentence and he knew it. Hitchens' own father had died of the same thing.

Hitchens publicly vowed to be true to his atheism. A public appeal by his old friend and sometime partner in crime and debauchery, the author Martin Amis, that Hitchens reconsider and become an agnostic went, so far as been reported, unanswered. Instead, Hitchens said to an interviewer that if, after his death, it's reported that the militant atheist Christopher Hitchens experienced a deathbed

conversion -- a la *Brideshead Revisited* -- we are to know that his mind gave way at the end.

I am not one of those who take an interest in a man's last moments. And anyway, of the dead, said the ancient Romans, say nothing but good. Hitchens was a proud bohemian, who loved his booze and cigarettes. They, and his genetic inheritance, killed him too.

Nevertheless, one item about Christopher Hitchens which made the blogs must be told here. I thought of it when I first learned of Hitchens' cancer diagnosis in 2010.

During his 2007 book tour for *God Is Not Great*, a confrontation occurred between Christopher Hitchens and Fr. George Rutler at the Union League of New York. There were a lot of witnesses and the whole thing was later never really denied by Hitchens. Fr. Rutler is an Oxford graduate himself -- and no coward. He was with Fr. Michal Judge at Ground Zero.

Under verbal attack by Hitchens but still urging his conversion, George Rutler told Hitchens that "he would either die a Catholic or a madman..." It's an ugly story, one which even the fact that there appears to have been drink taken (by Hitchens) can't excuse. So, there you have the militant atheist in full flower. I guess if you can't get by that, you're stuck -- if you want to follow that old Roman maxim -- with saying about Christopher Hitchens that, like the Thane of Cawdor in *Macbeth*, "nothing in his life became him like the leaving it."

But if you do, you'll have missed my point.

Nothing so became Christopher Hitchens as his life. And his life was writing and reading and talking and arguing. To borrow the epitaph of another Christopher - Sir Christopher Wren, architect of London's St. Paul's Cathedral: for the man whose friends called him Hitch, "if you wish to see his monument, look around you." It'll be in all the bookstores - or on YouTube.

Fitting indeed that Christopher Hitchens' death came on the day America's war in Iraq ended.

*Reprinted courtesy American Thinker*



# News in Brief

## WITH 6 BILLION EUROS PER YEAR, ITALY COULD ACCOMPLISH MIRACLES

This is the slogan on the maxi-posters of the new campaign by UAAR that earlier today (Monday 19 December) were posted around Genova and in the streets of Venice. After the notoriety gained by the website [icostidellachiesa.it](http://icostidellachiesa.it) (the first detailed list of the fiscal privileges and the economic contributions the Catholic Church enjoys), the association decided to go public with their information. The posters point out that the Church's tax privileges are "a price that both believers and non-believers pay". The activists argue religions should be financed only by their followers.

With the Italian Parliament discussing budget cuts, these atheists and agnostics are raising the stakes: "We are discriminated against as taxpayers, and we want everybody to see that". "It is incredible that the Catholic Church, the largest Italian real estate owner, is not asked to make the sacrifices that the economic situation calls for". With six billion euros, Italy could not only reduce its public debt, but also invest in research and education, as UAAR suggests in its poster.



### Study Explores Distrust of Atheists by Believers

Distrust is the central motivating factor behind why religious people dislike atheists, according to a new study led by University of British Columbia psychologists. "Where there are religious majorities -- that is, in most of the world -- atheists are among the least trusted people," says lead author Will Gervais, a doctoral student in UBC's Dept. of Psychology.

"With more than half a billion atheists worldwide, this prejudice has the potential to affect a substantial number of people."

One motivation for the research was a Gallup poll that found that only 45 per cent of American respondents would vote for a qualified atheist president, says Norenzayan. The figure was the lowest among several hypothetical minority candidates. Poll respondents rated atheists as the group that least agrees with their vision of America, and that they would most disapprove of their children marrying.

## Words and Music



Words and Ideas by David Tribe is available for \$15 for the total benefit of the Humanist Society of NSW. A very popular piece of literature which is selling fast so send in your order with your cheque or money order.



Love is Born CD is composed and the lyrics are written by Dennis Morris (past President of HumSocWA). The songs are English interspersed with Zulu, and are highly relaxing. The \$15 is totally for the benefit of the HumSocNSW so please send in your order with your cheque or money order.

# WESTERN SYDNEY FREETHINKERS

Murray Love

Western Sydney Freethinkers aspires to be a group promoting critical thinking, logic, reason, science, philosophy, art, literature, and all manner of other intellectual pursuits in the Western Sydney area through rational discourse.

WSF was the brainchild of Alan Conradi, who grew up in the Windsor area and now lives in Penrith. Alan had met several fellow nonbelievers from the Outer West at meetings such as Sydney Atheists and the Australian Skeptics.

Western Sydney Freethinkers' first formal meeting was held on Sunday 19th July 2009 in a room at the Penrith RSL Club entitled 'What is a Freethinker?' It was about a gathering of ex-christians, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, humanists, and brights settling on an umbrella name they could all live with.

Earlier, on Wednesday 1st July, a handful of us had launched the informal wing of the movement - cheekily titled 'Western Sydney Freedrinkers' - at an iconic Pub 'The Red Cow', just across from Penrith Railway Station. The hotel is family friendly, with good value meals. This critical bonding session has been faithfully continued on the first Wednesday of each month at 6.00pm upstairs at the back in the Red Cow ever since. It's a good place and time for newcomers to come and meet fellow freethinkers. There are often extra celebrations at the annual Equinoxes and Solstices (which are after all the original excuses for a festival in most religions).

Yet another foundational event was our trip down Charles Darwin Walk at Wentworth Falls on Saturday 5th July 2009. We gathered under the sign in Wilson Park and then followed the track which winds its way along a little water course, following the footsteps of Darwin himself. In 'The Voyage of the Beagle' he describes the breathtaking view of the valley from the top of the falls, and our leader Alan Conradi stood on a boulder and ceremonially read out the relevant passage, when we got there. He reports: "There was something special about hearing Darwin describe what was in front of us, which doesn't seem to have lost its magnificence in the many years since Darwin's visit."



Back again at the RSL on Sunday, 16 August Anthony Englund, then President of Sydney Atheists Inc. gave a talk on 'Positive Atheism' – an activist approach to being 'good without god'. (Anthony's views were quite reminiscent of Humanism. Since then, John August, President of NSW Humanists finally faced the group at the February 2011 meeting).

On Sunday 20th September Peter Bowditch, a Western Sydney Freethinkers member who happens to be a former President of Australian Skeptics, explained the ins and outs of the worldwide Skeptic movement. We finished off with guest performer Jason Hamiester leading us in a 'Psycho-kinetics Workshop' - a festival of spoon bending (and a few forks, but no knives), where we discovered how easily twisted these common objects actually are. (We had to restrain ourselves that evening in the Club restaurant!) This was the last formal meeting held in the RSL Club, although the habit of a meal there afterwards has continued.

Perhaps still our most ambitious trip out together, was the journey we made to the Australian Fossil and Mineral Museum, Bathurst on Sunday, 4th October 2009. We met at 9a.m., then drove to the lovely old pub at Mt Victoria for morning tea, and got to Bathurst around midday. This gave us two hours to view an exceptional collection of rocks, fossils, and reproduction skeletons of ancient creatures.

The October meeting was held on Sunday, 25th. This was a lively, effective, and well-attended



gathering, despite being in an open area by the bar upstairs at the Red Cow Hotel. We were graced with the presence of Tanya Levin, author of 'People in Glass Houses: An insider's story of a life in and out of Hillsong'. Tanya grew up in the congregation that evolved into the Hillsong Church in the Baulkham Hills district of Western Sydney. She was able to tell a warm and personal story of her involvement and disillusionment and ultimate expulsion from that community. Quite a few WSF group members are 'graduates' of Hillsong, a Pentecostal style church, which seems to leave a trail of ex-believers across the Western Sydney region. Several of these were also keen to share their own stories that afternoon.

We held the November 15th meeting at the old Penrith School of Arts building (managed by the local University of the Third Age). This has now become the regular Sunday venue. Geoff Cowan, a local member, and long-time skeptical activist, presented a critical but entertaining evaluation of various recent Australian allegations of alien abduction and UFO sightings, illustrated with examples of the pseudo-scientific, evasive, and manipulative research methods Ufologists employ to exaggerate their 'evidence'.

The 'Picnic and Pastors' outing on Saturday, December 5, 2009 began at Selwood Science and Puzzles, Hazelbrook followed by a picnic lunch and a visit to the Central Mountains Baptist Church at Hazelbrook Public School Hall for their "Creation Research Conference: Darwin on the Rocks". Such visits to converse with those faithful to dogmas and creeds we don't ourselves cherish, have also become a regular part of the WSF calendar. Later that same month some of us visited the "Bethlehem Experience" a costume event at the evangelical Imagine Nations Church, Penrith. (It's tricky evading the inevitable collection bowl when accompanied by a Christian dressed as a spear carrying Roman soldier!)

On Sunday, December 20, 2009 we held our 'Reason's Greetings' end of year celebration. Yes of course it was a party, but also the first of several 'Open Mike Nights' where individual members take the opportunity to talk about their varied and fascinating backgrounds and interests, follies and escapades and seasonal reminiscences.

We were back again in 2010 on January 17, focusing on current activist campaigns. Daniel Raffaele, leader of the Stop the AVN exposed the

so-called Australian Vaccination Movement (a sinister group promoting fear of bogus dangers in vaccines). Then Dave Singer explained the dangers of the Federal Labor government's proposed mandatory filtering system, supported by the Australian Christian Lobby. While ostensibly aimed at pornographers and pedophiles, the concern is that the secret blacklisting of websites could exclude information on euthanasia or other controversial minority choices.

The February 21st meeting took the theme of 'Alternative Atheism'. First, Gerry Texeira, Sydney Area Manager of the International Raelian Movement gave its history, which began with Frenchman Rael's 1973 encounter with the Elohim – extraterrestrials who are the designers of Life on Earth. An additional presentation on Crop Circles by fellow Raelian Eden Bates aroused the audience's skepticism further. Then author David Staume presented his book 'The Atheist Afterlife'. This involves extra dimensions of space and time, with the 'inner life' turning inside-out at death, and the lifetime mental content determining the quality of the afterlife experience. It required accepting mind-body dualism, and David's use of physics was unconvincing to the physicists in the audience, who tended to give him a hard time.

On Sunday, March 21, 2010 the University of Western Sydney's Dr Ragbir Bhathal, a genuine physicist and leader in the Australian SETI (Searching for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) project wasn't able to confirm the existence of the Elohim, but otherwise gave an informative and entertaining talk on the efforts of enthusiasts to explore Southern Hemisphere skies for interesting signals.

The speaker on Sunday, April 18, 2010 was also from the local University. Sociology Professor Adam Possamai gave a brief reprise of his 2007 Charles Strong Lecture 'Yoda Goes to the Vatican: Religion and Youth Spiritualities'. This examined new religions in Australia such as the Gaia-worshipping pagan Church of All Worlds, or Jediism based on the Star Wars movies. These draw on popular culture to create a religious message. He calls them 'postmodern hyper-real consumer religions', which appeal more to the individual self than to a congregation. The Internet has brought new impetus to such movements. The Professor has also published on religion for Generations X and Y, and much of the Q&A at the end was about the religious behaviour of the young.

The formal meeting on Sunday 16th May again saw local skeptic Geoff Cowan in action on a favourite topic – the ‘Towel of Turin’! Geoff expertly took the group through the Shroud of intrigue and fantasy in which this infamous artifact has itself been wrapped. A month later our other iconic skeptic, Peter Bowditch delivered an exposé on a mix of dubious therapies such as homeopathy – with entertaining demonstrations of the methods used.

The group sobered up again two weeks later on a wintry Sunday to hear ‘Tales of the Popes’ from Larry Buttrose a Blue Mountains freelance writer. His book looks at all almost 300 pontiffs from the inception of the papacy, up to the burning at the stake of the Humanist philosopher Giordano Bruno in Rome in 1600. The August Meeting on the 15th was another Open Mike Night with contributions from various group members culminating in all-out debate on the climate change issue, and on Sunday September 19th, Sydney-based online skeptical activist Jason Brown spoke on ‘Online Activism’ showing how sympathizers are drawn together in an online community that can go on to more direct and formal actions.

Sunday October 24th 2010 was undoubtedly the most compelling meeting of the year, as John Ellis of the group Broken Rites discussed his experiences in forcing the Australian Catholic Church to face up to the sexual abuse scandal. John’s struggle was prolonged and personal, and ultimately effective after many setbacks, and his hushed retelling pinned the audience to their chairs.

A little trip near home was the ‘Ghost Tour’ on Saturday Night November 6, 2010 at Windsor. I’m afraid we encountered nothing to induce us to believe in afterlives, but we were reminded what a lovely little town Windsor is. The formal meeting, titled ‘Geoff and Peter’s Cavalcade of Conspiracy’ on Sunday, November 21st brought the group’s two skeptical heavyweights, Geoff & Peter, together to analyse the antics of Conspiracy Theorists around the Globe.

Several Western Sydney Freethinkers (along a number of NSW Humanists) attended the Sydney Atheists’ annual Festivus (the festival for the rest of us) at Jubilee Park, Glebe on Monday 3rd January 2011. Festivus is a secular alternative to celebrate

the holiday season. The celebration, as shown on the Seinfeld TV show, included an aluminum ‘Festivus pole’ the ‘Airing of Grievances’ and ‘Feats of Strength’. The event included these signature moments, but was mainly a big barbecue in the park for non-believers. A good time was had by all and the story of the first eighteen months ends here.

The group has also had cinema nights, shown our own movies and various lesser planned and spontaneous events. New ideas are always welcome. Western Sydney Freethinkers even has a podcast ‘The Three Thinkers’ with dozens of episodes produced. This is media at its most basic, getting three or more members to converse on a topic, and recording the results. These digital recordings are then attached to websites where they can be downloaded onto home computers and listened to on portable mp3 players. The podcast is not for the faint hearted but can be found at [threethinkers.com](http://threethinkers.com). They’ve discussed vaccination, Julia Gillard’s atheism, censorship, atheist billboards, space, the Danish cartoons and whatever’s controversial at the time.

I hope some of the older Humanists will be pleased to know that the wider movement of humanistic freethought is alive and well in Western Sydney. WSF still goes strong in 2011 and any Humanists are welcome to attend any events they like. Membership is completely informal and contributions are purely voluntary.

The only impediment is that Western Sydney Freethinkers works best for those who access the social networking opportunities offered by the Internet. Just type ‘Western Sydney Freethinkers’ into Google or Facebook search engines to see heaps of information. Join the Facebook group.

If you don’t use computers, the best point of contact is to turn up after 6p.m. upstairs at the back of the Red Cow Hotel, Penrith on the first Wednesday of the month, or at the University of the Third Age building in Castlereagh Street, Penrith (opposite the massive Penrith RSL Club) on the third Sunday of the month at 4p.m. Perhaps I’ll see you there.

*The author of this article, a NSW Humanists Committee Member also living in the Penrith area, has been with the Freethinkers from the group’s inception.*

# The Darwin Economy?

Victor Bien

I was made aware of a new book published with the above title by SMH journalist Ross Gittins on 24 December who wrote a piece in the business pages, *A little regulation brings out the best for all of us*, about it proving that the true father of modern economics is not Adam Smith as most economists would say today but Charles Darwin! The author of the book, Robert Frank, professor of economics at Cornell University, forecast that in 100 years' time the prevailing view would change to that.

To understand Robert Frank's thesis we need to refresh our understanding of competition and free markets. With this fresh view we get a new handle on an old and on-going debate between the Libertarians and those, like us, who argue that varying degrees of government regulation is required.

In terms of the notions of "social darwinism" Frank's thesis could be seen as a new form of social darwinism; however because of the bad associations of "social darwinism" it is probably best not to think in these terms.

To refresh our perspectives or understandings the debate between the Libertarians and the regulators, roughly between the right and the left in politics, is that one side claims that leaving economic life to the free market gives the "best" outcomes - Adam Smith's famous "hidden hand" at work while the other says no that is not all because while competition may start roughly between equal players gradually, usually some players will come to dominate the market; the rich get richer, the poor get poorer and the end result is a scourge of monopolising market players overcharging and delivering poor service. This syndrome is often referred to as "market failure".

While people, including us, on the left have largely given up seeking "socialism" they/we have not given up trying to find some way to intervene to forestall such market failure. The approach has been "regulation". However, simple, direct or rather simple-minded regulation such as imposing price control does not work.



Here in Australia, which I think sets an example to the rest of the world, we have come up with a form of regulation which doesn't try to intervene in the market *directly*. We do it *indirectly* by regulating competition i.e. regulating the competitive process. Hence we have a body called by the acronym ACCC - Australian Competition & Consumer Commission. It has often been in the news in battles with the big boys like Coles, Telstra, Woolworths etc. It does things like disallowing mergers and acquisitions which make firms too large and gain too much market dominance and so preventing monopolistic behaviour. Big interests are at stake and consequently ACCC cases are like gladiatorial contests which is why they make news!

From Prof Frank's work it now becomes clear that we, and Adam Smith, are missing an important point. "Darwin's view of the competitive process was fundamentally different," Frank says. "His observations persuaded him that the interest of individual animals were often profoundly in conflict with the broader interests of their own species."

I urge you to read Gittin's article which you can find on the Sydney Morning Herald site and come to my upcoming talk on 12 February on the topic.

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