

# HUMANIST viewpoints



*YOU'RE NEVER TOO OLD TO ROCK'N'ROLL - IF YOU'RE BORN TO BOOGIE! - AT THE 2015 END-OF-YEAR TRIVIAGANZA*



*THE BIGGEST EVENT OF 2015 WAS OUR WORLD HUMANIST DAY SEMINAR IN JUNE OPENED BY M.P. ALEX GREENWICH*

**THERE WILL BE A BREAK FROM HUVAT AND MEETUP IN JANUARY WITH ALL BACK FRESH IN FEBRUARY**

**CHECK PAGE 6 INSIDE FOR OUR CALENDAR OF EVENTS INCLUDING DARWIN DAY ON FEBRUARY 14  
AN ACTIVISM MEETING ON MARCH 13 PLUS MEETUP EVENTS ON SUNDAYS FEBRUARY 28 & MARCH 27**

**WE HAVE MORE ITEMS FROM OUR QUITE INTERESTING SEMINAR IN JUNE SEE ERIK ASLAKEN ON  
INTELLIGENCE & EVOLUTION ON PAGES 8-9 ALSO FAY LOVE'S BOOK SERIES REVIEW ON PAGE 5**

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# A TRIBUTE TO MOLLIE CAMPBELL

This article is written in the context of the short *Vale* for Mollie I wrote for the July – September issue as well as the one written by Rosslyn Ives (*Australian Humanist* Vol 119 Spring 2015 p.16). Our editor asked me to write a more personal story of Mollie. She passed away on 17 June 2015.

Writing this article gave me a chance to refresh my memory of some names which I have not recalled for decades. The scenes conjured up when I did think of them were quite re-invigorating! It provides an opportunity to set down a bit of our group history for the record, and to freshly reflect on where we came from.



Mollie was born 24 January 1930 in England.

The Society was formed in 1961 and Mollie arrived the year after it formally got going. She migrated to Australia with her medical practitioner husband, Tony Chalmers, who died not long after they came to Australia. They initially went to live in Melbourne but soon moved to Parramatta.

Mollie was recovering from an upbringing by a religiously stifling Ana-Baptist mother. She discovered kindred spirits in the Society, and joined it in 1964.

Around that time Bill Birchley was an active member of the Society, who ran a discussion group in a room opposite to the Wayside Chapel. It was in 1965 that David Duffy met Mollie and formed a lifelong friendship with her, even though at times they had robust and sharp disagreements!

The Society had an earlier Humanist House located at 194 Crown Street, down the hill a small block from Liverpool Street - a terrace building which still stands today. Type the address into a search engine and click on the *Street View* link that comes up and you can see the building as it is today. I think the funds enabling the purchase of this building was largely provided by Dr John Hirshman.

Other prominent names of that time were Dr Alex Baumgarten a physicist, and Bill and Daphne Weekes. Bill was an English teacher at Canterbury Boys High School, which I

attended - as did John Howard. Daphne was a long-time secretary for the Society. Others I recall were Bridget Gillings, Bob and Marie Chalmers, Frank Stevens, Bill Shore, Jim Woolnough, Max Blanch, Rafe Champion, Lesley Bond, Marion Hoskings, Elizabeth Perry, not to mention Jim and Ann Young and Fred Flatow who are still active today. (Apologies to others whom I could not think of as I wrote this).

It was 1969/70 when the Society sold the Crown Street premises and moved to our current location in Chippendale. Mollie played a big part in achieving this move.

Mollie lived in Darling Point as a widow for some time. She even returned to the UK for a while in the 1970s.

In 1978 she met Gordon Campbell arising from a shared interest in bird watching. I'm told by my wife Silvana that the occasion was at a spot in Port Botany. They married in 1979. They established a home in Bellevue Hill and lived there till 2000 when they sold up and moved to Mudgee.

Gordon's interest in birds out in nature is a big time interest! He still works with a department of the Australian Museum systematically cataloguing many birds found in the field.

Here he is on the left receiving an award for his work there.



Mollie made her home available, hosting many Society reception occasions, meetings, and social events. She enjoyed playing host and providing hospitality to visiting Humanists from interstate and overseas.

During the 1980s I visited their place every week coding the Society's membership database system. This home-made software is still in use today. This work was done on one of the earliest 'IBM compatible' PCs available on the market at the time. After this project was completed, the rapidly changing computer technology caught up with that machine.

Subsequently Mollie reflected with me how a machine which had played such an important role in establishing the members' database became visibly a complete useless lump within an astonishingly short period of time - a period so fresh to our memories!

Gordon ran a small business from home called *Fiddlers Hire* from 1988. I recollect his building violins and other string instruments. He still has a few unsold ones which I think he would be interested in selling off.

Let us know if you wish to contact him.

**Victor Bien**





# A THANK YOU TO VICTOR BIEN

Victor d'Iapico-Bien joined the Humanist movement in 1968, initially in Queensland, although he had earlier heard of Humanism from NSW's Daphne Weeks, following a letter he had got published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Victor was President for a while in the 1980s, but his major contribution was as Treasurer of the Humanist Society of NSW from 1998 up to 2015. Victor always stresses the importance of Humanism's infrastructure, the social capital of the state, national and international institutions which embody core purposes and values and messages. Victor sees something unique in the Humanist movement - no other way of meeting people is as satisfactory to his needs.

Victor had only just left Christian belief in 1968 while studying for a Ph.D. at the University of Queensland. The departure was traumatic. He had been drawn in while a student at the Church of England's Cranbrook School in Sydney. During studies in 1956-1960 he associated with the fundamentalist Evangelical Union in Sydney University. He knew some highly intellectual Christians who introduced him to philosophy to help defend the faith, but his own persistent intellect found its way out. Victor had long been curious about the world, always quizzing his father, as a boy. Victor's father was a manager of the Bank of China located in Martin Place in the 1940s. The family had migrated from China prior to the ultimate Communist takeover.

Victor is a determined worker, and continued his service to the committee of the Humanist Society during surgery for bowel cancer and extended recovery due to complications in 2006. He has produced countless journal articles and was always at the hub of the Society's 'brains trust'. Victor is an 'epistemological' agnostic, and a 'practical' atheist. He is at the same time deeply technical and scientific, while broadly fascinated by the humanities and philosophy. For Victor, thinking and discussion come before action. He especially focusses on Humanism as the modern day exponent of Enlightenment values, which asserts that the basis of authority in the political order must be founded on reason and science, not supernatural belief.

Victor speaks frequently at Society events and is key to our successful Darwin Day series. He has helped organise many special events including our grand World Humanist Day Seminar at Parliament House in 2014.

Victor is stepping back from a formal role at this stage, but remains fully engaged in the Society's values and in shepherding the association on to a sustainable future in the current century. He helped Brian Edwards in his brief stint as Treasurer and is currently assisting Angela to look after these important functions. He is still with us but deserving of special mention at this time of his formal retirement from committee duties. He was made a Life Member at the most recent Annual General Meeting.



## Consider Making a Donation or Bequest

This year, please consider making a donation of \$5, \$20, \$50 or whatever you can, to protect and sustain the NSW Humanist Society. Your donation will sustain the diverse range of activities the Society undertakes. Please also remember us in your Will. All bequests contribute to the longevity of the Humanist Society of NSW and Humanism. Our thanks go out to those who have already made generous donations in 2015.

## Book Room & Library

Some of us have switched to e-books, while many continue to appreciate physical books. Either way, if you have any surplus books in your collection then consider donating them to the Society's Library or for sale in the Book Room. Thanks also to all the Book Room helpers.

## Member News

Thankyou to all of our members who have renewed their membership for 2015/16. Your continuing support is precious. Thankyou to Angela for ably managing membership affairs for many years. Angela is focussing on Treasurer matters in 2016. Membership enquiries can be directed to Fay, our Secretary, at [faylove@rocketmail.com](mailto:faylove@rocketmail.com).

A warm welcome to new members Meg Mooney, Glenn Burns and Geoffrey Ballard.

*Vale:* Lilian Emmett, long time member, former committee member, committed member. We are thankful for her leaving the Society a generous bequest.

An exciting development is that the beginnings of a new incorporated Humanist association have been made in Canberra/ACT.

# END-OF-YEAR TRIVIAGANZA REPORT

The Humanist Society of NSW finished off 2015 with a celebratory trivia night. Three teams battled it out at Humanist House on Saturday evening 5th December, then danced until it was dark. There was room for a few more of us, but enough of us came to provide enjoyment and togetherness.

The quiz questions favoured well informed aussies growing up in the sixties. There was an *Australia* round, a *Sixties* round and a *History* round of questions derived from the *Baby Boomer* edition of the *Trivial Pursuit* game.

They also had TV characters & Celebrity photos to identify. It was wonderful to see members bonding into teams as they collectively furrowed brows, reminisced bemusedly, and listened carefully to the answers blurted out at the other tables.

The favourite part was the musical guessing of pop songs from the sixties - but the lyrics were in the French version! It was another small way to honour Paris. John August helped break up the intense labour, giving us amusing recitations while the scores were being compiled. Team 3 won.

**Murray Love**

Team 1



Team 2



Team 3



# FICTIONAL PEOPLE, REAL ISSUES

Humanism can often be found in unexpected places including fictional characters in novels by such as the Scottish author, **Alexander McCall Smith**. (The title of this article is borrowed from the talk he delivered at the University of Virginia in April as this year's *Hollingsworth Lecture in Ethics*.)

Alexander McCall Smith is extraordinarily well credentialed. He has a PhD in Law from the University of Edinburgh and is Emeritus Professor of Law there. He was formerly a Chairman of the British Medical Journal Ethics Committee, and has been on both the UK Human Genetics Commission and the International Bioethics Committee of UNESCO.

If I'd known all this first, I could even have been put off reading him. I usually read fiction for my own sheer vacuous pleasure, rather than for the erudition of the author. But I do love to read about people and their interactions with each other, with their environment, and with society in general.

I am also a fan of historical fiction, which I think of as 'Fictional People, Real Time-Settings', so perhaps the work of Alexander McCall Smith is not so far removed from my usual choices!

Some of you may have heard of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, set in Botswana, with Precious Ramotswe as the main protagonist. It is the first novel in a most delightful set of stories and has been turned into an equally delightful TV series.

However, the series of Alexander McCall Smith that has grabbed and held my attention most is the *Isabel Dalhousie* series – also known as *The Sunday Philosophy Club* series.

The novels are set in Edinburgh in Scotland.

Isabel is a philosopher. She is the owner and editor of a quarterly publication *Review of Applied Ethics*. Isabel is also something of a sleuth, an amateur detective, but not of the usual sleaze, vice, and violence variety that we have come to expect from modern film and literature.

Isabel involves herself in people's problems and various other ethical matters. These issues are not strictly crimes – sometimes it's just a case of bad behavior – but mostly she tries to sort out mysteries and difficulties in people's lives.

What intrigues me is that Isabel never stops having an internal debate about her moral obligations and duty to others. She approaches everything from a philosopher's point of view.

Several philosophers crop up in the novels. Isabel admires, for example, David Hume, a fellow Scot, but seems to be dismissive of Immanuel Kant.

Other readers would find these references fascinating, but my own personal interest is less substantial – I am more interested in what she decides to do, rather than which philosophy she is adhering to in coming to that decision.

W.H. Auden, a 20th century Anglo-American poet, is a favourite of Isabel's and she often alludes to his writings, as she wends her way through her moral quandaries.

Auden's principal themes are "love, politics and citizenship, religion and morals, and the relationship between unique human beings and the anonymous, impersonal world of nature." This description sounds like just the sort of thing Isabel usually loves getting her teeth into.

Alexander McCall Smith has said he thinks Isabel Dalhousie and Precious Ramotswe would get along well together!

Here are just some of the problems Isabel encounters throughout the series:

- She witnesses a young man plunging to his death and does not believe it to be suicide because she noticed a look of surprise on his face as he fell
- A man with a heart transplant who has memories which don't fit into his life story. (This raised the issue of memory, where it is stored and how it is retrieved)
- The mysterious death of an artist on a Scottish island
- A doctor whose career has been unfairly shattered

Parallel to these events are the issues in Isabel's own life to which she applies similar ethical rigour. These include her romantic attraction to the much younger Jamie, who is the ex-boyfriend of her niece. Isabel agonises over whether to report her niece's delicatessen to the authorities for selling mushrooms which made her ill.

As a reviewer has said: "Isabel doesn't so much detect as interfere in a quietly masterful way which more frivolous sleuths can only envy."

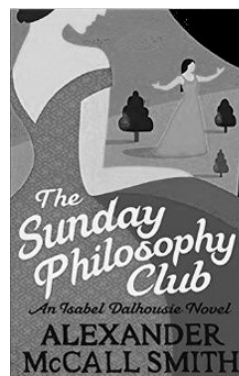
Other interesting characters throughout the series are:

- Cat, Isabel's niece – a young attractive woman who runs a delicatessen. Cat keeps falling for inappropriate men and refusing to listen to Isabel's advice about them.
- Grace, Isabel's housekeeper, an outspoken Scotswoman with an interest in spiritualism, and an opinion on absolutely everything.
- Jamie – Cat's ex-boyfriend who is a "fatally attractive" bassoon player.
- Eddie – Cat's assistant at the delicatessen, who has experienced "something traumatic" in his past and is very shy.
- Brother Fox – an urban fox who lives in Isabel's garden.

I recommend this series for both pure enjoyment and an interesting insight into the issues Humanists often explore.

## Fay Love

Fay is Secretary of the Humanist Society of NSW. This is her first item published in our newsletter following her talk at the 2015 World Humanist Day Symposium. She is a keen reader of fiction and a book clubber.



# CALENDAR FOR JAN-MAR 2016

THERE WILL BE A BREAK FROM HUVAT AND MEETUP IN JANUARY WITH ALL BACK FRESH IN FEBRUARY

## The HuVAT for Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> February 2015 at 4.00 for 4.15 p.m. will be our Darwin Day celebration

Our President Ian Bryce will discuss **The Evolution of Sentience** - The capacity for pleasure and pain is essential to any theory of ethics. Its origins shed light on our consideration of humans, apes and all animals.

Our Vice-President John August will talk on **Evolutionary Psychology** theories about human behaviour, responsibility and ethics. He will consider how evolution operates, and how the ideas bear on ethics. The old 'nature vs nurture' has developed into 'epigenetics' where nature triggers and adjusts biological possibilities. What can we learn from animals? Can we compare animal and human behaviour? *Ethics* looks at what ought we do, and how we assess it, but *Evolutionary Psychology* looks at what do we do, and why. The 'underlying reasons' for altruism, cooperation and selfishness may not map to philosophical frameworks.

Our former Treasurer Victor Bien will discuss **The Evolution of Resistance**. Any pressure, natural or artificial, on the survival of organisms leads to selection of individuals in populations of species. e.g. weedicides apply selective pressure on agricultural pests - but even home gardeners now need to use stronger concentrations. The last line of antibiotic defence against infection may become useless, and epidemics again become common.

AS ALWAYS PLEASE STAY AFTER EACH HUVAT FOR OUR SHARED MEAL AND HUMANISTIC CONVERSATION AT 6 PM

## NSW Humanists Meetup 'New Humanists Sunday Open House' 3-6PM on Sunday 28th February 2016

We'll look at the concept of Humanism itself and its continuing relevance in the 21st Century. We won't be trying for a narrow or dogmatic view - no-one owns Humanism - but for a stimulating and diverse exchange of views. The 20th century bequeathed to us a broad humanist tradition, but new generations need to establish priorities relevant to the life they lead today. How do we become a campaigning community of diverse individuals sharing a meaningful lifescape in an international movement? How do we address a world simultaneously globalising, and rebounding from a colonialist past? How can we find our voices and our audiences in a fragmenting communication and media environment? What are the values held by those generations now maturing? The topic will simply be called '**21st Century Humanism**'. Bring along your forward looking ideas.

SHARE SPACE WITH A DIVERSE HUMANIST MEETUP COMMUNITY AND ENJOY A MIX OF DISCUSSION SNACKS AND SOCIALISING

## Sunday 13th March 3.15-5.15 p.m. will be the first Activism Meeting of 2016 to share ideas and plans

At these meetings The Humanist Society of NSW gets together with guests to share concerns and hear about projects, views and ideas towards progress regarding the values and issues that disturb and inspire the humanist community. Members are again invited to tell us what they are doing, and what they would like the society to focus on. It will include a presentation and Q&A by CAHS President Scott Sharrad on his proposals for re-organisation to present Humanism at a national level in Australia. We can also discuss our approach to items at the 2016 CAHS 'Australian Humanist Conference' to be held in Brisbane May 27-29. Murray Love will present some of his thoughts on the creative thinking, careful risk-taking, genuine outreach, and magnanimous succession planning the Society needs to engender to build a secure new future for the association and its assets.

REMEMBER A 3PM START FOR THE ACTIVISM MEETINGS - ALL WELCOME TO GO ON TO 'THE STONED CROW' FOR A MEAL

## NSW Humanists Meetup 'New Humanists Sunday Open House' 3-6PM on Sunday 27th March 2016

will take its cue from Harmony Day which comes with the equinox each March. The equinox sees the days the same length all over the world and is symbolic of equality between the developed 'north' and the developing global 'south'. Authentic equality means that even conservatives can't solve conflict using antiquated discriminatory practises. We have to share the world with people who have dangerous ideas. They find our ideas dangerous too, if in a different way. How can we manage divergent Australian identities without falling into demonisation, segregation or implicit ethnic cleansing? The stresses provoked by Islamist violence are the obvious case study. Too many fixed views exist that seem reducible to 'wishing away' the problem from one side or another. Yet we need to acknowledge all of these clashing concerns to build a basis for creative solutions. So, yes, bring your favourite facts, but come also to listen and to find answers. All views are welcome, and needed, in a spirit of fruitful exchange. We'll begin it with a presentation of the breadth of thoughts and emotions out there. But the essential part of the day will be a constructive sharing of ideas. It's titled '**Harmony for a Day in a Year of Fear**'. Share your fears and your hopes.

SHARE SPACE WITH A DIVERSE HUMANIST MEETUP COMMUNITY AND ENJOY A MIX OF DISCUSSION SNACKS AND SOCIALISING

Congratulations to John August for his pioneering of the very useful Activism Meetings in 2015. These have had a range of stimulating participants who provide insight into activism projects happening around us in NSW. It's never easy to generate momentum for real change in a complex world. We need inspiration and ideas, and this happens at John's events. Ultimately we need energetic members with coherence and drive to renew ourselves as an active group in a 21st century world.



**'Open Forum' continues to meet each Wednesday night at Humanist House 8.00pm as it has done for many years. Open Forum has a diversity of speakers and does not represent the views of the Society.**





- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 1-Jan 1802   | Thomas Jefferson first uses phrase "separation between church and state"                                      |
| 2-Jan 1920   | Birth of science fiction author and former Hon. President of the American Humanist Association - Isaac Asimov |
| 3-Jan 106BCE | Birth of Cicero   |
| 7-Jan 1697   | Thomas Aikenhead becomes the last person to be executed for blasphemy in Britain                              |
| 8-Jan 1642   | Death of Galileo Galilei  |
| 11-Jan 1970  | First "World Atheists Conference" meets in India  |
| 24-Jan 1891  | John Ballance, a freethinker, is sworn in as Premier of NZ  |
| 27-Jan 1967  | Treaty which forbade territorial claims, making or dumping weapons, in space, is signed by 62 nations         |
| 1-Feb 1865   | 13th amendment USA prohibits slavery  |
| 10-Feb 1931  | Death of Fred Hollows - atheist, physician, philanthropist  |
| 12-Feb 1809  | Birth of Charles Darwin & Abraham Lincoln   |
| 13-Feb 1633  | Galileo detained by the Inquisition in Rome   |
| 15-Feb 1564  | Birth of Galileo Galilei  |
| 19-Feb 1600  | Giordano Bruno burned alive at the stake  |
| 21-Feb 1953  | Watson and Crick discover the structure of DNA  |
| 24-Feb 1871  | Darwin's "Descent of Man" is published  |
| 6-Mar 1927   | Bertrand Russell delivered his address "Why I am Not a Christian" to the National Secular Society             |
| 14-Mar 1879  | Birth of Albert Einstein  |
| 21-Mar 1804  | Napoleonic Code comes into force entrenching in law many goals of the French Revolution                       |
| 25-Mar 1811  | Percy Shelley expelled from Oxford for writing "The Necessity of Atheism"                                     |
| 26-Mar 1941  | Birth of Richard Dawkins  |

# EVOLUTION & HUMAN INTELLIGENCE

The evolution of life, from its first appearance until today, has been a story of goal-oriented adaptive action.

The goal has always been the same - *survival*. But the nature of the process has changed, and to see this, it is convenient to divide evolution into three phases.

The first phase, perceived and documented by Charles Darwin, started maybe 3.5 billion years ago. Life developed from the simplest forms, to a myriad of increasingly complex and widely differing organisms. New species emerged, and existing species became extinct. There was relentless experimentation and survival, in a continually changing environment.

As mutations generated more complex molecules, the range of environments in which each could exist tended to become narrower. To survive in a fluctuating environment, a new feature was introduced into our story - *cooperation* between different types of molecules.

And so *cells* came into being. In the nucleus, the complex DNA molecule contained in its structure the information that allowed the various molecules to cooperate in an efficient fashion. A particular type of cell proved a survivor, in the competition for resources against the many other variants thrown up by mutations.

This formation of viable complex forms through the goal-oriented cooperation of simpler forms, will be a recurring feature, as our story unfolds.

The second phase started as our hominin ancestors split from the chimpanzee line maybe 8 million years ago. Our species *homo sapiens* led to anatomically modern humans who appeared a couple of hundred thousand years ago.

This development of the genus *homo* was characterised by functionally important, but outwardly minor, physical changes. These included speech and manual dexterity, and an increase in brain size accompanied by very significant mental changes. All this combined to produce a rate of development an order of magnitude greater than in the first phase. This was a development, not mainly of shape, but of *capability*.

The third phase, starting a few tens of thousands of years ago, is characterised by the formation of groups of mutually interacting and inter-dependent individuals. These groups, or *societies*, are like the individuals in a new selection process.

Just as cells combined to form more complex organisms, humans combine to form entities that far surpass the individual in functionality and capability.

The time for change in the first phase might be ten million years, in the second phase a hundred thousand years, while the third phase is maybe a thousand years - and decreasing! The different evolutionary processes in the three phases are the **drivers** of change that allow adaptive action to take place.

In the first phase, it was genetic mutations, over which the organisms themselves had no control.

In the second phase a transition took place, with the genetic changes that drove the evolution of species within the genus *homo*, from *erectus* via *neanderthalensis* to *cro-magnon*, being replaced by social changes.

In the third phase, social changes, characterised by agriculture, animal husbandry, technology, and increasingly complex social structures, are the predominant adaptive actions. And they are driven, not by genetic mutations - but by us.

Our world today is what it is, because **we** made it so - and we determine what it will be tomorrow. This is a huge responsibility. Are we aware of it and, above all, do we recognise the problems, and the dangers, that could lead to a disastrous outcome?

We will better understand the significance of this, if we consider the incredible journey over the last few ten thousand years or so, from the cave to where we are today.

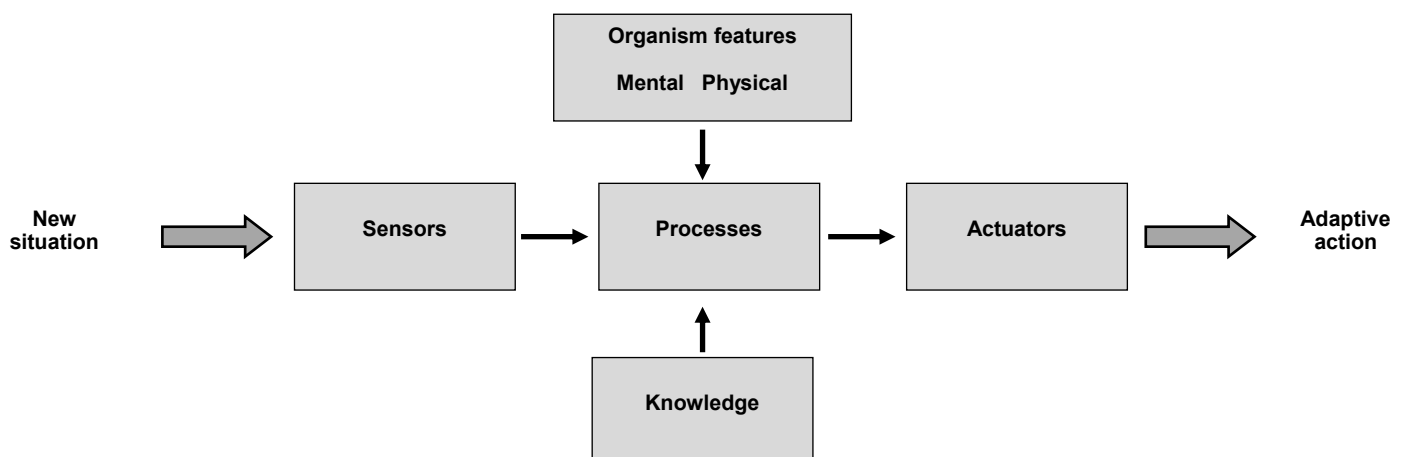
How did we do it, and what was it that drove this development? It was not some external force, or divine power - it was an ability within us. The ability to, at every point in the journey - assess the new circumstances and take goal-oriented adaptive action - which is exactly the definition of *intelligence*.

So we should take a closer look at what intelligence consists of and how it works. Remember though, the goal has remained the same since life began - *survival*.

The strategies we adopt for survival today are enormously more complex than the strategy adopted even by our cave-dwelling ancestors, let alone a simple organism like a bacterium (and even that is amazingly complex). We are not *evolving towards* something - some ideal state here or in 'Heaven'. Evolution is **always** a process of *survival*.

To understand intelligence and how it works, it is useful to consider the simple diagram at the bottom of this page.

The organism responds to the external stimuli representing a **new situation** by performing an **adaptive action**. The action is performed by the **actuators** (hands, feet, vocal chords, etc.) available to the organism, which are controlled by the **processes** - in response to the signals provided by the **sensors**.





The processes are dependent on the **knowledge** accumulated by the organism through experience and education, and on inherent mental (instincts), and physical (agility, strength, reach, etc.), **features** of the organism.

The elements of this model have all undergone great changes during the evolution of life on Earth. Stages of these changes can be observed in organisms alive today, ranging through both plants and animals.

But with the arrival of humans, the development of intelligence took a different route. The organism's visible features, the actuators and the sensors, changed superficially. But the *processing capability* - and with it the ability to store and retrieve knowledge to make it accessible and usable - changed dramatically.

And that brings me to the most important point of this article: The information, knowledge, and understanding available to individuals taking adaptive action - *exercising their intelligence*.

It is useful to think of this data in two separate parts. One part is the knowledge and understanding developed through human effort. This is what we transmit through education and training. This *exo-somatic* information, which we pass culturally from generation to generation, changes, or mutates, very much faster than the *endo-somatic* genetic material.

Just as we might sometimes be concerned with not passing on defective endo-somatic genetic material, we should also be concerned about not passing on incorrect, ineffective, or

incomplete knowledge from one generation to the next.

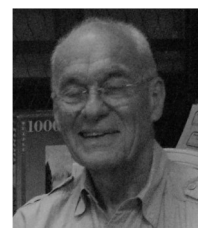
The other part is what we might call *current information* - the information we receive daily through newspapers, radio, TV and the Internet. It is, at least in the short term, the most important input to our intelligence. It is also prone to decision processes that provide a brief improvement in survival-value for a small part of society, at the expense of the survival of society as a whole, not to mention the planet.

There are numerous indications of serious problems with the current use of information technology. Various authors have described how the flood of data tends to obscure or trivialise important issues. We are becoming media rich and information poor! There is a widening gap in the quality of information available to the wealthy vs that available to the rest of us. Information has become the latest 'commodity' in the capitalist mode of production.

The too-frequent complacency in this regard reflects a poor understanding of the importance of freedom of information in the development of humanity.

I hope this long view of history will help us better employ our evolved intelligence in a world with new layers of complexity.

**Erik Aslaksen**



## GILLIAN'S CHAIR

Society members Affie Adagio, Gillian Ellis and Fred Flatow were all attending an afternoon tea in the NSW Parliament House at Macquarie Street in early December 2015. This was organized by the local United Nations Association to commemorate 70 years since the formation of the United Nations in 1945.

Gillian recalled another distant event in her own life. Her father, Frederick Hutton Ellis, had been a Master Craftsman before he enlisted in the British army in World War II. When he came to Australia in the early 1950s, he was drafted to restore the NSW Speaker's Chair. He completely recarved and reupholstered the chair which is still in the House today.

Gillian got to sit in the actual chair and Affie managed to get a splendid photo of the grand occasion.

Gillian is on the committee of the Humanist Society of NSW, and a longstanding active member.



# QUARTERLY PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Our **October** Meetup was *The Religious Freedom Issue* with a speaker on International Human Rights. At our October HUVAT (Humanist Viewpoints Afternoon Talks), John August addressed members on *Economics*.

Our first **November** function was another of our *Activism Meetings*, organised by John August. This series explores where current concerns lie, and who is doing what:

Catherine, a primary teacher, described how Christians are pushing their agenda into public schools, with many devices to flout the regulations. Some activists are opposing them.

Tim described the need for voluntary euthanasia, as 160,000 people die each day, mostly in a long and painful process. There is a current campaign to raise awareness.

The world's refugee problem was discussed, with proposals ranging from settling them in Australia's regional centres, to Australia swapping its detainees with an equal number from Europe, which would empty our camps, while maintaining some kind of deterrent.

The growing NSW Ethics classes were acclaimed, as well as the welcome Victorian move to shift Religious Instruction out of core time altogether.

The historicity of Jesus was discussed. John August asserted that Jesus did exist, but he was an individual who was "naturalistically gifted" in communications and theology, and he was also lucky, as there were several similar individuals, including Apollonius of Tyana. Zoltan made a critical review of the references to Jesus in Josephus' writings.

Another November meeting was a Meetup titled *Motherhood is Powerful - humanist & feminist perspectives*, with guest speaker Catherine Walsh of [motherhugger.blogspot.com.au](http://motherhugger.blogspot.com.au).

In **December**, our End-of-Year function *Triviaganza* included a competition based on the 1960s and 70s. Challenges included music, faces, politics, and world events. Good reports were received all round. Thanks Murray and Fay.

Our society has again benefited from a bequest - the late Lilian Emmet thoughtfully remembered us in her will.

Also in December, *The United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA)* held a Reception hosted by the Governor of NSW at Government House, marking a significant date for the UN. One of Australia's early roles in the UN was to mediate in Indonesia from 1947 to 1951, between the departing Dutch and the Indonesian nationals - a process which shaped our powerful neighbour today. I represented the Humanist Society of NSW.



*The Governor of NSW opens the UNAA reception*

**The Humanist Society is playing a major role in a consultation process known as the Religious Freedoms Roundtable.**

Firstly, the *Australian Human Rights Commission* called for submissions, and the Humanist Society of NSW made one after consulting with members and committee.

**The major thrusts are :**

1. We were asked to comment on the issue of Preserving religious freedom when an organisation receives taxpayers' money to provide a public service.

We responded that private and religious schools receive government money. Religious schools are involved in indoctrinating children into a specific belief system, which in many cases teaches intolerance of other belief systems. Thus the funded organisations are reducing religious freedom. This must be stopped.

Secondly, advancement of religion qualifies any church group as a charity, providing many financial benefits. This loophole is not of public benefit, and must be stopped.

Thirdly, the banner of religious freedom has been used to perpetrate and cover up many crimes (list of examples given).

2. Children have the right not to be coerced into a religion [despite the UN resolution of 1981 to the contrary!], because that curtails their freedom of choice later as adults.

3. Anyone has the right to leave a religion, without incurring coercion or sanctions. In Australia we hear of rejection by family and culture; overseas, stoning and decapitation.

4. The law should support universal human rights, not parochial (e.g. Australian) values. Tolerance, respect, justice and equality are of real value; not memorising cricketers and prime ministers.

5. We were given Guiding Principles including GP1 – "religious freedom should be treated equally with [or balanced against] all other human rights..." - no, we disagree – basic human rights, freedoms and laws must take precedence over religious freedom.

**The Roundtable Delegates**

The HRC then invited me as President to be one of 36 delegates representing 21 faith and 4 non-faith organisations, for the inaugural consultation on 5 November.

Groups attending were:

1. Anglican Church of Australia (2 including former Labor Premier of SA, Lynn Arnold)
2. Antiochian Orthodox (Lebanese)
3. Atheist Foundation of Australia (1) – Michael Boyd
4. Baha'i Community Aust. (2)
5. Baptist Ministries Aust. (2)
6. Catholics (2)
7. Hillsong = Australian Christian Churches (2)
8. Islam – Office of the Grand Mufti, Muslims Women's Association (1)
9. Church of Scientology Australia (2)
10. Buddhists (Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils) (1)
11. Hindu Foundation of Australia (1)
12. Humanist Society of NSW (1) – Ian Bryce
13. Lutheran Church of Australia (2)

14. Judaism (3)
15. Presbyterian Church of Australia (2)
17. Rationalist Society of Australia (1) - Hugh Harris
18. Religious Society of Friends in Australia (Quakers) (1)
19. Secular Coalition of Australia (1) – Rod Bower
20. Adventists (SDA) (2)
21. Sikh Nishkam Society (1)
22. Mormons (... Latter-Day Saints) (2)
23. Russian Orthodox Church (1)
25. Uniting Church (1)

I have made some abbreviations, and have identified the four representing so-called non-faith groups (a more focused term would perhaps be freethought). I note that we have 11% of the delegates, whereas the non-religious form 22% of the population, according to the 2011 census (and soon to be much more, due to the rise of atheism plus the re-ordering of the question on the next census). The organisers said they strived to achieve balance in many competing ways.

### Proceedings

Opening remarks were made by Attorney-General George Brandis, senior Human Rights Commissioner Gillian Triggs, and Commissioner Tim Wilson (who moderated the day's proceedings). Press were excluded after the opening remarks.

Each session had a question to address. I made detailed notes of what was said. We were allowed to report what was said but not who said it - the *Chatham House Rule*. The context allowed me to raise the issues in the Submission including children, the law taking precedence, and universal rights.

An additional matter was raised: the existing legislation does more to protect religious institutions, doctrines and practices. It should instead protect individual *persons* (drawn from a separate submission by Murray Love).

On the agenda was: how religious freedom applies when government money is involved. For example a religious body is exempted from anti-discrimination laws and may refuse to hire a gay or other-faith employee. But if it is a subsidised school, should this exemption be removed?

Several delegates agreed that the rights of children was a burning issue, and most (including the non-faith) agreed. Tim said this would be addressed in a separate coming Roundtable. However, discussion often returned to this issue.

The organisations present there run most or all of the religious schools in Australia, at which the children are taught (perhaps exclusively) a single belief system. So one positive idea stood out in my mind.

A circuit of speakers similar to the work of the *Pathways Foundation* was suggested - drawn from a variety of beliefs - which could rotate around the schools, giving them a glimpse (perhaps the first) of other views. This has much in common with the comparative religion concept, and would of course include humanism and ethics.

When it became apparent that Tim Wilson was going to ignore this popular idea, I took it up, and determined that most of the religious school providers present were willing to provide a speaker, and (more importantly) many willing to allow such speakers into their schools.

Later in the day, I became a bit more daring. I pointed out that there were organisations in the room who taught that a

woman was made pregnant by a ghost, that the spirits of aliens adhere to people, and that an angel spoke to a man in a cave. Science has shown many universal truths, and surely our children are entitled to the truth. Could we agree on that?

I attempted to seek a common statement from the Roundtable, such as the issues mentioned above, but this was not allowed.

### Outcomes

The *Australian Human Rights Commission* produced a *Media Release* on 30 November (available on their website) to report on the Roundtable. I can make some comparisons as follows:

Tim Wilson now proposes to improve religious literacy within government and the public service, so that laws, regulations and processes can accommodate the myriad of religious sensitivities. This was not agreed. Rather, religions should acquaint themselves with the secular laws and regulations governing this country.

Tim proposes self-regulation for religious institutions that receive taxpayers' funding. On the contrary, we only have to look at the record of child abuse in most churches, and frequent acceptance of fraudulent practices by complementary health care industry bodies, to see the abject failure of self-regulation, and the great harm done socially and economically. No, a uniform set of regulations needs to be imposed on everyone.

Tim wants a long-term discussion on how religious freedom can be preserved in anti-discrimination laws. The freethought groups have already put forward a compromise model where religious bodies providing services, such as marriage or pregnancy counselling, must advertise up front in their websites where they fail to provide some services, and must provide immediate referral elsewhere where appropriate.

On a positive note, the *Media Release* mentions visitor programs for schools to educate students about different faith traditions, and those without religious belief. And *universal values* as an umbrella under which all faiths and non-faiths can abide. These are two initiatives which we freethought groups can all develop in future rounds.

**A second round** is commencing, with a Roundtable focused on non-faiths, scheduled for 18 February in Melbourne. Most non-faiths have been invited to supply two representatives of different genders. There will also be Roundtables focused on gender diversity, and on children.

In summary, our contributions have already been successfully brought before the wider religious community, and some have made their way into official reports. The ongoing process is a great opportunity for Humanists to influence the religion and belief environment in Australia.

**Ian Bryce**





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