

J o h n R a w s o n

An Ordinary Aussie Pestern The Press

(The Press Wins – Of Course!)



There is no armour against fate,
Death lays his icy hand on kings

(The Glories of Blood and State – James Shirley)

First published in 2000
by the author: JJ Rawson.

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Note: This electronic version does not include the Index contained in the printed publication because it was simply too difficult for me to do. The Word document to which I had access had errors in it—I fixed those that I recognised without going through the printed version in detail to check.

Richard Rawson, July 2006.

Preface

In recent years, I have published two books: *Mount Elephant Once Had Trees* and *TOPSEC*. I have been told, and I agree, that I *exposed* myself in those books. This book will *expose* me even further, I have no doubt. There will be much room for criticism of my intelligence, my character, my opinions, my attitudes. But that does not concern me.

In 1975, I became interested in writing letters to newspapers and journals, my first letter being published in *The Australian* in November 1975. I used mainly to hand-write them, but in recent times I have used e-mail. There are 189 of them in this book. . Three topics that I am particularly interested in, politics, religion and English grammar, figure prominently in my contributions. I have to say that I find myself now to be most unimpressed by some of the letters. I have plenty of reason to be modest about my letter-writing talents. But there it is: I am, as the title says, an ordinary Aussie.

In 1980 (I cannot find any drafts of letters from the second half of the seventies), I also began ringing letters through to *Access Age* (on the letters page of Melbourne's *The Age*), a requirement being that the letters not exceed 50 words. In more recent times, that section of the letters' page has had its title altered to *And Another Thing*. Over those years — it is now August, 2000 — I rang or e-mailed through 289 letters. There were periods when I was somewhere other than in Victoria, or perhaps I was having no success at being published for too long, so I gave up for the time being. As will be revealed in the letters, I was sometimes at odds with *The Age*, on one occasion appealing to The Australian Press Council about what I regarded as an exhibition of quite unacceptable bias on that newspaper's part.

Letters' editors, like us all, have their own opinions about things, so their reactions to the letters that they receive naturally vary one to another. Favourite contributors, particularly brief letter contributors, emerge with some editors, that contributor being given what may be called 'a very good go' — sometimes over quite long periods. The present letters' editor has been on the job for most of this year. He has three or four brief letter favourites, one in particular being treated extraordinarily favourably: I would say that he has been printed at least twice a week for months now. A letter from him on four successive days has occurred more than once. The letters are of no better than average quality. In my opinion the letters' editor should be told to ease up a lot in his blatant favoritism.

The letters that I submitted I shall present, mostly in chronological order, in two parts. In Part One I shall place a mixture of long and short letters, sometimes with replies, sometimes with an attached piece of writing, to various newspapers and journals. In Part Two, I shall include all my telephoned, and these days e-mailed, brief letters to *The Age*. Letters that have a heading in bold type are the ones that were published. (See Below—R Rawson) I have left out, as unnecessary, most salutations and references to dates, etc. I have used lower case and italics for mastheads. Occasionally, I shall make comments at the end of, or perhaps before, a letter.

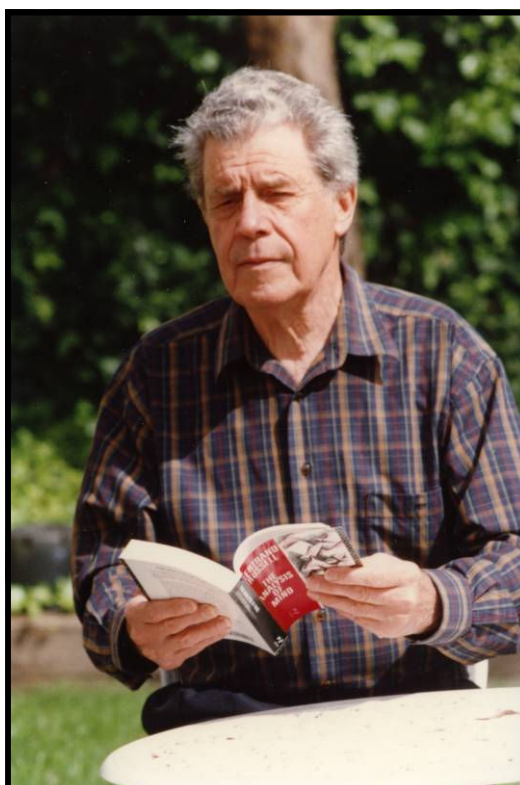
My eyesight is poor now. I managed to put all the letters in Part Two into the computer a year or so ago. And so, except for marvellous help from my wife, Elizabeth, and my son, John, I would not have been able to finish this book. I thank those two dear people. I thank, also, my friend, Alex Grieve, AO, musician, artist and thinker, who for the second time, refusing any remuneration, has designed a delightful book cover for me.

For my children: Richard Peter; John Sutherland; Jennifer Elizabeth; Robyn Maree

Published letters are shown in dark blue type. (R Rawson, July 2006)

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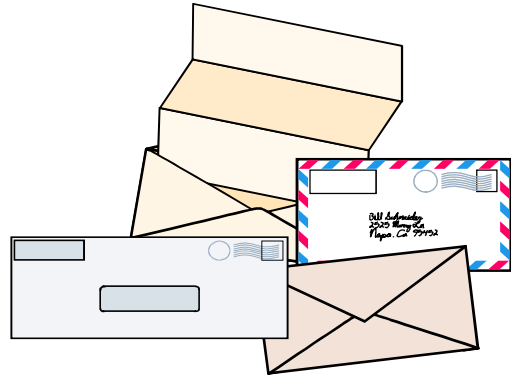


**John Rawson at
Greensborough in 1999**

John Rawson was born in Yarrowonga, Victoria, in 1922. From 1927 to 1938, he lived in the small Victorian country town of Derrinallum, where his father was postmaster. His schooling finished before he was 14, but he improved his educational standard to some small degree during the years that followed. A shooting accident on Anzac day, 1938, was followed by medical treatment in Melbourne. He remained in that city until 1941 when he entered the Army. He joined the AIF in 1942, during World War 2, but circumstances dictated that he would not leave Australia. He remained in the Army, leaving the Australian Regular Army as a major in 1975. His two earlier books, *Mount Elephant Once Had Trees* and *TOPSEC*, go into much detail about his life, particularly his army life, and the difficulties he eventually had because of his opinions about politics and religion. He and his wife, Elizabeth, who had two sons and two daughters, live in Greensborough, Victoria.

Part One

Letters, Replies and Comments



To: *The Australian* – 11/11/75

It is probably too much to hope that the proposal to introduce the subject of religion into the Victorian school system will be rejected: the influence of the Church is pervasive indeed, especially in its influence upon conservative governments.

Should the authorities succumb to the great pressures that the Churches will undoubtedly apply, it will be interesting to see the form that the instruction will take.

Will the subject of religion be carefully examined as any school subject ought to be? Will the existence of a god be assumed, or will the powerful arguments against the existence of god be put to the children?

Will the Christian version of the creation be revealed as the fairy tale that it is? For example, will any of the teachers be willing to admit that the existence of fossils alone, long ago made nonsense of the Christian Church's theory of the creation?

Will the teachers speak of the great poverty, ignorance and cruelty associated with religious teachings over the centuries? Will the children learn that, generally speaking, the established Church has always associated itself with the rich and the powerful in their oppression of the poor and the weak?

And what of hell? Will it be seriously maintained that there is such a place? Or will the Church practice of terrifying people with this concept be not included in the curriculum?

Presumably, the teachers will give instruction on the several great religions. Will they explain that only one of the them can be true; and that, indeed, it may well be that none of them is true?

How much better it would be if children were taught to face life without the aid of myths! Then, hopefully, greater numbers of our citizens would grow up unwilling to accept lies and deceit and hypocrisy. If that should happen, then the possibilities for good are, I should maintain, beyond calculation.

A reply to the preceding letter – *The Australian* – November 1975

The sheer inaccuracies and distortions contained in J Rawson's attack upon religion in general and Christianity in particular demand a response.

For example there is no "Christian churches theory of creation" and never has been. The biblical creation mythology is sourced in antiquity and predates Christianity by thousands of years. Furthermore, to equate mythology with lies, deceit and hypocrisy is unworthy of even the least educated mind.

All cultures and sub-cultures have at all times had their own mythology and a moment's reflection should make this obvious even to the most convinced atheist.

It is true that poverty, ignorance and cruelty have been associated with religion from time to time. However, in

modern times, the great barbarities have been the work of the followers of the godless creeds of rationalism, atheism, Communism and racialism, and on a scale to make the inquisition look like a children's party.

The churches have no mortgage on inhumanity. To go further and imply that cruelty etc are an essential concomitant of religion displays an ignorance of religion that can only be willful.

Finally the statement that only one of the world's religions can be true is meaningless in the context of modern religious thought: and after all now is where we are, not back in the 18th century where the objections of J Rawson historically belong.

The rationalist wrath at religion ought to be seen for what it is: mythology.

The Rev K. S. W. Colbert

To: *The Australian* – December 1975

The Rev. Colbert did not come to grips at all with the central issue in replying to my letter of 11th November.

If he were in a position to decide whether religion as a school subject should be examined as all subjects ought to be, what would be his decision? Quite predictably, he made no mention of it at all. Even the "least educated mind" soon grasps the significance of that evasion.

It was careless of me not to be more precise in my reference to the Church and the creation. Perhaps I should have written "the Christian Church's (adopted) theory of the creation."

It is refreshing, though, that he acknowledges that the biblical account of creation is mythology, that is, that it has no foundation in fact. It really does seem that he agrees with me – and disagrees with many fellow Christians – that it is a fairy tale. It was honest of him, too, in writing of inhumanity, poverty, ignorance and cruelty, not to disassociate the Church from blame for the existence of those conditions.

I do not equate myths with lies, deceit and hypocrisy. My objection is to the Church practice of equating myths with truth. That is surely deceit – and lies and hypocrisy surely follow from it.

It is noteworthy that the Reverend Colbert did not include among his list of barbarians those responsible for the two World Wars. But then they belonged to Christian nations. And what better examples of racialism than some of the devout Christians of Rhodesia, South Africa, southern USA? I can only suppose that obscurantists did not get a mention because they are not followers of godless creeds.

Really, it does seem to me an odd position to take to describe as "meaningless" the contention that only one – if any of several conflicting religious philosophies can be true. His religion, then, is not the only "true" religion? Reverend Colbert writes of rationalist wrath as mythology. And yet he seems to accept mythology as part of the Christian faith. Thus the syllogism: mythology is not lies, deceit and hypocrisy; rationalist wrath is mythology; therefore rationalist wrath is not lies, deceit and hypocrisy.

Comment: I sent a copy of the above letter to The Reverend Colbert. His reply follows.

Dear Mr Rawson

Thank you for yours of the 11th instant. I will attempt a brief reply to each paragraph in turn and make any general comments at the end.

(a) The "central issue" does not concern me, hence no comments upon it. Living as I do in Queensland, I have no knowledge in Victoria. All I know is that your education system is very different to ours.

(b) Why "quite predictably?" If I were called upon to make such a decision, and if all other subjects were examinable and if religion were part of the normal school curriculum, then I would follow the precedent of most universities and examine the subject. In Queensland the question simply doesn't arise since we have abolished

external examinations and I commend this to our Victorian friends. If I were a Victorian I would wish to see “religion” an elective subject, available to all students and including all religious systems in depth, the philosophy of religion and its place in the various world cultures. Such a study would be a great aid in understanding our near neighbours of the region.

(c) I don't mind if you add “adopted.” I stand by what I said. Perhaps I should clarify that by saying that apart from asserting God as Creator (as in the creeds) the Churches are not terribly interested in the detail. Big bang, steady state, ex nihilo, they are all theories and ultimately unprovable.

(d) I am surprised that you are surprised by my agreement with some of what you say. We are however a fair distance apart in our understanding of the nature and use of mythology. The fact that a myth may take the form of a “fairy tale” is to me quite unimportant. It is the attitude or “truth” that the myth seeks to convey that is important. For my part, I have never in my life suggested (or believed) that the Genesis mythology was anything but that, so no “lies deceit and hypocrisy” on my part.

(e) Anyhow “lies deceit and hypocrisy” are pretty strong terms and require intimate knowledge of the accused. In the area of opinions, where both religionists and anti religionists operate, such judgements are difficult in the extreme, if not impossible. What sounds absurd to me may make eminent sense to you. Who is to say I am right and you are wrong. Try convincing someone to change his politics.

(f) I don't admit the concept of “Christian Nations” .I don't think such a thing is possible. It's political Rhetoric. Please don't call Adolf Hitler a Christian (or Churchill). Certainly some devout Christians support racist policies in the places you mention. Devout Christians also oppose these same governments are imprisoned for their trouble. The former Anglican Dean of Johannesburg, Gonville French-Baytagh, Bishop Trevor Huddleston Martin Luther-King the Berrighans are notable, but by no means isolated examples. You should take a look at the record of *The Anglican Church* and Roman Catholic Church in South Africa and Rhodesia, Bishop Muserawah who has been imprisoned by the Smith Regime for ten years, the World Council of Churches and its anti racist programme and support for African liberation movements. You simply don't know what's going on in the world. You really ought to find out before tarring all with the same broad brush. “Obscurantist” is a term of abuse, not a description.

(g) You continue to miss the point. The only truth that I as a religionist am interested in is my relationship with (a) God and (b) my fellowman and the rest of creation and (c) myself and not necessarily in any order of priority. The way I choose may be true for me, but not for you. So be it. I cannot even prove that the God I worship and try to serve exists, but that God is still true for me and the assertion of “his existence” constitutes “truth” for me. Such is the nature of truth. You say my religion is not the only “true” religion. Quite so. I have profound respect for the Buddha. I know little of other religious systems, but they speak to millions. I find Christianity speaks to me of God in a way I can understand. I also believe that in the person of Jesus we have a unique demonstration of the nature of God. However we are now in the realm of faith which is outside the scope of this correspondents. I will only add that I can see no reason whatever to assert that my religion is the only “true” religion. Really the whole idea is quite meaningless to me.

(h) Your syllogism is quite ok with me. I have never suggested that anybodies mythology can be equated with lies etc. The psychological background of those who vehemently oppose religion may be of interest and may explain the lengths they go to oppose us, but “lies etc” would never be applied to their assertions by me at least.
General comment:

Your experience of Christians seems to be limited and unfortunate. I only hope that you can come into contact with some non-obscurantists Christians so that you can form a better opinion of us. I'm not asking you to join us but please find out about us as we really are and not as we may have been 100 years ago. Then we may have dialogue about the important things and not about irrelevant trivia like divinity exams. The ethical and moral dilemmas facing the world today are enormous and we religionists must engage in dialogue with you non-religionists so that together we can formulate a valid world-view that can sustain our civilization. It was with that end, the promotion of dialogue and the destruction of false images of Christians, that I wrote my original letter, and this one also. I can only hope that some progress in that direction has been made by this correspondence.

Yours sincerely

To: *The Age* – 1982

FM Doherty (28/5) does not applaud Mr Halfpenny's politics but he does applaud his avoiding the widespread, quaint and incorrect use made of the adverb "hopefully."

I, in turn, applaud Mr Doherty's letter, and his correct use of the exclamation mark at a time when it is being used inappropriately, so redundantly, by so many, that the whole situation has become hilarious.

But, I suggest, the most intriguing solecism is one involving the function. It is intriguing particularly because well-educated, indeed highly educated people are subject to error in its use. (I have in mind a professor of philosophy, a professor of linguistics and countless others – including several *Age* feature writers.)

Consider this sentence: "Mr Falwell is one of those Christian fundamentalists who finds it more satisfying" The relative pronoun is "who" and it is the subject of the clause that follows. It relates to "fundamentalists," which word is plural, so "who" is plural also. The verb, therefore, should also be plural: "find" not "finds."

It really is puzzling that so many clever, educated people seem not to be capable of simple sentence analysis.

To: *The Age* – 1983

The section, "When words fail" is, I feel sure, of interest to many *Age* readers.

There is, though, one aspect of the feature's compilation that is of primary importance: those who produce it must not themselves fail in their use of the language.

The latest failure occurs in *The Age* of 19 February 1983, this being at least the second time (see *The Age* of 13 November 1982) that Patricia and Frank Horn have not noticed the misuse of a relative pronoun. It is necessary to quote the second example in full: "The White Hotel, like the Twyborn Affair, explores frontiers which started with Freud and still has a lot ahead of it."

The following comment is made about the passage: "What does "still has a lot ahead of it" mean?" One cannot help but agree that the meaning is far from clear.

What is quite clear, however, is that the verb "has" should be "have," because its subject is "which" (understood) and "which" is plural because it relates to "frontiers" not to "White Hotel". Mark Loane was, of course, meaning to refer to the White Hotel but his grammar and syntax failed him, and the Horners failed to notice the full extent of his lapse.

Comment: It was very foolish of me to send that letter. Many years were to pass before *The Age* published another letter, other than a *brief* letter, from me.

To: *The Age* – 19/4/1983

Perhaps those that, like Peter Crisp, argue against the observance of rules in the use of the English language have a good case. One notices, though, that the same people usually seem to do their very best not to break any of those rules themselves.

The fact of the matter is that most of those making errors do not do so out of any wish to eliminate rules or to "provide us with a new word or a new usage:" they quite simply do not know any better.

Now most of us are amateurs and may be excused for never having mastered the uses of our language. But what about the professionals (I have journalists in mind.) Shouldn't that mastery be part of the formulation of their craft?

It is soon obvious to the interested reader of top quality English or United States journals that the writers have done their foundation learning: grammatical, syntactical or punctuation errors are rare. The best of *The Age* writers, too, rarely contribute to the errors that appear in the newspaper. It seems, then, that first-class journal-

ists believe in providing ‘good models of English’ as Julie Johns advises. *The Age* aspires to be a quality newspaper. It will never achieve that ambition while many of its journalists, even though they may possess considerable talent, make grammatical and other errors in their writing.

To: John Rawson, from *The Age* – 28/7/1983

Thank you for offering your article on Army “Intelligence” for publication. It is an elegantly written piece, but I feel its time has passed.

Let me say, though, that I share your hope that being a member of an Opposition political party of any color no longer brings down suspicion or worse on an individual’s head.

It would be interesting, for your own satisfaction, to attempt to win the right to peruse your own file under the Freedom of Information Bill.

Yours sincerely,

Alan Morison,
Editor, SATURDAY EXTRA.

Comment: Mr Morison refers to a document that I wrote in 1973. I included it in my book *TOPSEC* in 1999. I reproduce it now.

A Brush with Security

They were tall, well-built men, and neatly dressed, and their size seemed to be at odds with the size of the Morris 1100 car in which they arrived. They were just outside my front door. They spoke briefly with a battalion guard; then they eased themselves into the car and it moved along the road in the direction of Battalion Headquarters. This was the second half of 1967.

There was little doubt in my mind about their identity – people in their calling do have a certain air about them. At the same time, I must say that I was not anticipating something quite of this sort. The telephone rang minutes later, and the caller, as I felt it would be, was the Battalion Intelligence Officer, Captain Bryan Green: ‘Oh, John, have you finished that personal particulars form yet?’

It is not easy to say when all this had its beginning – certainly a supporter of the Australian Labor Party is very much a member of a minority in the Army. And it’s not just a case of conservatism among the officers either: not too many other-ranks, especially the senior ones, are Labor supporters. But perhaps this particular episode could be said to have begun upon the arrival at the Barracks of a certain member of the Chaplains’ Department. I speak of Chaplain Pat O’Connell of the Roman Catholic Church. He was a tall, dark individual, in his middle thirties, I should think. When he walked he rather plodded along. He had been kind enough to help my son with some problems with the school subject, economics.

On occasions we talked. We talked not at all only about politics. Censorship, pornography, and religion were part of our conversations, too, and I must say that there was some heat to these at times. (At this time strenuous efforts were being made by some to keep such publications as *Pix* out of the hands of New Guinean soldiers – because this practice seemed pointless to me and I had said so, a member of the Chaplains’ Department (not the same one) told one of my colleagues that Captain Rawson was ‘not fit to be in New Guinea.’) And he was appalled, no doubt, that an atheist should be allowed to belong to the battalion. On one occasion, also, the Commanding Officer removed and screwed up a calendar with a naked woman on it from my office wall, giving it to me when I indicated that it was my property.

O’Connell was not at all the first one I had met over the years who could not stomach radical opinions – but he was, as far as I am aware, the first and only individual to report me for my ‘subversive’ opinions. Know? No, I do not *know* that he did. There was enough evidence as far as

I was concerned, though, to confirm this opinion. Especially when I rang the Intelligence Officer back and Pat O'Connell answered the telephone. Then I felt I knew quite well what was happening at Battalion Headquarters: the two men from the Special Branch were with Bruce Hearn, the Commanding Officer; the Intelligence Officer had gone from his office to tell the visitors that Captain Rawson had not yet completed the Personal Particulars form; and the Chaplain was waiting to be called to give his 'evidence.' There may well have been others questioned, too, I suppose.

I had wondered a few weeks before why I was being returned (early) to Australia to a posting in Adelaide. The senior officer from my corps in New Guinea, Lieutenant-Colonel Roger Jones, had just returned from a visit to Canberra when he told me this. It is reasonable for me to think that my Security and other difficulties, such as my atheism, were the main reason for his visit to Canberra. He was a fine officer and an honest person and I sensed his embarrassment at the lack of prior information or explanation given to me. He agreed to do what he could to change the decision so we could remain in New Guinea for a further period. When, soon after that, the Intelligence Officer asked me to complete a Personal Particulars form, again I wondered. What for? 'Oh, it's just routine,' said Bryan Green. But it is not routine to be asked to fill in another one of these forms unless one's circumstances change, for example, by marrying. I began to realise what was happening.

A Personal Particulars form is a document forming the basis for a check by the Attorney-General's Department into the background of the individual. It is the basis for a security check, the check normally done by ASIO. Details one must provide include such things as *The Ages* and birthplace of parents and siblings, the places in which one has lived, the countries one has visited; and so on. I had not completed the form by that time because the necessary information about family birth-places and other details had not been forwarded to me by my father. (I did, however, complete it quite soon after the visit of the Security members.) It is worth mentioning at this point, that in later months when, as an adjutant of a unit, and at the direction of my Commanding Officer, I made an application to be cleared to 'Top Secret', this was refused and the 'Intermediate' grading that I had been given in 1962 was still dated 1962, not, it should be noted, 1967. What happened to the 'routine' form? Obviously it was not 'routine' at all – it was initiated because someone (in my opinion, Chaplain O'Connell) had complained that I held subversive opinions, as well as that I was an atheist.

There was no chance at all that even the most thorough investigation would reveal any association by me with any subversive organisations or individuals – unless you regard the publishers of the *New Statesman* and Bertrand Russell as fitting that description. (And I must say that some I have known would so regard them.)

I had jotted down the number of the car. Later that day my wife drove me in to Konedobu, a part of Port Moresby. We found the car where I had expected to find it – outside Police Headquarters, in which buildings were also the offices of the Special Branch. My wife and I still laugh about that episode. She called herself *Natasha* that day.

There was no doubt in the minds of my wife and myself by now: we knew beyond doubt that the views I held on many topics, views which agreed with those of many men in the then Federal Opposition were deemed so likely to be subversive that, on the complaint of a cleric, I should be moved out of New Guinea.

After their interview with the Commanding Officer, the men went to the headquarters of the company to which I was attached. No doubt they were seeking the opinions of the OC of Headquarters Company, Major Tony Trevarthan. We got on quite well together. Our favourite topic was football, however, not politics. I suspect that he may even have voted Labor. In any event, although he probably did consider me something of a radical, I think that he would not have considered my outlook subversive. But who knows?

A few days later, Bruce Hearn called at our house. It was late afternoon. My wife and I were both at home. We liked and respected him and he was most welcome to a book from the few we had. He had not done that before, though. And there he was, kneeling down in front of the bookcase carefully reading every title. When he left, *Natasha* said, 'You know what that was all about

don't you?' Indeed, I did know. Bertrand Russell was the only controversial writer in the shelves, so I supposed that helped my case. (In fact there was a copy of *The Communist Manifesto* in the house somewhere. I shudder to think!) He knew many of my opinions; we had had brief discussions from time to time during social occasions. I think that he would have thought that I was pretty harmless, really, even if a bit misguided.

The adjutant of the unit was interested in books, too. As he passed my office one day he paused at the door to say a word or two. It happened that I was at that moment opening a small parcel, a book that I had had sent from Australia. He was most interested. He walked across the door to my table and looked carefully at the book. Bertrand Russell again! I used to wonder just how many knew what was going on. Things like that do get around. I came to realize that I was, so to speak, *the talk of the town*. The crisis passed. No one told me, of course, that I had been cleared, (if, indeed, I had been) but I learned that I was to stay in New Guinea for a further period, and that seemed to be some sort of proof that my innocence had been established. On the other hand, as it turned out, and as I found out years later, I was no longer to be employed as a teacher so that made me rather more *safe* as an army officer. In March 1968, we moved to a new camp near Lae.

But was it really the finish? Not really. The officer who wrote my Confidential Report in 1968 thought it necessary to write, 'There is no question of his loyalty' among his comments about me. I wondered if he knew that I knew what he meant. Why would he write that unless my loyalty was in question and unless he had been given the background? That document is (now in 1998) in my possession. (The first time I ever brought the matter up officially was with the visiting Military Secretary at Watsonia Barracks in June 1973 – I thought it about time that it be known that I knew.)

A later CO of mine, I am positive, had been briefed about me, too. I remember being amused in the Mess one day when a conversation began about a union strike that was occurring in Australia. On such occasions I almost invariably said nothing – in any case politics was supposed to be a subject not talked about in messes. The officer had eyes that might be unkindly described as shifty. He was not facing me but, no doubt to observe my reaction to what was being said, his eyes kept darting around to his left. It was quite a priceless performance. I had become accustomed over the years to remaining 'poker faced' in most circumstances, and so I remained on that occasion.

We left New Guinea in 1969. One day in July 1969, my unit received a signal from an officer in Australia inquiring about married quarters as he was to replace me as adjutant of the unit. This was news to my Commanding Officer and to me. I realised later that the Area Commander had arranged this, probably because of a difference of opinion we had had over his charging and fining black soldiers for not wearing a tie when going on leave to Lae in civilian clothes at night. (Headquarters at Port Moresby put a stop to this later.) My posting was to be as QM (Captain) of a Melbourne unit. (This was changed later without any reason being given to me.)

Now the Government has changed. (It is 1973.) Now, on every hand, in Officers' Messes one hears the most vituperative, unfair, inaccurate and mindless criticism of that Government, its Ministers and its policies. It is almost always assumed that there is no dissent from anyone within earshot. Bring out the Personal Particulars forms!

To: *The Age* – 13/3/1985

Voters should note the advice given to the Liberal Party by one of that party's members of the blinkered right, Mr Neil Brown. It appears that he "exhorted Liberals to follow the example of President Reagan and Mrs Thatcher."

Mrs Thatcher, recently described in the prestigious Manchester Guardian as "Britain's most destructive Prime Minister this century," has failed completely to uplift the British nation, the higher and higher unemployment figures alone being sufficient condemnation of her policies.

As for Mr Reagan, there is no real doubt that his primary role (and Mrs Thatcher's) is to represent the interests of the privileged classes, and that, of course, is the principal role of Mr Brown's party too. So, the numbers of the poor and the numbers of the illiterate in the USA grow, the quality of health care declines, and the home of gangsterism remains just that.

For most of its history Australia has had governments of the Right. Fine country though it is, good government over the years would have made it much better. Do we really want more of the same or, even worse, Mr Brown's reactionary policies?

To: *The Bulletin* – 18/6/1985

One of the most simple rules in English grammar must surely be that "Two singular subjects joined by 'and' take a plural verb:" constructions such as "He and Tom is going," certainly, would be used by hardly anyone. But that is a simple construction. In more complicated ones, the error of using a singular verb despite there being two singular subjects is so widely made that it must rival in incidence the (more understandable) misuse of "who" and "whom."

So that former Labor Premier, Don Dunstan, in a letter to the *Melbourne Age*, on May 29, wrote, "... a television, airconditioner and refrigerator is installed..." (He used three singular subjects.) And Claude Forell, an *Age* feature writer, included in an article recently, "... their skill and their prestige is also their livelihood..." As for politicians, consider a contribution from Paul Keating: "The cabinet and the party is competent to do that." Even the ABC National, on May 12, came out with "... water cannon and tear gas was used."

Perhaps the observance of rules of grammar is of no importance. One notices, however, that the very best writers mostly observe them.

To: *The Bulletin* – 26/6/1985

When, in *The Australian Financial Review*, on June 3, the editor of the letters columns used the headline "How about we Australians" above a letter from a contributor, he made a grammatical error similar to one in the letter itself: "... the plight of we whites in Australia." ('About' and 'of,' being prepositions, the pronouns that they govern should be in the objective case: 'us,')

Even if we do not know why, most of us realize that 'Between you and me' is good grammar so most avoid saying 'Between you and I.' A reporter on the ABC's *The World Today*, on June 21, however, managed '... between he and Justice Murphy,' so it's easy to slip.

Within seconds of each other, Andrew Peacock and Bob Hawke, in that order, in the House earlier in the year, declaimed: '... for we on the opposite side of the House...' (or some minor variant of that) when they really should both have known that the pronoun 'us' was required. They both get called names from time to time, but at least they should escape being called pedants.

As for pedants, (Yolande Bernard, July 2), one notices that, usually, those who thus describe others are very careful themselves not to make grammatical errors if they can help it. And that it is better to use 'simplest' rather than 'more simple' to promote 'established usage' and to quote Fowler to back it all up may be thought to be a little pedantic, too.

Perhaps, Larry Foley, the inverted commas caused the problem with your 'law and order.' From the point of view of this reader, at least, they encourage one to regard 'law and order' as a concept rather than as two separate subjects, a singular verb thus seeming to be appropriate.

To: *The Age* – 1/7/1985

If, as Tom Duggan writes yet again, John Cain is anti-trivia, it would seem to follow that *News Diary* would not be on the Premier's reading list.

As for gobbledygook, (was that the right word to describe Mr Cain's speech?) well, Tom Duggan may never be guilty of that, but he certainly makes his share of grammatical errors.

A close check of his third column, on 28 June, will reveal that, not only did he use "who" when "whom" was required, but he used "whom" when "who" was required, his confusion proving fairly conclusively that he simply does not know about the uses of those pronouns.

To: *The Age* – 2/7/1985

Arthur Comer's answer (1/7) to what he perceives to be the likelihood of a complete breakdown of community morality is that we turn back to the church and embrace Christian morality.

Christian doctrine, though softened to some extent by opposition over the years from, and almost entirely from, freethinkers, has an appalling record in its attitude towards sex.

Obsessed with the notion of sin, determined to suppress knowledge on sex subjects, fanatical opposition (in some doctrine, at least,) to contraception and abortion no matter how cruel the consequences of a sexual union may be, all these and more constitute part of the deplorable influence of much Christian doctrine over the centuries.

To consider the nations of the world is to note that where religious belief is strongest there reside poverty and ignorance. In the name of religion, people are murdering one another all over the world – Christians included.

Religion is not, and it never has been, any kind of answer to the problems of humanity. Rather, it has helped cause many of them.

To: *The Bulletin* – 6 /5 /1986

Yolande Bernard surely knows that only a small proportion of journalists handles the "who/whom" question with confidence and authority. It is a pity, therefore, that, as usual, she did not develop the topic in a longer letter.

Or would that have involved the risk of her making an error or two herself?

To: *The Bulletin* – 8/5/1986

When either the Speaker of the House of Representatives or the President of the says sternly (the practice is well-established) that a member or senator "will cease" some or other activity, the intention is, one supposes, to order that person to do or not to do something or other, that is, to employ the imperative mood.

"Will," used in this way, merely denotes simple futurity ("shall" is not suitable, either) and does not , therefore, serve to convey an order.

"The member for O'Connor; stop interjecting," though it would very likely not be obeyed, is one example of the imperative mood in action.

To: *The Bulletin* – 5/6/1986

David McNicoll showed that he, too, has problems with the two tricky pronouns, "who" and "whom," when he wrote, "... belongs to Wayne Newton whom I thought had long since joined the heavenly choir."

"Whom" here is not the object of "thought," but the subject of "had," and so should be "who."

Many writers, even among those that obviously aim to be grammatically correct, trip up on this construction.

To: *The Age* – 7/6/1986

Father Doyle's letter was brief, and that was good, for religion, in Australia, at least, is widely regarded as rather boring.

No doubt without intending to do so, he plays right into the hands of non-believing opponents in recommending that "... courses should be intellectual : towards knowledge, understanding and critical evaluation." Were that to come about, atheists would aver, even fewer of our population would be taken in by religious myths and, indeed, all religions would be exposed for what, mostly, they are: untrue and harmful to mankind.

Such a treatment of the study of religion as Father Doyle recommends is never likely to occur in Australia. For one thing, the church itself would oppose the vigorous questioning of its dogma in the school room. And although the influence of the church is still unduly pervasive, and its hierarchy would no doubt like religion introduced into the school system on its own terms, there is not much chance of a more (than it was) enlightened society like ours accepting so retrograde a move.

To: *The Bulletin* – 15/7/1986

While it is possible in our society for some (the Crown Prosecutor: *The Bulletin*, 7/7/86) to receive payments of up to \$150,000 for a month's work, while huge numbers of our citizens receive less than adequate weekly wages, we can hardly claim the very highest status for our democracy.

Obviously, the individual's idea of what constitutes a democracy is relevant here: Ronald Reagan, for example, seems to regard democracy and capitalism as one and the same thing. Many people, though, certainly have, among other things, equal opportunity in mind when they speak of democratic principles. How can there be equal opportunity (consider education) when such huge income disparities exist?

It could well be, too, turning to another but related incomes matter, that there is little point in Mr Hawke and others exhorting the work force to give more. Many of the latter may quite understandably ask themselves why they should "bust a gut" in a society that heaps disproportionate rewards on (to quote Bernard Shaw, who probably, though, did not have lawyers in mind) "... persons with some cunning in planning combined with abnormal acquisitiveness."

Our economic system, as we all know, relies very heavily on the individual's desire for monetary gain: the profit motive, with all its attendant evils. That's all right, we say. But you should hear us (yes, many of the under-privileged, too) when ordinary Australians try to increase their incomes: unions are greedy. (Isn't greediness the name of the game?) We mustn't use those terms about the *truly* greedy ones, though, must we? That would be letting the system down.

To: *The Age* – 15/7/1986

It really is a bit much that E de Vries justifies capital punishment largely on the grounds of recurring wars throughout history, and of the world's being, in any event, an "utterly barbaric" place (which, of course, it is not.) He seems on the one hand to condemn barbarism and yet on the other hand to encourage it.

One feels confident that Mr Hawke opposes capital punishment no matter where in the world it occurs. It was quite natural that in the cases of Chambers and Barlow he would show a special concern.

In what way Mr de Vries considers Mr Hawke's agnosticism of relevance it is difficult to be sure. Perhaps he was suggesting that Mr Hawke's thinking processes were therefore more to be trusted. Many would agree.

To: *The Age* – 20/8/1986

Perhaps other readers, too, wonder why it is that Bruce Ruxton manages to have letters published so regularly in *The Age*. Furthermore, it is most noticeable that replies to his far Right opinions rarely (ever?) appear in the

columns.

Is it the case, perhaps, that no reader is prepared to take issue with the views expressed? Or is it more likely that the naughty editor prints the letters to give many readers a laugh? Does he then reject any replies, his intention being to suggest that no one considers Mr Ruxton's opinions as being worthy of a reply?

To: *The Age* – 26/9/1986

It may be that Arthur Comer is right when he asserts that man was either created by God or just happened through chance, and that “no other valid position is possible.”

It may also be the case that it is incredible that anyone should believe that a life form, especially one that looks like us, could ever have existed on Mars.

Perhaps it is possible, too, that “the only book able to speak with authority about the origin of mankind remains the Bible.”

How is it, though, it seems reasonable to ask, that anyone could be possessed of such certainty about the truth of his own beliefs as Arthur Comer seems to be? He should heed Bertrand Russell, who once wrote: “he that is certain is certainly wrong for there is no such thing as certainty.”

To: *The Age* – 1986

If one were to refer to all the employees of a newspaper office as journalists, journalists would probably be quick to raise objections. “Surely you realize,” they may say, “that many who work in the office are not journalists at all, but are clerks, computer operators etc, etc.” This being so obviously the case, no one would be likely to argue about it. Now let us consider two other places where people with different kinds of work to perform are found: embassies and consulates. In these cases the said journalists (throughout the Australian media) are not anywhere near so concerned with accuracy: they used the titles of “diplomat” or “envoy” for everyone employed in those places regardless of the type of work those people do.

Why do journalists do this? Are those words “handy” words that reduce the need for the journalists to think and to write with accuracy? Are they used to save space, perhaps? Surely such problems be met by using terms like “embassy staff” or “consulate staff.” Is it not ludicrous to describe as diplomats those in an embassy or consulate whose duties do not (and are not meant to) involve any (real) diplomacy on their part? Embassies and consulates, like newspaper offices, have their office and other staff, too.

To: *The Age* – 1986

Perhaps journalists first started to misuse “self-immolation” all those years ago in Vietnam, during the years when, every now and then, their souls tortured by the continuing tragedy being enacted in their country, people chose to incinerate themselves before the eyes of fellow citizens and others and sometimes before the eyes of the world, too, as many of us remember.

And so, throughout the ensuing years, certainly in Australia, at least, “self-immolation” is used as though it means burning oneself to death. That is certainly what Simon Holberton of the Melbourne *Age* of 3 November 1986, meant when he reported that “...seven women committed suicide by self-immolation.” Did this error cause him to lapse into tautology, too?

But Aussie journalists are not alone in persuading their readers (and they have persuaded many of us) that immolation has to do with fire when in fact it has to do with sacrifice. A headline in the *Le Monde* section of the *Guardian Weekly* of 23 November 1986, adds fuel to the fire.

To: *The Herald* – 18/2/1988

Anyone poisoned through ingesting the pesticide sprayed on bran by direction of the Grain Elevators' Board, should not expect any help from the Health Department of Victoria. They will very likely fob off any written inquiry, ducking furiously for cover in a most suspicious manner.

To: *The Bulletin* – 6/12/1988

When, back in the early sixties, Mr Krushchev replied to President Kennedy's comment that only Communists could be candidates for government in the Soviet Union, the former said, in effect, "so what? all your candidates are capitalists." He had a point there.

Perhaps that is one reason why voter turnout is so low in Presidential elections: whom is a voter of the Left to support? (Some Australians would argue, no doubt, that these days they are not much better off than those Americans that hold similar views to theirs.

Perhaps, too, United States society may well be more compassionate, better-educated, receive better health care and be less crime-ridden and poverty-stricken were the holders of political power not almost always from the ranks of those representing those of wealth and privilege.

To: *The Age* – 1988.

On 1 July 1970, the then Prime Minister, Mr Gorton, officially opened a new airport to serve the city of Melbourne. And if you drive along the Tullamarine freeway to the airport, as so many, including some media people, do every day, the name of the airport, on large signs, appears before your eyes several times; Melbourne Airport.

Mr Gorton made the point in his speech that he really did like the name Tullamarine (he described it as "liquid"), but that the place was to be Melbourne Airport and so that was that.

What, then, of all those media people that used the wrong name? Many speak and write of Tullamarine Airport. Are they so unobservant that they are unable to get even a simple thing like that right?

To: *The Bulletin* – 1988

No doubt Michael Adams is, as he claims to be, a "convinced pro-American." He leaves the reader pretty much to work out for himself, however, why he holds that view.

One is tempted to dare him, so to speak, to lay it on the line. That is, to list all those things he admires about the United States against its many deficiencies; the deficiencies he wrote about and all the many others that come very readily to mind. Is he saying – he could be so understood – that but for the present "unscrupulous and incompetent leadership" the United States would be its quite admirable old self? If he is, many will disagree. There surely is much that is not admirable about the United States of America.

To: *The Herald* – 17/6/1989

If one called all employees of a newspaper "journalists," there would be objections. So why do journalists use "diplomat" or "envoy" for everyone employed in an embassy or consulate? Are they handy words that reduce the need for thinking, or are they used to save space?

To: *The Herald* – 19/7/1989

One suspects that many of those people that are loudest in their condemnation of abortion would be much less concerned were it intended that the children be raised as atheists or communists.

To: *The Herald* – 1/8/1989

The pro-lifers and the right-to lifers should add an explanatory word or two (in brackets?) after their titles.

As things stand, we could come to wrong conclusions about the meaning of the titles. For example, we may think that, like Albert Schweitzer, they have a “reverence for life,” and so accord them an undue measure of respect. If Hanoi were bombed again would they protest?)

It should be made plain, if only for the sake of honesty and clarity, that their religious beliefs in most cases form the basis of their opposition to abortion.

To: *The Herald*.– 16/8/1989

As Max Harris was writing about words in his column, it is surprising that he did not pick up an error in Graham Kennedy’s “having a lend of me.” “Lend” is not a noun, it is a transitive verb. He should have used “loan.”

To: *The Herald* – 22/8/1989

Poland is in trouble. The Pope is a Pole. He should go home to Poland. There he could exert, perhaps, even more influence on Poland’s affairs than he does from the Vatican.

To: *The Herald* – 8/9/1989

For years we have used the adverb “hopefully” as though it means something like “we must hope.” Surely a strange use of the word.

Now there is an upsurge in the use of the expression “most importantly,” which we seem to use in place of something like “what is most important.” Why “importantly?”

To: The Editor, *The Age* – 19/9/1989

There are so many comments that I could make about his paper to the editor of *The Age*, having read that paper for many years. But I want to be brief. Some of us (who knows how many?) find it incredible that you are prepared to tolerate the way in which your ‘Letters’ page, in recent times, particularly, is presented. We have seriously to doubt, indeed, that you concern yourself at all with *Access Age* otherwise, we ask, how does the person responsible get away with it?

I am talking about an outrageous, right-wing bias, a bias so obvious that there really can be no argument about it. I refer you in particular to *Access* and to the period since the pilots’ strike began. To prove my point about bias, I need refer only to one aspect of the matter, and that is the extraordinary favouritism shown to Fred Menzies, a contributor from Dandenong.

He is, of course, entitled to support the pilots and repeatedly to denigrate Bob Hawke if he wants to. But what is so special about his opinions that he is printed almost every second day? (As a thinker and as a writer he is no Peter Ryan, believe me.) Why, I ask again, such favoured treatment? Does he have some special kind of relationship with someone at your newspaper?

No, the truth probably is that he strikes a cord with whoever it is that selects the letters. And the person that selects the letters is a very biased person, indeed. That has been for a long, long time.

To: *The Herald* – 3/10/1989

Every now and then, heaven help us all, the pilots even get to be referred to as “workers.”

To: The Editor, *The Age* – 6/10/1989

I wrote to you about three weeks ago, but so far I have not had a reply.

Perhaps you did not receive my letter. (I have enclosed a copy of it.) Perhaps you have the letter, but don't quite know what to say in reply. Perhaps you do not bother to reply to letters from unimportant readers. Perhaps you take the view that since *Access* has been, quite obviously, the subject of (shall we call it?) a shake up, then there is no longer a problem.

To return to the point in my letter about your not seeming to exercise much supervision over *Access*, it seems likely that Peter Cole-Adams may also be similarly out of touch with it. If he took a real interest in it, would he say on 3LO (it could have been simply a slip, I realize) that 90 per cent of callers to *Access* have their letters published? Surely, that's not correct?

To: Mr John Rawson, from Editor, *The Age* – 17/10/1989

Thank you for your letter of 6 October. I regret, however, that we have no record of receiving your letter dated 19 September.

I am surprised that you feel there is some basis for accusing us of right wing bias in letters published in *Access Age*. I do not believe there is any ground for such accusations. The criteria for selection is that *Access* contributions should be topical, relative and brief. They are a serious effort to maintain balance and to enable a greater number of readers to comment on issues of controversy.

I cannot explain how one contributor should come to be published frequently. Such repetitions do occasionally occur when the editor of the column is on sick leave or vacation and has to be replaced temporarily by a sub-editor who is not regularly involved with the column.

I did not hear Peter Cole-Adam's broadcast and he is on leave at the moment so I am unable to reply to your claim that he said something like 90 per cent of callers have their letters published. However, if such a statement was made it could have been, as you suggest, a slip. In fact the rate lies somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent.

Yours sincerely,
Creighton Burns
Editor

Comment: The editor rejected my accusation of bias. Had he read that series of *Access* letters, had he noted that, indeed, there was evidence of bias on the part of the letters' editor, I suspect that he still would have denied my accusation. I have been following *Access* for 20 years, and it's not difficult to detect bias on the part of the letters' editor when it is very obvious. And it is from time to time.

To: *The Herald* – 15/11/1989

Perhaps priest Richard White should regard celibacy in the same way as he has been taught to regard birth control as being against nature.

To: *The Herald* – 5/1/1990

Atheists everywhere will not be surprised that Christian leaders have not spoken out against the summary execution of the Ceausescus. Imagine the outcry had Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos been similarly treated.

To: *The Herald* – 5/2/1990

“May God have mercy on your soul.” Thus spoke the United States judge after pronouncing the death sentence upon James Savage in a Florida court recently.

Probably judges, in many countries, are required by law, or regard themselves as required by convention to use that expression in such circumstances. Some judges would certainly be atheists. Do they say it too?

Whatever the reason for the platitude’s inclusion in the sentence of death pronouncement, when a judge, in Florida or anywhere else, uses it, two things seem to be clear: on the one hand, he shows himself to be quite without mercy; on the other hand, he expresses the hope that God will show mercy. All very confusing.

Were there a God, surely he would be offended by such hypocrisy, insincerity and patent claptrap.

To: *The Australian* – 5/3/1990

James Murray, in his article, “Leaders overlooking truth and faith,” seemed to assume that readers would know what he meant by those two terms; he made no attempt to define them.

It is certain that he would not agree with Bertrand Russell’s definition of faith. The great thinker has been quoted as saying that “Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.”

As for truth, Russell has suggested that something is true when it is in accord with fact. Perhaps Mr Murray may take more kindly to that definition.

In any event, there are, of course, many people that believe that the truths Mr Murray probably had in mind – religious truths, presumably – are, in fact, myths. He really should be much more precise, not to say, sparing in his use of the word.

To: *The Herald* – 9/7/1990

As Bishop Hollingworth found recently, no doubt to his acute discomfort, one needs to be careful about being associated with, indeed, seeming to be in agreement with, grossly inaccurate statements.

Francis Galbally went one better on ABC TV on 3 July. He, himself actually made the wild statement that “Nobody in the government is concerned about what has happened,” when speaking about the Pyramid affair. He really does seem to be well fitted for a career in conservative politics.

To: *The Melbourne Report* – 11/7/1990

Brian Crittenden’s piece in the July issue was very interesting, but one section of it, at least, was more than a little puzzling, too.

Was there a typographical error, or did he actually write, “The problem with “hopefully” is not that it is used as an adverb?” Surely he knows that it is an adverb. Then he goes on to use it as though it means something like, “We must hope.” When did it get to mean that?

To: *The Herald* – 13/7/1990

It seems to be true, of Australian society, anyway, that politicians are widely regarded as unworthy individuals whose main aim is to wield power and to gather to themselves as many benefits as they possibly can. Perhaps Bertrand Russell was right in 1931 when he wrote that “It is a curious fact that the more democratic a country becomes the less respect it has for its rulers.”

There are some critics, no doubt, that are capable of marshalling a good argument against the character of politicians as a class. They would not be such fools, however, as to lump them all together as poor quality human beings. (Terry Vine avoided so generalizing on 12 July when he offered the opinion that too many of them are scoundrels and blackguards.)

Many critics merely parrot the opinions of others. Some, it seems likely, not to like governments (and therefore politicians) because they like unrestricted opportunities to make lots of money.

Whatever the truth of the matter, however, one thing does seem fairly certain: we, the people, in the main, are uninformed, lacking in tolerance, hypocritical and quite without the ability to think straight. Perhaps Nietzsche was not too far wrong when he wrote of “the bungled and botched.” Do politicians deserve our pity rather than our contempt?

To: *green guide* – 29/9/1990

It seems doubtful that G Salter is right in suggesting that the ABC is “concerned about correct language.” Certainly, many of those that we hear on TV and radio do not live up to that concern.

Just the other day, “Cash decimated his opponent” and an “Indian student committed suicide by self-immolation.” (Did the mistaken idea that immolation has necessarily to do with fire arise during the reporting of the war in Vietnam?)

Surely, every now and then, at least, the newsroom in Melbourne could let us hear an unsplit infinitive? “Will” and “shall” are tricky verbs, so “is to” almost always takes the ABC’s preference: “the government is to legislate”.

“That” gets left out on occasions when anyone with any feel for the language would include it: “The government said the officer had resigned. “The agreement of subject and verb is often badly handled, with constructions like “The government and the union is to have talks” not being unusual. And so on.

Finally, away from the topic a bit, is “thanks for your time” after interviews by so many journalists ever going to drop out of use?

To: *The Herald* – 5/10/1990

Just recently, we had a replay of a football final. A genuine replay, that is. But that won’t stop those that are unable to distinguish between a game that is a replay and one that is not.

So when Collingwood and Essendon meet for the first time in 1991, what will be said about the match? It will be spoken and written of as a replay of the Grand Final. A funny thing that.

To: *The Bulletin* – 10/10/1990

Perhaps journalists first began to misuse “self-immolation” all those years ago in Vietnam. During the years when, every now and then, their souls tortured by the continuing tragedy being enacted in their country, some people chose to incinerate themselves before the eyes of fellow citizens and others — and sometimes, per medium of film, before the eyes of the world, too.

And so, in Australia, at least, “self-immolation” is often used as though it means burning oneself to death. Just recently, an ABC journalist reported from India that “an Indian student committed suicide by self-immolation.” That is, the student committed suicide by self-sacrifice. It is so easy to be wrong, of course.

To: *The Sunday Herald* – 21/1/1991

Bob Hawke’s speech writers (or would he have only one?) made something of a mess of the “we shall” section of his address to parliament on 21 January.

They seem to believe that “we shall” implies firmness of intention. (And perhaps it sounds more dramatic — there was, after all, General MacArthur’s “I shall return.” You would think that he would know.)

But “shall” in the first person, denotes simple futurity. “We will” was required.

To: *The Bulletin* – 22/1/1991

Bob Hawke’s speech writers (or does he only have one?) made something of a mess of the “we shall” (repeated several times) section of his address to the House of Representatives on 21 January 1991.

One gathers that they (and Bob, too, obviously enough) believe that “we shall” implies firmness of intention. (Perhaps they had in mind General MacArthur’s “I shall return” which declaration might have sounded dramatic but was not grammatically correct, if we assume that he meant that he sure would be back.)

But “shall,” used in the first person (“we”) denotes simple futurity, so was not appropriate language. “We will” was required.

To: *The Sunday Herald* – 24/1/1991

Belief in a supreme being and in immortality are, as Bertrand Russell noted, quite fundamental tenets of Christian belief. Can that opinion be disputed?

Experience shows, though, that many so-called Christians are not able to accept both, or even one of those things.

The description, “a Christian society,” then, is hardly appropriate to describe us any more.

To: *The Sunday Herald* – 16/2/1991

It must be terribly frustrating for many men (and women?) throughout the world who have come to the (no doubt sad) conclusion that the war in the Gulf is necessary.

Frustrating for them, that is, in that because of their age they are unable to join up and to do their bit for the country.

A solution to their problem could be the formation of special Defence Force units. Platoon strength units, that senior commanders could use for special tasks. Walking across mine fields, for example, to clear a path for the younger warriors. Suicide squads, even. One can just imagine the rush of volunteers.

To: *The Weekend Australian* – 8/4/1991

No doubt Phillip Adams had a smile or two when he read Bruce Ruxton’s letter.

Did he notice, though, the grammatical errors (one was intended) Bruce made? (Wonderful writer though he is,

Phillip makes a few himself.)

Bruce wrote, ... “he is one of the few Australians who really has a firm grasp ...” The “who” should have been “that” and the “has” should have been “have.” And why, Phillip may wonder, did Bruce use an exclamation mark when what he wrote was not an exclamation?

To: *The Bulletin* – 17/6/1991

Bob Hawke is usually quick to reject irrationality in argument. It is odd that he, an agnostic, should view so charitably the irrationality contained in the religious views of the Jawoyn. Is he, himself, in his final years, moving towards the acceptance of religious belief? Some weaken in that way.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 8/7/1991

If the reporting of Doug Aiton’s conversation with Brian Howe was accurate, then it seems that one can be a Christian without being religious. At least, so said Brian Howe: “Well, I’m not necessarily religious but I am a Christian.”

To be entitled to describe oneself as a Christian, surely, as a very minimum, one must believe in a supreme being and in immortality. Isn’t that being religious?

To: *The Bulletin* – 21/2/1992

Bob Hawke is no socialist: he obviously supports capitalism. Nearly all Australians do too; they vote for capitalism in election after election.

Why, then, should he not do what capitalism is all about and make lots of money for himself? Most of those that criticize him are hypocrites, as well as being inferior to him in most important respects.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 31/3/1992

In the middle sixties, the Australian Regular Army decided that the practice of using “You will” (do this or that) to form the imperative mood in giving orders was not appropriate, and that “You are to” was the correct form. This corrected an error of long standing: to use “will” in the second (or third) person in such constructions merely denotes simple futurity.

So when the speaker of the House of Representatives says, for example, that the member for Kooyong “will resume his seat,” he probably thinks that he is using the imperative. He is not.

One can imagine the uproar were the member to reply, “Yes, I shall – but not just yet.” (He should try it just for fun.)

A reply to the preceding letter – *The Sunday Age* 12/4/1992

John Rawson pronounces that the expression “you will” (do this or that) is not only an inappropriate form for the imperative mood, but, indeed, an incorrect one. He is at odds with the Concise Oxford Dictionary.

The COD (seventh edition), in its second meaning of the verb “will” reads as follows: “verb aux. In second and third person, forming simple future or conditional statement or order or question.” Examples are provided.

It has been my experience over many years that about nine out of 10 self-appointed experts in English do not bother to consult a recognized authority before correcting others in print. Their own prejudices blind them to the possibility of alternative usage. **John Carter**

A reply to John Carter's letter – *The Sunday Age* – 19/4/1992

John Carter's assertion that "about nine out of ten self-appointed experts in English do not bother to consult a recognized authority before correcting others in print" is glib.

Mr Carter is apparently ignorant of — or, at best, intolerant of — the forces of attrition that have obliged modern lexicons to militate some of the traditional principles of the English language. For example, take the word "unique," which was originally defined as being: "single in kind; sole; having no like or equal; peerless." The definitive adjective to describe one of a kind. Yet the Macquarie Dictionary proclaims that "unique" can now mean: "remarkable, rare or unusual." Surely, a shameless deference to universal catachresis.

So, Mr Carter, when recognized authorities betray their ambivalence between the traditional and the evolutionary whom does a would-be writer trust?

Judith Edwards

A second letter from John Carter – *The Sunday Age* – 26/4/1992

In my letter of 12/4, I pointed out to an earlier correspondent that "you will" (do this or that) can have more than one meaning, and I implied that it is wise to consult a recognized authority on such matters. In her letter of 19/4, Judith Edwards pointed out to me that "unique" has acquired more than one meaning. She had consulted a recognized authority yet she seemed to feel that her ideas and mine were in conflict.

Yes, of course our language is changing continually, and the process of change is documented in standard dictionaries. It is not the business of the lexicographer to dictate the meaning or pronunciation or spelling of a word. He should simply present all forms that are in use at the time of writing, so that his readers can express themselves in the language of the day.

Your original correspondent would have been enlightened by reference to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* - or the Macquarie, or the Collins, or Webster's. It was he, not I, who was "ignorant of - or, at best, intolerant of "differences in usage."

To: *The Sunday Age* – 13/4/1992

Please allow me to repeat, particularly for John Carter's benefit the wording of that section of my letter (5/4) to which he seems to object most: "... to use "will" in the second (or third) person in such constructions merely denotes simple futurity. Please note (above) my added emphasis "on "such constructions" – I was writing about "you will" being used giving orders, not about other uses that "will" may have as well.

Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary 1950 is unequivocal about the matter: "In the second and third persons "will" expresses only a single future or certainty, the idea of volition. purpose, or wish being lost; thus, "You will go" or "He will go" indicates a future event only.

It does seem that John Carter needs some "recognized authority" that is more exhaustive than the COD (7th edition.) He should make sure, also, that "before correcting others in print," he is not himself wrong in his assertions.

Comment: In 1965, I was an instructor at the Officer Cadet School Portsea, Victoria. I wrote a paper making the point that "you will," used as long as I could remember to convey the imperative mood, was in error and should be replaced by "you are." The chief instructor approved the paper and it was to be issued to the cadets. Just before that was to be done, however, the Military Board issued an instruction that agreed with my paper which, therefore, became redundant.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 27/4/1992

Even if we assume it to be the case that, in the matter of language usage, I am indeed possessed of the several defects that John Carter assigns to me in his letters of 12/4 and 26/4, there is still this question to be asked: how could he know so much about me only from reading my fairly short letter? Perhaps he is an expert in such things?

Please allow me to repeat a section of my earlier letter (5/4), the section that he seems to object to most: "... to use 'will' in the second (or third) in such constructions merely denotes simple futurity."

Note (above) my added emphasis on "such constructions" – I was writing about "you will" being used in giving orders, not about other uses that "will" may have as well. (He mentions examples, but he has not given us any.)

In his letter of 26/4. John Carter mentions Webster's Dictionary. I quote from the 1950 edition: "In the second and third persons will express only a simple futurity or certainty, the idea of volition, purpose or wish being lost; thus, you will go or he will go indicates a future event only. The second person may also be used as a polite command; as, you will be sure to do as I have told you. (polite commands, surely, do not employ the imperative mood.)

We are always being told that the language changes. Who can deny that? It seems likely, oddly enough, that changes occur largely because we, most of the users, the non-experts, use it so poorly. Isn't the Macquarie Dictionary kind to back us up so diligently, giving legitimacy to our errors?

Comment: To have the above letter published, I had to argue strongly with the editor that it was unfair not to print it considering that John Carter had published two letters in criticism of my opinions.

To: *The Age* – 6/6/1992

Les Carlyon asserts that Gareth Evans "is careful not to split infinitives." (He should not bet too much on that.) Was that praise or was he sneering at the good Senator?

Let's hope that it was praise, for Mr Carlyon managed to avoid splitting 19 (?) infinitives in his clever and amusing, if unkind piece.

It is interesting, that his way of avoiding the splitting of infinitives seems to involve the rejection, in that article, anyway, of any adverbs that may do the splitting job. Not for him, "to slowly walk," "to thoroughly inform," "to clearly understand."

To: *The Sunday Age* – 21/6/1992

One hopes that Mr Jeff Kennett has pointed out to "*The Sunday Age*" that there were errors relating to his military rank and appointment included in the article 14 June.

As the photograph of him and his platoon members shows, he was a second lieutenant, not a lieutenant. He could hardly have been a commander of A Company, as that appointment would normally have carried the rank of major, three steps above his rank.

His unit title, given as First Royal Australian Regiment, was not correct – 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment would have been about right.

Ken Merrigan, journalist, replies: Kennett was commander of the 1st Platoon, A Company, 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. He was shown in the platoon as a second lieutenant but finished his army service as a lieutenant.

To: *The Age* – 25/6/1992

Understandably, Bob Santamaria was anxious to defend the DLP against criticisms from Kevin Childs.

One wonders what his reaction was if he read , in 1963, an editorial of the Church of England newspaper the “Anglican.” The editorial attacked the DLP with great vigour.

Reviewing Federal elections it said that the DLP “was a disgrace and a serious threat to democracy in Australia.” It wrote of “dirty fighting” the “despicable lies and misrepresentations.” “This is a party, in our view, whose tactics are utterly beneath contempt.” And finally: “It is a party of the blackest reaction, sustained by an unholy alliance between clericalism and large scale capitalism, indistinguishable in any respect from the Italian Fascist or German Nazi parties of the 30’s.”

In comparison, McMahon Ball’s criticisms, as quoted by Kevin Childs, were mild indeed.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 2/7/1992

Comment: The newspaper asked for reader contributions relating to a delightful holiday place that they had visited. I wrote about the ancient city of Petra in Jordan. My contribution follows. There had been some editing of the piece when it was published.

PETRA: THE CITY OF ANCIENT MONUMENTS

Our world has travel wonders in abundance, but few of them, perhaps, have a stronger claim to uniqueness than Petra, Jordan, has. Its out-of-the-way location means, one supposes, that many fewer tourists than its truly astonishing attractions would warrant visit there. (This tourist, with his wife and a Syrian guide, drove there from Damascus in 1988.)

Petra was the capital of the Nabataeans, a people long settled in Jordan; for centuries, indeed, before and after the birth of Christ. The visitor needs to be prepared to walk fairly long distances or, alternatively, to hire a guide and horse, to engage thoroughly in the sight-seeing. (Good accommodation is available nearby.)

Petra, it has been written, is a city of ancient monuments, monuments carved out of rocks in what is a mountainous area. How, you wonder, could people of those times, with the limited variety of tools that were available to them, how could they have created such beauty in the form of facades, of tombs, that appear before your eyes as you explore? And, oh, the colours!

It would, to many, at least, be worth making the trip to Petra even if only to see the Khazneh. A facade, some 30 metres wide and 43 metres high, its appearance first strikes the visitor when he or she walks through a crevice in a wall of rock about 100 metres from it. It is such a wondrous sight! It has been described as ‘the most perfect two-storied facade which has been preserved in the East from antiquity until now’. Another of the facades, the stunning Ad-Deir, is even larger than the Khazneh, it being reached after a walk up hundreds of steps. (Bob Hawke, we were told, was taken up there by helicopter.) And there are all the other monuments to see.

Some say that a visit of three days is needed for one to explore Petra thoroughly. That may be so. A visit of just one day, however, we found to be a quite marvellous, touching on spiritual, experience.

To: *The Australian* – 15/7/1992

Mr Keating, one suspects, would like to tax the rich more heavily, but he is in no position to do that. For one thing, he needs to assure the wealthy by treating them kindly that he cares for them just as deeply as John Hewson does.

Again, he knows from our history that, if he took that step, then the large numbers of ordinary (far from wealthy) Australians that, paradoxically surely, have a habit of voting for conservative parties, would not be at all impressed. Indeed, they would probably become even more determined to help kick Labor out of office.

To: *The Age* – 24/10/1992

Peter Ryan is a bit of a worry. “Education starts with original sin.” he writes. Are we to understand that he accepts as indubitable the teaching of say, St Augustine on the activities of the mythical Adam and Eve and on the consequences of those activities? He seems to agree with St Augustine, too, (as well as with the Old Testament), on the question of human wickedness: wickedness is inherent in all our hearts. How does he manage not to mention evolution here? At least (presumably) he knows something (lots?) about it, even if the sages of earlier times were severely handicapped in their thinking processes by their ignorance of it and other things.

One could go on; there is much to criticize in his article. “Free will,” for example, gets a mention as though there is no doubt that we all possess it. Determinists would not agree. Peter Ryan sneers a lot these days.

To: *The Age* – 27/10/1992

Harold Klomp made plain in his letter that he holds certain religious beliefs. He seems to have no doubts at all about his opinions on the questions of God, Jesus, etc.

Some would say that if his beliefs are in accord with facts, then it would be valid to describe them as true beliefs. But what are the facts? Does he or does any one else know?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 1/11/1992

It seems to be true that politicians are widely regarded as unworthy individuals whose main aim is to wield power and to gather to themselves as many benefits as they possibly can.

Perhaps Bertrand Russell was right in 1931 when he wrote that “It is a curious fact that the more democratic a country becomes, the less respect it has for its rulers.”

Whatever the truth of the matter, however, one thing does seem fairly certain: we, the people, in the main, are uninformed, lacking in tolerance, hypocritical, and quite without the ability to think straight. Perhaps Nietzsche was not too far wrong when he wrote of “the bungled and botched.” Do politicians deserve our sympathy rather than our contempt.

Two replies to the preceding letter

Re John Rawson (“People lack the ability to judge politicians”) There is plenty of information available on which to make judgements, but the majority of voters prefer tabloid trivia to considered facts that might adversely affect them.

After swallowing the “sweetener” of two cents of petrol, they are not even conscious of being insulted when three days before the election Mr Kennett, the leader of the then Opposition, refuses to release his more devastating policies because “the people would be confused.” His real reason was that this essential information could lose him votes.

How can we hope to become known as a clever country when citizens allow themselves to be so easily duped?

Irene Kinsman

John Rawson deserves admiration for advancing the proposition that politicians perhaps “deserve our sympathy

rather than our contempt,” but, after the deceit and gratuitous conflict of the past month, I do not have his generosity of spirit.

I believe that John Douglas Pringle’s comment is as true now as when he wrote over 30 years ago: “... the old saying that a country gets the politicians it deserves cannot possibly be true of Australia. No country deserves politicians as bad as these.”

In time, I may come to forgive them, but I will never forget what they have done.

Tim Hunter

To: *The Sunday Age* – 6/12/1992

The United States has been trying for decades to destroy the Cuban nation, the means of destruction including an economic blockade.

The kind of rotten regime that ruled there before Castro overthrew it suits the United States best, it seems.

By its actions at the United Nations recently, the Australian Government has given support to the United States’ determination to destroy Cuba.

One hopes that that sort of grovelling, that sort of betrayal of the Left, leaves at least some of the Labor caucus members feeling ashamed of themselves, and of their party.

To: *The Age* – 28/12/1992

“A multi cultural society such as Australia has become ... must prevent any overt criticism of ... religion.” Such is the extraordinary, not to say chilling, opinion of Greg Bailey. “Must prevent.” How? one may ask.

He is good on truth, too,. He writes of “relative truth,” whatever that is. So there is no true religion anymore?

He attempts to refute Pamela Bones’ contention that religious belief should be more subject to criticism in our society by claiming that “within special religions an enormous amount of public debate occurs.” About what, though? The existence of God, perhaps? Oh, no – about things like the ordination of women in *The Anglican Church*.

Finally, incredibly, even though, according to Dr Bailey, criticism of religion must be prevented, he writes that “Ms Bone must be applauded for suggesting ... that debate on religion should be taken off the list of taboos.” Oh, my!

To: *The Age* – 28/1/1993

Perhaps it is understandable that some people expect more of a prospective national leader than that he should take advantage of certain taxation laws. A quite legal thing to do, but ...

Perhaps they believe that the term “highly honorable” should always be an appropriate description of a national leader.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 28/1/1993

The letters protesting at Terry Lane’s recent piece on religion could hardly have been better chosen. If, that is, the intention was to illustrate the fanciful nature of religious belief.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 15/2/1993

Terry Lane is a very privileged man and some of us are very pleased about that. Those of us, I mean, that over the years have had their attacks on religious belief rejected time after time by the media. He gets away with it, and that's just wonderful.

It seems reasonable to think that if, say, from the years after Darwin, criticism of religion had not to a very large extent been taboo in the media, religious belief would have been much reduced. Reduced, too, would have been its harmful effects on much of mankind.

To: *The Age* – 4/3/1993

Following on from Frank Hainsworth's Arabian proverb perhaps Bertrand Russell's comments on scepticism may interest readers: "(1) that when the experts are agreed, the opposite opinion can not be held to be certain; (2) that when they are not agreed, no opinion can be regarded as certain by a non-expert; and (3) that when they all hold that no sufficient grounds for positive opinion exist, the ordinary man would do well to suspend his judgement. These propositions may seem mild, but, if accepted, they would absolutely revolutionize human life."

Perhaps number (2) has particular relevance to economists?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 4/4/1993

Father Nicholas, begging the question, asserts that "What the Catholic Church believes is perfectly reasonable."

To make just one of many possible objections to that statement: the Church believes in hell – is that reasonable? In passing, surely only a mind beset by malignancy could conceive of such a place as hell.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 20/4/1993

In his attempt to give credence to religious belief, and following Terry Lane's extended assault on it, Gordon Powell, who claims to know God, enlists the aid of Albert Einstein.

Gordon Powell quotes Einstein as saying, "science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind." Einstein did write that in his essay "Science and Religion." But a couple of pages later he wrote this: "In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of priests."

To: *The Sunday Age* – 13/7/1993

Weary Dunlop was a most admirable person. Few would dispute that opinion.

Would he have wished, though, that such an extraordinary fuss should have been made about him on his leaving? Perhaps many of us feel virtuous when we demonstrate that we are admirers of the admirable?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 15/8/1993

Much less heed is paid to the rules of grammar these days than formerly. Perhaps that does not matter very much.

You could reasonably think, though, that people whose profession is based on the constant use of the language,

for example, academics, journalists and broadcasters, would take the trouble to master 7all aspects of their craft.

If one is a bit of a pedant, one notices that the professionals provide example after example of assorted grammatical errors. (Pedants make errors, too, it really needs to be said.)

There is one error, however, that nearly all of us make. That is one where the rule that “The verb should agree in number (and person) with the subject” is ignored. Simple sentences don’t usually trouble us; sentences like “The house are burnt down” would rarely be used. It is more complicated sentences that trouble us. Here is one: “The evidentiary basis for these astonishing claims were one or two ambiguous scraps of evidence.” “Were” should be “was.”

Of course, were the sentence recast and “one or two ambiguous scraps” became the undoubted subject of the sentence, the verb would than need to be plural.

To: *The Age* – 16/8/1993

Was *The Age* editorial writer serious in asking “Is it not God’s work that the scientists are trying to emulate?”

If the writer, ignoring the facts of evolution, that now is 1993 not 1893, believes in the creation, well that’s up to him or her.

But if the writer does not believe myths of that sort why, one may ask, did he or she give them support in this way?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 26/9/1993

It is a pity that when Barry Jones made his comments about intellectuals he did not tell us what he meant in using the word.

And as for those that have attacked him about his list of intellectuals, has any single one, in doing so, defined the term? What would they say if they were asked to do so? There may well not be even two similar definitions, one suspects.

One definition (was it Lord Bullock?) goes like this: “A highly educated person that has critical and creative opinions about normative ideas.” Would Barry Jones, or his critics, agree with that definition?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 17/10/1993

A couple of weeks ago, Digger James, of the RSL, in a letter to *The Age*, asserted that our great Australian society is a result of our being a constitutional monarchy. He seems to believe, also, that governments are not capable of concentrating attention on more than one important matter at a time.

Now, one of his lieutenants, Bruce Ruxton, goes on about its being treason to openly criticize and question the constitutional role of our monarch.

Let us hope that some leaders of the RSL are capable of expressing opinions of a less fallible nature when writing to newspapers.

To: *The Age* – 10/1/1994

Apropos of Pamela Bone’s piece on religion. She writes about, among other things, the possibility that religious belief is based on ignorance or lack of intelligence.

As for ignorance, it could be argued that before Darwin and before astronomers such as Copernicus people were in a very real sense ignorant. (Perhaps there is less ignorance about today?) Even Newton is said to have remarked that perhaps God hurled the planets into orbit.

It is not surprising that some people can be clever in some ways but very unclever in other ways. Mozart was a genius when it came to music, but it seems that he was intellectually pretty ordinary in other areas. Perhaps it is apposite to quote Bertrand Russell here: "People believe in God because they were taught to do so when they were little children."

To: *The Age* – 14/1/1994

Karen Kissane tells us that, when her father died, her mother said that he had gone to heaven. Perhaps her mother sincerely believed that that would happen upon his death.

Not long ago, I was one of a group of people that included a lady, an intelligent lady, of 73 or thereabouts. At one point she said, "Oh, I don't know what I'll do if its not true." She said this in relation to her going to heaven when she died.

What can be said in defence of institutions that inculcate that kind of confusion into the minds of the young, and that continue that process over the succeeding years?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 18/1/1994

In Melbourne, not long ago, a small group of elderly people were having a discussion. One of the group, a lady of about 73, said, "Oh, I don't know what I'll do if it is not true."

For some of the group, it can hardly be doubted, it was difficult to believe that a modern-day Australian, not unintelligent, and with a reasonable standard of education would believe in heaven. But, clearly, she did. She was obviously in an agony of doubt about it all.

What is there to be said in defence of institutions that inculcate that kind of falsehood into people's, especially children's, mind?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 6/3/1994

As is well known, the practice of male and female circumcision began in early times. The practice became so imbedded in some cultures that it may never be done away with, despite the cruelty involved, in the case of women, and the seeming pointlessness of it (usually), in the case of men.

We may well ask ourselves why it is that much of mankind is so influenced in so many directions (not only in the matter of circumcision) by the opinions of, in present day terms, ignorant men of antiquity.

Yes, ignorant men. Men whose knowledge of the world was, through the circumstances of their day, poor indeed.

To: *The Age* – 13/3/1994

Pamela Bone, this time writing about circumcision, again shows the admirable clear-mindedness that appeals so much to many of her readers.

As is well known, the practice of male and female circumcision began in early times. The practice became so imbedded in some cultures that it may never be done away with, despite the cruelty involved, in the case of women, and the pointlessness, usually, in the case of men.

We may well ask ourselves why it is, that much of mankind is so influenced, not only in the matter of

circumcision, by the opinions of, in present-day terms, ignorant men of antiquity.

To: *The Age* – 6/5/1994

In his letter (6/5), Michael Shadbolt, expressing a religious viewpoint, no doubt, used the term “universal truths.” Some will wonder what he means.

If religious truths are indeed universal, and given the meaning of that word, then the people of, say, China, should be familiar with them, too, surely. One suspects that most of them, being not Christian, have never heard of them.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 15/5/1994

Brian Harris and Senator Harradine, maintaining, as they do, an unremitting opposition to birth control (and abortion), choose to disregard expert opinion on over-population, starvation, poverty, etc.

In looking for reasons behind such attitudes, it is reasonable to conclude that the words of Pope Pius XI, years ago, referring to those who practise birth control, are critical. They, he wrote, in his encyclical on marriage, “sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.”

To: *The Age* – 5/8/1994

Perhaps Brian Harradine, pursuing his unremitting opposition to birth control (and abortion), has been much influenced by the words of Pope Pius XI on those practising birth control in marriage: they “sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.” Or does he reject that opinion?

His attitude seems to be that he is a caring, human rights activist, that he is an expert on these matters, and that is that. Experts should not be so biased, so driven by dogma.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 28/8/1994

Infringements of human rights are going on in many parts of the world and it is right that people should be concerned. It is so easy to be intellectually dishonest, though, about the matter: our protests are pretty selective.

If, for example, the people suffering human rights abuse in East Timor were, say, communists (consider Cuba), there would be very little concern among people in Australia.

To: *The Age* – 22/8/1994

As someone without any expertise on such matters, I should like just the same, to comment on Eleanor Weekes’ letter on suicide.

Probably because of a need to be as brief as possible, the reasons that prompt some people to contemplate, or to commit, suicide, were not discussed in the letter. An experience that I had during the middle eighties, suggests, I believe, that the impulse to suicide may be spurred by something that one is regularly ingesting, and I refer not only to drugs.

In January, 1988, the Health Department of Victoria, responding to letters and telephone calls from me, explained in a letter that the Grain Elevators’ Board treated whole grain with the pesticide Fenitrothion. (In a telephone conversation one of their officers said that the pesticide is “acutely toxic in high doses.”)

From early 1984, I had been eating large quantities of unprocessed bran, much more, certainly, than the quite safe two tablespoons of bran each day recommended at the time by the Department. There was media publicity.

I stopped eating bran.

No longer ingesting bran, I noted, within a day or two, the disappearance of a number of puzzling medical symptoms that had been troubling me. Two months later came the further realization: I had not thought of suicide since I stopped eating bran. I used to think of it often.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 29/8/1994

Especially after the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the capitalist nations have been terrified by the possibility that Communism would triumph over capitalism. Communism has been fought tooth and nail all over the world ever since. Beset by its own inadequacies, and the determination of capitalism and the church to destroy it, Communism has succumbed in some nations, notably nations of Eastern Europe. The nation of Cuba, not far off the coast of the United States, is desperately trying to survive.

Castro's successful revolution in Cuba brought to an end the rule of the dictator Batista y Zaldiver. Cuba at that time and before being the playground, especially, of wealthy Americans. Castro's communist regime, over a period of years, improved enormously such things as education, medical care, infant mortality rates and housing. No doubt, too, there have been, and are, human rights problems in such a process. Castro was a very popular leader.

From the point of view of the United States, to mention just one of their objections, those improvements to the conditions of the Cuban people were a huge problem. Communism must not be seen to be successful, especially so close to home. And other nations in Central and South America may want similar improvements in their societies.

The United States placed a trade embargo on Cuba about 30 years ago, an embargo now particularly harmful to Cuba since the demise of the Soviet Union. (They have done much more than that to destroy Cuba, of course.) The Cuban economy is crumbling and the people are suffering terribly because the United States determined long ago that Castro and Communism must go. (They even have a naval base on Cuban soil.) In all this, the Australian government connives. The human rights of Cubans are not important to us Australians it seem.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 2/10/1994

To the numbers of those already opposed to a Grand Prix at Albert Park may now be added those drawn into the controversy by the recent anti-democratic legislation passed by the Government. It may not be overstating the matter to suggest that potentially explosive circumstance have been created.

And it is no good believing that commonsense will prevail. Some people may well ask why they should tolerate the vandalizing of the Constitution by a government determined to have its own way. Their protests may well rock Melbourne.

To: *Good Weekend* – 2/10/1994

It seems to be the case, particularly, one may reasonably assert, among followers of conservatism, that a high intelligence may nevertheless sometimes be accompanied by a badly flawed ability to make soundly reasoned judgements about at least some issues of importance.

The public profile of Bronwyn Bishop supports such a contention.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 17/10/1994

A recent public opinion poll has found that women are more influenced than men by religion. They accord it more importance, they attend church more often, and they are considerably more likely to believe in God than men are.

Perhaps this divergence of opinion between men and women has existed for centuries. In earlier times, women – whose right to be educated, men barely acknowledged – were deprived, particularly, of learning opportunities in the field of science. And even in these more enlightened times, it is said, women are still less likely than men to engage in the study of science subjects.

Consider just one thing: do more men than women study evolution? (Education systems place nothing like the importance that is warranted on this subject.) Such a study is very likely to cause the student to wonder about the truth of much religious teaching.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 2/11/94

It is enormously sad to think that all that was necessary to save the lives of those young men in Cambodia was the paying of a sum of money to their captors. This could not be done, we are told, because it would encourage further instances of hostages being held for ransom. Perhaps so, but it would have been wonderful if those young men could have been returned to their loved ones. We should have allowed our hearts, not our heads, to rule in the matter.

It is sad, too, that many of us are less affected by the tragedy than is perhaps warranted. The men are deemed by some to have been at fault, bringing the tragic happenings upon themselves by being where they were. Perhaps that is one reason why there has been little public reaction, in the form of letters to newspapers, for example, to their terrible circumstances.

To: *green guide* – 10/11/1994

Thomas A Watkin and others are perfectly entitled, it goes without saying, to be admirers of Pope John Paul II and to say so. There are other people, however, who are equally entitled not to be his admirers and to say so. It seems that Sir Mark Oliphant belongs to the latter group.

For centuries, religion and its luminaries have been protected, often in the most cruel manner, from criticism. Why, considering all the harm religion has done and is doing, should criticism of it be suppressed, as Mr Watkin urges?

To: *Good Weekend* – 26/11/1994

The media has long been in the business of, to say the least, soft-peddling articles that may be regarded as a criticism of religion or religious belief.

It was pleasing to some of us, therefore, that the editor of *The Age*, saw fit to publish an account of the evil doings of some Christian Brothers in Western Australia years ago.

It is reasonable to argue that if criticism of religion had not been suppressed for centuries, often in the most cruel ways, religion may now have many fewer adherents throughout our troubled world, which situation would constitute a great advance for mankind.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 4/12/1994

It is not at all surprising that the scandalous conduct of that priest was allowed to continue for years. For centuries, religion has been, often in the most cruel manner, protected from criticism, partly because, among other things, religion is perceived to be “good” by many people.

The media has long been in the business of protecting religion from its critics. “*The Sunday Age*,” however, in its few short years of existence, has demonstrated a willingness to bring criticism of it and of some other matters regarded as sensitive, before its readers.

At least some of its readers urge it to continue its efforts to arrive at the facts.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 13/12/1994

It is rather unreasonable of Monsignor Cudmore and Rowan Forster to criticize Terry Lane for making “infallible statements” and for displaying “unshakable certainty.”

They, themselves, being Christians, must believe with certainty that, for example, a supreme being exists, despite there being no evidence to support their belief.

Shouldn't they, like Rowan Forster's hero, Dr M Scott Peck, retain an open mind on religion as we are assured Peck does on the question of demonic possession?

To: *green guide* – 15/12/1994

Susanne Chambers, writing about the spiritual element in the marriage service, states that “The service speaks of a God who affirms and strengthens the love between couples and longs for them to have a relationship with him.”

How is it that the Reverend Chambers, or anyone else, for that matter, has had the kind of contact with God (if he exists) that justifies such comments?

To: *The Age* – 17/12/1994

There have been, as most would know, anti-Communists at least since Marx laid bare, among other things, the evils of capitalism in England at that time. Brian Buckley makes it clear that he is one of the many millions of them.

The opponents of Communism, over the years, it seems to this aged atheist, supporters of socialism were, most of them, those that feared for the future of capitalism and/or those that feared the anti-religion effects of “Godless Communism.” Usually though, those things were not much mentioned, great emphasis instead being placed on the anti-democratic nature of Communism. That criticism has a more general appeal among the people being, therefore, more persuasive. (The USA has consistently shown throughout the world that it places capitalism ahead of democracy. We need only to consider Central and South America. In the USA democracy is used as a synonym for capitalism, one may argue.)

As for fervent anti-Communists, it is difficult not to agree with the opinions of Henry Rosenbloom. They always have been an obnoxious lot.

To: *The Age* – 20/12/1994

If it is the case, as John McClaren argues, that there has been a marked deterioration of the quality of life in Australia, perhaps we should place the blame, on the long term effects of the kind of economic system we have. Capitalism does, after all, depend on, among other things, competition and greed to drive it. Competition may not always have a worthy place in our economic life. And greed?

As Marx brought to notice last century, the kind of economic system a nation has does much to determine that nation's politics, institutions, laws, morals, religion, arts and so on. At least in some of these areas, its influence may well be very bad indeed.

Probably, owing to the fear of being labeled, few commentators ever attack capitalism as it deserves to be attacked. The reasons for this state of affairs are fairly obvious.

To: *The Age* – 21/12/1994

As Craig Thomas reported, “The Resource Assessment Commission’s final report noted that woodchips created an important market for the residual wood in many forests.” The Commission said, too, that the industry utilized “trees that were unsuitable for saw logs and that would be left standing in the forests ... to be left to rot or burn.”

Now anyone that accepted the rationality of the Commission’s findings, would not, one would think, object to wood-chipping; provided, of course, that person approved of the forest industry itself.

It seems to follow that, at least to ardent conservationists, wood-chipping is not the real issue. They, it seems likely, would be pleased to see the end of the industry for the sake of their trees. (Never mind that the trees are replaced.) They should be more forthcoming about their true attitudes.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 23/12/1994

Most Australians that approve of our having a timber industry would, one would think, also accept the good economics, the commonsense, of wood-chipping the inferior material remaining after the best timber is gathered.

As the Resource Assessment Commission has pointed out, wood chips create an important market for the residual wood in many forests. The timber industry, they said, utilized trees that were unsuitable for saw logs and that would be left standing in the forests, to be left to burn or rot.

But what do you do if, like most conservationists, you don’t approve of our having a timber industry? You spread propaganda about forests being destroyed for wood-chipping, doing your best not to mention the primary reasons for having such an industry.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 1994

Go to see almost any film and it will contain scenes in it, or sections of it, that, if you think about them, will place a strain on your credulity. “Schindler’s List” is such a film.

Probably history records that Goeth, the Camp Commander, was indeed a fiend. But what of his superiors? Clearly, they must have been degenerate, too, to allow a psychopath like him to continue in his position.

After all, he is shown taking pot shots at inmates of the camp from the balcony of his house. He was killing for pleasure; presumably, he did that when the idea appealed to him; certainly, his superiors would have known what was going on. Was the German Officer Corps so rotten that it tolerated such conduct from one of its members? Or did Spielberg overdo things?

And the matter of the two weapons that Goeth used when he decided to shoot the factory worker. The chance that two different types of hand guns would mis-fire time after time in the way that Spielberg depicted the incident would be, although, of course, possible, vanishingly small. (But it did make us feel good that the swine, who had a big belly, who urinated noisily with a cigarette stuck in his mouth, who was a womanizer, on that occasion, at least, had met with humiliating failure.)

Then, too, there was the matter of the women and the showers, and...

To: Mini Saga Competition – *The Sunday Age* – 9/1/1995 and 12/1/1995

There, on the patio, eyes closed, lay the sleek, black body of darling Sumi, the most beautiful of cats, a bloodied gash in her flank.

Swept into loving arms, she was soon with the vet. A gash, Madam? Where? On the floor. Gashes and

squashed cherry plums look so alike.

The light plane thundered down the tarmac at Essendon. Destination: far-eastern Victoria. The several passengers, green-uniformed, grim, tortured faces, meticulously adjusted their binoculars.

Huge forests were soon everywhere to be seen. "I just don't believe this," one passenger said. "Surely we should see someone clear-felling forests for wood chips."

To: *The Sunday Age* – 15/1/1995

Terry Lane, striving, as always, in the most fair-minded way to put the facts of a matter before us, could hardly have come to any other conclusion in his piece "Oh Blinky Bill:" "Children's television shows are no place for airing the topical ideological arguments of adults."

The propaganda of extreme greens is typified by the much-used expression "Clear-felling old growth forests for wood chips." This is a deliberate distortion of the facts. Wood chips are not the purpose of the felling. They occur as a by-product of the timber harvest.

To: *green guide* – 2/2/1995

Ross Warneke said of a Paul Lyneham interview with John Howard that he, Lyneham, "Thanked him for coming." If Lyneham did use those words, then how refreshing!

He, like many others in the ABC, seems to be incapable of thinking of anything else to say at the close of an interview except, "Thanks for your time." They have been using that same expression for years.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 5/2/1995

And so we have Terry Lane declaring that there is no way that he means to be silenced by the International Year of Tolerance, and Kaz Cooke launching a sizzling attack on a few of the many ridiculous aspects of the monarchy and the papacy. More power to *The Sunday Age*.

If Kaz and Terry are intolerant, then let us have more of it. Let there be more prising open of the protective door behind which, for one thing, the many myths of theology have been enabled long to endure.

It is outrageous that the myths are still, as the 21st century approaches, propagated as truths.

Comment: By arrangement with me, the paper did not publish this last paragraph.

"Take, for example, the matter of the alleged virgin birth. It is fairly widely known, but of course not much mentioned, that the words "young woman," were mistranslated from Hebrew to Greek as "virgin." Thus: "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son ..." (Richard Dawkins: "The Selfish Gene.")'

To: *Good Weekend* – 11/3/1995

Jane Cadzow demonstrated in her very interesting piece on Carmen Lawrence that, unlike most other journalists, she is aware of the existence of, and the function of, the square bracket. She does this, for example, when quoting Graham Richardson: "You've got to say she's a contender [for the leadership.]"

Square brackets, which are used for such purposes, make it plain to the reader that the words, "for the leadership," were Jane Cadzow's words, not Graham Richardson's. Most other journalists would have made an inappropriate use of rounded brackets.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 11/4/1995

It will be interesting to see whether there is any authoritative response to Terry Lane's comment about the question of the virgin birth.

Richard Dawkins, of Oxford University, in his book, "The Selfish Gene," declares that the words 'young woman' were mistranslated from Hebrew to Greek as "virgin."

To: *The Sunday Age* – 2/5/1995

Many would agree with Neil Mitchell that, "Essentially we are more decent" [than the Americans.] If that is, indeed, the case, it is reasonable to look for at least one reason why that may be so.

In Australia, and no doubt also in the USA, the economic system is rarely blamed for anything – it is always the government, the trade unions or whatever, at fault. (Of course, anyone attacking capitalism is very likely to be derided as a communist or socialist, and look what failures those economic systems have been shown to be, it will be pointed out.)

Whereas, in Australia, both the Left and the Right have had turns at being holders of power federally and in the states, the USA have been governed by men (mainly) who have embraced capitalism with, many of them, almost a religious fervour. Capitalism is all about greed. It would not be surprising, surely, if that kind of ethos were to be detrimental – not to mention other influences – to the quality of the human beings under its all-pervasive influence.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 6/6/1995

It seems to be the case, in all Australian parliaments, that prayers are said routinely. What purpose does this serve?

The assumption is, when one says prayers, that one speaks directly to a supreme being. But in the parliaments many, perhaps most, of the politicians are not believers, that is, they do not believe in a personal God. Perhaps they say something like this to themselves: "Oh well, let's not rock the boat. Religion, as Marx said, is the opiate of the people. It is probably best that people do believe, so it's a reasonable thing for parliament to help promote Christian belief."

As for who is a Christian and who is not (many people, if asked, will describe a Christian as someone who is kind, who is good, etc.) Bertrand Russell wrote that as a very bare minimum a Christian must believe in a personal God and in immortality. How can that opinion be disputed? And on that basis, Australia has many fewer Christians than Census figures indicate.

To: *Dear Sam, The Age* – 9/6/1995

Dear Sam[Newman], we know what "get the sit" means, but what is its derivation? Does Crackers Keenan know the difference between a behind and a point? Before Geelong and West Coast meet, how many dopey journalists will refer to the match as a "grand final replay?"

Sam's reply:

Jonny boy, steady. Three questions in the one. How diverse your mind must be. Let's make sure we protect it. Make sure you're not hit by a falling napkin. Why you'd need to know the derivation of "get the sit" I'm not sure but, as I couldn't put my hands on the book of paradigms and etymologies. I'm prepared to take a stab at it. It may have come from the era of Charlie Pearson in the early '90s – 1890s, that is. Many thought Charlie was in danger of ruining the game with his "rocket-like leaps" into the air. Maybe, during one of these aeronautical forays, Chas managed to squat on an opponent's scapular, hence "get the sit." Trotting drivers often "get the sit" as well, and sometimes they get it while they're "in the death seat," but don't write back about this,

OK? Re my old friend and confidante, Crackers. A “behind” is what he sits on, a “point” being what his skull comes to at the top. Now on to the “dopey journalists.” To this end, we’ll wait with baited breath for the Patrick Smith analogy. What else would you have them call it anyway? The first return match between the two sides who played the last game of the ‘94 season? Or, consecutive appearances of the two teams that are at the extreme west and south of the country? I think “grand final replay” is as good as we can do, but the important point is WHICH grand final replay? The ‘92 or the ‘94 version? Write again, John. The municipality of Greensborough is so chuffed that you’re among their numbers.

To: Dear Sam, *The Age* – 12/6/1995

Dear Sam, I accept, over page, your invitation to write to you again. I am a bit quick, I guess, but then you will decide if and when you will publish it. If the letter is a bit long, and you decide to shorten it, please do me a favour and leave in the bit about the ABC.

Perhaps I am being pedantic, Sam, but there has not been a grand final replay since 1977. Some journalists have written things like “Rematch of the grand finalists of last year,” thus avoiding the error of calling the match a replay.

Good luck with your column about the greatest game on earth.

To: Dear Sam, *The Age* – 13/6/1995

Dear Sam, I accept your invitation to write to you again. Unlike you, some football commentators can be so boring, so unoriginal. Why doesn’t someone tell them? Match after match they say the same tired, worn out, irritating things. Examples: “Sweeping hand pass;” “Little chip pass;” “Straight through the centre;” and, at the end of an interview, “Thanks for your time.” (The last one is a widespread ABC disease.)

Sam’s reply:

“Sweeping handpass,” “little chip pass,” “straight through the centre.” You’re on about tautology, or being redundant aren’t you. Aren’t you? Mind you, a sweeping handpass can be just that, not a little tiddler. “Thanks for your time.” Tell the *real* doyens – like Willesee and Jana – they got it wrong. But Johnnie boy, if you’re tired of the mundane like “the ball’s thrown back into play,” maybe Rex’s “the boundary umpire heaves this air conveyance back on its circumvolution into the stadium,” would suit. Or maybe “the ball’s bounced” for “umpire Darren Goldspink hods this Sherrin into the atmosphere and, bang, slams it into the rubber knob,” and, “the ball rises into the afternoon sunshine.” I know what I prefer, that’s why I work with him. “Mil Hanna’s cranium glistening in the evening light,” and “the pontiff kicks the ball into the congregation behind the goals, but the ball wafts, and lofts and pofts and goes behind the stick,” are other offerings, so you can take your choice. Isn’t that what life’s about?

To: Good Weekend – 17/6/1995

Ben Hill makes mention in his “Coming to terms with Hiroshima” of the fanaticism, not only of Japanese servicemen but also of the civilian population, in Okinawa, at least.

Religious fanaticism is something that we all know has been present in the world over the centuries. In Japan’s case, perhaps Bertrand Russell’s comments in his “History of Western Philosophy” (first published in 1946), may help to explain things. “The Japanese have been taught since 1868 that the Mikado is descended from the sun-goddess, and that Japan was created earlier than the rest of the world. Any university professor, who, even in a learned work, throws doubt on these dogmas, is dismissed for un-Japanese activities.”

To: *The Sunday Age* – 11/9/1995

The Sunday Age continues to please many that manage to live their lives without the aid of myths. Allowing Terry Lane to continue his criticism of the influence of 'brainless' religion (among his comments on the UN World Conference on Women) is an important and progressive editorial decision.

Bertrand Russell who, it has been written, was a pro-feminist ahead of his time, was scathing in his criticism of religious influence on women: We sometimes hear talk to the effect that Christianity improves the status of women. This is one of the most gross perversions of history that it is possible to make.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 26/11/1995

A 73 year old atheist, I admit never to having read the book of genesis. (No doubt many that say they are Christians have not read it, either.) Recently, I did read it. An old copy.

I noticed, first of all, that God is credited with exercising his awesome power of creation in the year 4004 BC. Surely not very many believe that any more?

Perhaps, though, the question about the contents of Genesis that I should most like to have answered is this: how did the writer(s) get to learn all those details that are stated as facts?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 30/1/1996

In this life we are every now and then reminded that Heraclitus seems to have been right in his belief that everything is in a state of flux. This time, a reminder was contained in the excellent 'Teen Spirit' in the *Sunday Age*. It might not have been a reminder to the young, but it certainly was to some whose teenage days are several decades in the past.

The descriptions of their life-styles by the teenagers depict a markedly different existence from the teenager of, say, 50 years ago. To attempt to deal with those differences is beyond the scope of this letter. Certainly, though, a young person's style of living in those times was much less frenetic than now. Drugs, alcohol and tobacco were available, but those other drugs were not.

Do the young people's stories persuade us that our way of life has improved as we all would hope (expect?) it to over a 50-year period? If the answer is 'yes,' then good. If the answer is 'no,' why is this so? Many reasons may be adduced. Why couldn't our economic system be to blame?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 11/5/1996

Over a period of 30 years or so, it has been interesting to note that writers and commentators in the media and elsewhere have been less and less influenced by the rules of English grammar. No doubt that was the intention of the education authorities and perhaps those authorities had the right idea.

Does it really matter that, generally speaking, people are not able to discriminate between the use of "who" and "whom," or "shall" and "will?" How many even know what a split infinitive is? And so on.

There used to be a rule that went like this: "The verb should agree with the subject in both number and person." Let's be concerned here only with number. "Bill loves Betty:" singular subject, singular verb. "Bill and Jack love Betty:" plural subject, plural verb.

Recently, an editorial writer (Not of *The Sunday Age*) wrote this: "What we need with Swanston Walk, therefore, are not superficial solutions." The writer did what most present day writers would have done with that arrangement of words – he used a plural verb ("are") even though the subject of the verb was singular. The plural "superficial solutions" could be the subject, but only if the sentence were recast. Question: What, then, is the subject?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 1/6/1996

The determination of organizations to shed employees and thus assist in the creation of higher profits, is perhaps exemplified by the situation at the Commonwealth Bank in Main Street, Greensborough.

Not so long ago, both the State and Commonwealth banks operated in Main Street. Then the State was absorbed by the Commonwealth. When they were both in operation, the total number of tellers on the job would be something like double the number at present serving the public in Main Street. That is, there are about half as many tellers for something like, one supposes, a similar number of customers in earlier times when the banks operated separately. It is not unusual for the single queue to have up to 30 people in it. Someone should get a blast.

To: *The Age* – 12/6/1996

Rowan Forster described Dennis Minns as “sneering sarcastic and supercilious, and displaying a somewhat less than charitable disposition.” Some may think it less than charitable of him so to describe Mr Minns.

In his attempt to whitewash, indeed to deny, the ferocious cruelty exhibited by members of the Christian faith over the centuries, Mr Forster claims that “the true followers of Jesus were the victims of inquisition and incineration not the perpetrators.” (As an aside, Bertrand Russell described “faith” as a belief in something for which there is no evidence.)

Does he mean that the estimated hundred thousand “witches” put to death in Germany alone between 1450 and 1550 were Christian martyrs? Does he say that the Crusades, the soldiers of the cross, were all about wiping out Christianity? There is so much more.

He and other correspondents write about truth. Well, it seems that most philosophers, who are not pragmatists, consider that a belief is a true belief when it corresponds with fact. Is it a fact that God exists? Is it a fact that Jesus existed? Was he, in fact, divine? And so on.

To: *The Editor, The Age* – 18/6/1996

I have been an *Age* reader, and a subscriber as well, for years and years. I would describe myself as a loyal reader, but I cannot see that loyalty, severely tested as it has been, continuing. This is a complaint, a very serious complaint in my eyes, about bias and the way I have been treated as a contributor to your letters' column. There is so much that I could write, but I will do my best to be brief.

You printed a letter from me in 1982. I have sent in more than 30 letters since, but none has been printed. (In passing, I should mention that I have had letters accepted by *The Sunday Age*, *The Australian*, *The Herald* and *The Bulletin*, and that, in fact, my autobiography will be printed before long. I mention these things to make the point that I am, I suppose, a reasonably good writer. Certainly, no more than that.

Early in 1983, I wrote a letter criticizing the column in *Saturday Extra*. That was a foolish thing for me to do. I came to think over time, as letter after letter was rejected, that my name had been placed on a black list. I realize that for people like me it is not easy to have a letter accepted by a quality newspaper. Nevertheless, people like me do get in often enough. But I don't.

The black list, though, did not apply to *Access Age*, it seemed. Until a couple of years ago, things went pretty well: better than one in three of my letters were published, including during the first months after the current letters' editor took over. He then dropped me. In fact, he has printed two of my *Access* letters since July 1994. In December of that year, he printed a letter made up almost entirely of a quote from Bertrand Russell. He could not resist a comment that related to people like Skase. He printed another in February this year. I wondered whether that was a result of my note to you about Melbourne Airport.

You may well ask me what the letters' editor may have against me. I can think of at least two possible things. In the middle of 1994, he made it plain enough that he was biased in favour of the anti-loggers. Hardly an *Access* letter got in supporting logging when the controversy was at its height. He certainly would not print one

from me. (Did Jill Redwood ever have a letter refused, I wonder?)

One of my theories is that at about that time he became aware that the Director of Forests Service in Victoria is my son. From my letters in 1994, he would easily have realized that I am an atheist. As has been shown over the last week or two (more of that later) he is biased in favour of religion. So I think my atheism is at least part of the problem he has with me.

Since I am dealing with religion at this point, I should like to digress for a paragraph or so. I mentioned earlier that I have written an autobiography. In the preface, I mention my atheism and make the point that it is very difficult to persuade the media to accept criticism of religion. I have a number of appendices, one of which will now contain, to support my view of the media attitude, the letters that *The Age* has recently refused to print. In passing, I must mention, as well, that one of the other appendices contains an account of my being investigated by ASIO when I was an army officer in New Guinea in the sixties. Some years ago, I sent it to *Saturday Extra* hoping that it would be published. Your Alan Morison, described it as “an elegantly written piece,” but he felt that it was past its time.

I turn now to events of the past week or so. The very evident bias of your letters’ editor, as demonstrated by his selection of letters to be published was, to use a cliché, the last straw as far as I was concerned. On the side of religion, he published letter after letter. On the side of those wishing to question and to oppose the religionists, he printed but two letters, both of them being from James Gerrard, President of the Humanist Society. I sent or rang in four letters, three of them to *Access*. (I have attached copies.) In my opinion the main letter, for one, was well worthy of publication, particularly in view of the rot contained in the letters to which I was responding. I suspect that many very able men and women found it all so preposterous, so puerile, that they would smile to themselves, shrug their shoulders and turn their minds to something of more use and, yes, something less harmful, to humanity.

I regret having to trouble you like this, but the notion of fairness, for one thing, has strongly influenced my life. I hope that if there is a black list my name is removed from it. And once the current letters’ editor finishes his stint, and I think that that should be pretty soon, perhaps I’ll be able to engage in one of my favourite hobbies again: contributing to *The Age* letters’ columns. I ask you to publish my main letter. I do hope to hear from you.

To: *The Age* – 20/6/1996

“*The Age*” in the last couple of weeks, seems to have gone out of its way to provide the opportunity for a number of adherents of Christian dogma to give us almost a daily, fairly heavy, serve of their opinions on some or other ecclesiastical matter.

At least, the most recent sally, by John Carroll, was no where near as boring or lacking in appeal as the earlier waffle. In passing, in a long life, I cannot recall anything like that opportunity being given to, say, humanists, who are not bothered, one may claim, by such things as sacraments, faith, prayers, angels, superior beings, the meaning of life (why, for heaven’s sake, should life have meaning? – one gives life a meaning) and all that stuff. But then the media, in general, protects religion from criticism.

It can hardly be doubted that John Carroll would describe himself as a Christian. That is, that at the very minimum he believes in a supreme being and in immortality. That lots of people who describe themselves as Christians in our society do not believe those two things, can be determined simply by asking around. A Christian is a good person, many say. So much for Census results on religious belief.

Mr Carroll reprimands the church for its “... extraordinary intellectual failure of nerve to accept virtually unchallenged the evolutionary picture...” Bishop Wilberforce, in 1860, challenged it: “The principle of natural selection is absolutely incompatible with the word of God.” The poor chap had to reckon with Thomas Huxley. When would the church have rounded up someone with the intellect to better, say, RA Fisher in the thirties? Or Francis Crick, whom Mr Carroll mentions? Or SJ Gould of Harvard university? Or Richard Dawkins of Oxford university?

And if the church did have someone with the intellect to compete with those men of science, his position would be hopeless because he is all about dogma while they are experts in the field of biology. Evolution is a fact, not a theory. Mr Carroll seems to wish otherwise.

To: *The Age* – 21/6/1996

Pamela Bone remarks that: “I see from the letters to the editor, that while I have been away there has been a discussion about Christian truth.” (One cannot imagine Pamela being too impressed by the discussion it seems reasonable to remark.)

The question of truth and its definition was brought up by Beverley Lewis in an *Access Age* letter. As I remember, she did not specify Christian truth. (Do we have, by the way, Muslim truth, Jewish truth, Hindu truth – do all the religions have their own truths? Or is truth truth and that’s that? Let us proceed.)

Now I don’t know whether or not Beverly was satisfied with the definition of truth provided to her by Dr David Powys. Perhaps she was, perhaps she was not. But this was what he wrote: “Put simply, Jesus is what I mean by truth.”

So we have the opinion of a theologian about truth. What do philosophers have to say? No doubt their opinions would vary, but it would be unlikely that many would even approach Dr Powys’ unscholarly reply to Beverly. In an attempt to reach her through *Access Age*, and to provide her with a definition that some philosophers seem to agree upon, I phoned this brief comment to *Access*: “It seems that many philosophers, although not including pragmatists, consider that a belief is a true belief when it corresponds with fact. So one is speaking the truth, for example, if one says God exists, if, in fact, God does exist.” My letter did not appear in *Access*, however.

To: *The Age* – 27/6/1996

It was refreshing to read Henry Herzog’s reply to Dr Roger Fernando on matters scientific. The latter was a participant in a recent spate of entries in the letters columns of *The Age*, when six or so contributors gave support to, and only one person (James Gerrand) was given the opportunity to criticize, some aspects of Christianity, and religion generally. It is a matter of history, and history is made up of facts, that religion has been a bitter opponent of science, and has had gradually to retreat in opposition since science became firmly established in the 16th century.

Science, as Mr Herzog explained, is a collection of facts, these facts being established, perhaps he would agree, by careful observation, experimentation, and the testing of hypotheses. No doubt there is more. Scientists know quite well that there are many questions to which science does not have an answer.

Religion, it may be claimed, is principally about dogma. Chambers’ dictionary: “A belief or principle laid down by an authority as unquestionably true.” An authority?: The bible is one. Dogma varies, of course, from religion to religion. Bertrand Russell made this point: “It is evident as a matter of logic that, since they disagree, not more than one of them can be true.” He believed that none of them was true.

To: *The Age* – 29/6/1996

Perhaps there were others, too, who were more than a little bemused by Bruce Barber’s complaint about theology’s not being allowed “Its place in the universities.” This, he writes, is due to “That Australian prejudice,” which has “Marginalized the theological enterprise from mainstream intellectual life.”

For heaven’s sake (or is that expression not appropriate here?), just what does he mean? There is a faculty of theology. He is its Dean. That’s not a bad start if you want to get going on theology. Is he saying that theology should have influence over other faculties? Surely not. Do circumstances at the university prevent him from having intellectual dialogue with, say, scientists, economists, etc? What for heavens sake is his problem?

To: *The Age* – 30/6/1996

On the grounds of religious belief, obviously enough, Kerry Flattely bases an assertion that the “Deepest of arbiters” is “The human soul.” What does he mean when he uses the word soul? Where does mankind get the

soul from? Are we born with it, is it part of the embryo? Or does it get popped into us, say, after we are born? When we die, does it rot with our bodies if we are buried or, if we are cremated, is it consumed by the heat? Or does it make its way to heaven if we happen to be one of the elect, or to that other place if we are not chosen for higher things? He then goes on to write of “religious yearnings or need – redemption and salvation remain the great human needs.” “Littleness,” it seems, is one of our problems.

Many people on this earth, especially if they were not indoctrinated with religious dogma when in their infancy and are thus able to live their lives without the help of myths, many people, I affirm, will see little or no validity in the opinions expressed by Kerry Flattely.

To: *The Editor, The Age* – 3/7/1996

On Tuesday, 11 June 1996, I personally delivered to your mail room, an envelope marked “personal for the Editor or his deputy.” The envelope contained a long letter from me to the Editor, with some other documents attached. These were copies of a letter I had earlier sent for publication, plus copies of three *Access* letters I had rung through. None was published.

I delivered, rather than posted, the envelope, because a few years ago, when I posted (not for publication) a letter to the Editor, I received no reply. It was later explained that the letter had not been received.

It is now more than three weeks since I wrote, and I have not been contacted by you or by one of your assistants. I have little doubt that if I were anyone of importance you, or someone on your behalf, would very quickly have written a note of acknowledgment or, perhaps, a quick telephone call would have been made.

Although aggrieved by your lack of courtesy, I am not altogether surprised. I feel sure that you were angry at some of the things I said in my letter, and my feeling is that you decided to continue the policy of not publishing letters from me, and had other reactions that I shall speculate on in a little while.

At that time, I had no reason to feel any animosity towards you. I knew that you had been Editor of *The Age* for a fairly short time and could hardly be blamed for the biased manner in which, from time to time in some areas, and nearly all the time in my own case, the letters’ editor carried out his responsibilities. Besides, when you were with *Sunday Age* several of my letters (one out of three at that time) were published.

It seems to me that *The Age* has made a serious error of judgement in handling this matter. By refusing to print even one of the nine letters (three of them to *Access*) that I have submitted since the great religious letters and articles saga began on 6 June, you have made, I believe, a very positive reply to my claim that I am black-listed at your paper. That reply is: “Yes, you certainly are.” I believe, also, that the expression “denied natural justice” is applicable to the treatment of me by *The Age* newspaper. Webster’s on Justice: “Impartiality; equal distribution of right in expressing opinion.” And more.

If you had been shrewd enough, not to mention unbiased enough, to publish just one of the letters, my charge of black-listing would have been disarmed, at least to some extent. “But no one, [and I again speculate on your reactions] not some nobody from the suburbs, is going to get away with accusing this newspaper of black-listing and of being biased. No sir! We will ignore him! Freeze him out! Who does he think he is?”

I have referred earlier to what I call “The great religious letters and articles saga” that began on 6 June. Let’s see what can be said about bias during that saga. I mean, a quite outrageous bias in favour of religious belief. Up to, and including, 1 July, my figures may not be exactly correct, thirteen people have had twenty letters and articles published, all of them clearly supporting religious belief. Their opponents published total two, with a total of four letters. I must mention that the fourth of the letters opposing religion was only of forty-four words. Perhaps, in a bit of a panic about charges of bias, you popped in a letter from *Access*

You may reply that few letters opposed to religion were received. Many able men and women, I must admit, would consider it a waste of time to reply to such a lot of rubbish. It was also so unimportant and uninteresting, not to say boring. If, indeed, you received hardly any letters (apart from nine from me) in opposition to the views of the religious contributors, then why, although they were clearly not attracting the interest of those readers with contrary opinions, why, I ask, were those views published in such numbers over such a long period? (I can’t recall a topic ever having been given such favourable treatment for so long in the letters columns

of a newspaper.) The answer to my question is plain: someone at your newspaper is biased. Biased against me. Biased in favour of religion, and biased against expressions of opposition to it.

As for *Access Age*, the favouritism accorded to some individuals for quite a time has been tempered, I suspect because someone directed the letters' editor to stop it. Attacks by one contributor, who must be the all-time record holder in *Access* letters, on Mr Kennett, occurred time and again. Not everybody likes Mr Kennett, but the letters' editor should not have made his dislike of the Premier so obvious. Isn't balance one of his responsibilities?

As for the timber industry, one needs only to examine *Access* in the first couple of months of 1995 to see where the bias lies. On occasions, a big part of the column was taken up with the letters of opponents of the timber industry. Much of it mindless nonsense, I should add. In a periods of about four weeks, I sent in (I have the originals) seven letters supporting the industry. One was published when the letters' editor was on leave (those relieving him have published me.) The others were all rejected, even though, on more than one occasion, no letters with similar themes to mine were published. Then there was *Access* and the Grand Prix – I must not go on.

It is my intention now to explore the kinds of replies, had you bothered to reply, that you might have given to this question from me: "Why did you refuse to publish any of my nine recent letters?" I shall frame replies that you may give making comments, if I have any, after each reply

"You accuse us of black-listing and bias, and threaten us with an intention to publish in your autobiography copies of letters of yours that we have rejected."

I mention the autobiography to suggest that I perhaps was able to write at a reasonable standard. Perhaps well enough to have at least one letter published in *The Age* over all those years since 1982. I did not mean to threaten, although I do agree that what I wrote could have been so construed.

"You should have sent the letters to the letters' editor, not to me."

The PS in the letters columns on 25 June 1996 (I sent in two letters to you after that date) gave that information. Wasn't that the first time readers have been so informed? I sent them to you personally hoping that I would get a fair hearing.

"In an *Access* letter, you said that there was bias and that the editor should step in."

A letter I have written in reply to Rowan Forster was not published. His letter contained opinions at variance with historical facts, I believed. You should have published somebody's reply, in my opinion. In *Access*, a lady asked the question, "what is truth?" I did my best to provide an opinion on two occasions. Reverend David Powys in a letter said this: "put simply, Jesus is what I mean by truth." To say the least, I was becoming frustrated by then, if not before. Hence the *Access* letter to which you refer.

"Your letters did not merit publication."

I doubt that that opinion can be sustained. Compare them with just three of the letters published in the great religious, etc, saga. Consider, for example, the letter from I Batticci (15/6.) Did you agree with Rowan Forster's (11/6) views about persecution and Christianity, and Kerry Flattely's (26/6) views about the soul? They "got away with murder," so to speak, because you failed to print my replies to them.

"Your letters were too long."

The Age, I feel sure I am correct in saying, had a word limit of 300 for letters submitted, for many years. It was not at all unusual for a letter to exceed 300 words. In the PS that appeared on 25 June, the word limit was lowered to 250 words. Now this ruling (and the one about letters having to be addressed to the letters' editor) may be very handy, it might have been thought, in defeating that pest from Greensborough. One of the letters I submitted before 25 June did exceed 300 words but, as I have said, that was not unusual. The three letters that I wrote after 25 June were all of fewer than 250 words.

In any case, Dr Geoff Thompson's (27/6) letter was of 276 words. And, wait for it, on the very day that the PS appeared, Jill Redwood's letter contained over 300 words. The very day! Jill, by the way, is a special case. A

special favourite of *The Age*. A forest campaigner, she is now with the Wilderness Society. I'll bet that there are others who, like me, doubt that Jill has ever had a letter refused in the last couple of years. She writes always on the same subject, often tendering, for one thing, spurious figures about the timber industry.

Some may consider it cowardly that an important newspaper is prepared to shelter behind silence when challenged by one of its readers on important questions relating to fairness, for one thing, in the management of its letters columns. Some may conclude, also, that the newspaper's very silence suggests that there must at least be some substance in the arguments of its challenger. And substance there is.

To: The Australian Press Council – 17/7/96

I suppose that it is unusual for your Council to be asked to pass judgement on a clash between an unimportant (and old) Australian male and a powerful newspaper. That, however, is what I am asking you to be kind enough to do. I regret having to bother you with so much written in long hand.

The detail that I wish to place before you is contained, in the main, in two long letters that I wrote to the Editor of *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne. I apologize for giving you the task of extracting from those letters the essentials of my complaints against the paper, and for what you may well regard as long-windedness on my part.

I am particularly affronted by the Editor's failure to reply to, or even to acknowledge receipt of, my letters. No doubt you will come to your own conclusions about why he chose to ignore a long-time very loyal, subscriber to his newspaper. For my part, I think that he chose a dishonourable path. I believe that he was not prepared to face up to my allegations; that he realized that much of what I wrote was based on fact; that my assertions could not easily be refuted. So he decided to rid himself of this nuisance, someone, in my case, quite without any influence, he correctly estimated, by simply not replying to my two letters.

I should like now briefly to mention the several complaints that I am making against *The Age* newspaper.

1. The Editor has, to say the least, treated me with extreme discourtesy.
2. Since 1982, I have been blacklisted in the main letters columns and, when a certain letters' editor has been in attendance, I have been blacklisted in *Access Age* since the middle of 1994.
3. Over a period of about a month (!) from 6 June 1996, an extraordinary bias in favour of religious belief was reflected in the letters chosen for the letters columns, and on four occasions articles chosen for publication on the *Opinion* page.
4. In *Access Age*, for at least the last two years, a heavy favouritism has been shown towards certain individuals, towards those protesting against the existence of the timber industry, towards – but I'll leave it at that.

I have enclosed three collections of letters. Collections one and two contain my personal letters to the Editor. Collection three contains copies of six letters (I am sorry that they are difficult to read) that I sent in during the great religious spree that began on 6 June 1996. Also enclosed are the drafts of six of the letters that I phoned to *Access* during the anti-logging deluge early in 1995. All were rejected even though any fair-minded person would have wondered why so few contrary opinions appeared.

I have been on this earth for a long time now. I live in the best country of all, I believe. Just the same, even here in Australia, there is much injustice. It is not just idle talk to speak of the power of the Press, and I imagine that your Council exists, in part at least, to seek to curb that power when such a step is seen to be necessary.

I do not claim to have suffered a huge injustice, but I do think it reasonable for me to claim that I have been treated unfairly by *The Age*, that, indeed, I have been denied natural justice. I hope that you will be persuaded to agree with that opinion.

PS. Please note that I am not claiming any particular merit for the twelve letters contained in collection three. But I do claim that the opinions expressed in them – or more opinions from others who also offered contrary viewpoints – were badly needed to give some balance to the one-sided presentation of the views of believers

and anti-loggers.

To: Mr John Rawson, from The Australian Press Council – 22/7/1996

I acknowledge receipt of your letter of 17 July together with its various attachments.

For your information, I enclose a copy of the latest version of the Council's booklet which details its principles and practices. Therein are set out the standards of journalistic ethics which the Council upholds and the procedures it uses to deal with complaints alleging breaches of those standards.

You will see that the Council sees a newspaper has having a greater obligation to publish letters when inaccurate or damaging material is published – events which do not appear to be relative to your complaint. In other circumstances, the decision as to whether to publish a letter, is, the Council thinks, best handled by the newspaper concerned. In fact, a newspaper is under no obligation to have a letters page.

Newspapers receive many more letters than they can publish and have to choose among those letters those which they believe most suitable. That means that, inevitably, some correspondents will be disappointed. Also enclosed for your perusal is an article from the Press Council News on letters to the editors column and another from the Council's Chairman on the best way of ensuring publication of letters.

I note that you believe you have been blacklisted by the letters' editor. I also note that you were unhappy at the non-publication of your letters regarding the logging debate and are presently concerned with the "great religious letters and articles saga."

I am not treating your letter as a formal complaint. As a courtesy to you, however, I have written to *The Age* and have asked it for any informal advice it can give regarding its concerns. I will be in touch when I hear from the paper.

Yours sincerely, Deborah Kirkman

Acting Executive Secretary

To: The Australian Press Council, from *The Age* – 28/8/1996

I write in response to the complaint of Mr John Rawson regarding the non-publication of his letters in '*The Age*'. *The Age* rejects the allegation that *The Age* letters' editor, Mr John Messer, uses his personal biases to judge letters' suitability for publication. In relation to Mr Rawson's complaint that his letters were not published because Mr Messer is 'anti-logging' and Mr Rawson's son is the Director of the Forests Service in Victoria, Mr Messer has advised me he was unaware of Mr Rawson's son's position. In relation to Mr Rawson's complaint that his 'atheism' was the cause of his letters not being published, Mr Messer says he believes the number of letters against or in favour of a religious point of view were representative of the numbers received.

Mr Messer, on receiving Mr Rawson's original complaint to the Editor, went to considerable trouble to reassure Mr Rawson that there is no 'ban' on him or his choice of topic or content. *The Age*, as you know, receives many more letters than it is able to publish. Any letters received from Mr Rawson in the future will of course be considered for publication in the normal way.

Yours sincerely

Pamela Bone

Comment: The first thing that I want to say is that *The Age* did not reply to either of my two letters. In addition, the letter that Pamela Bone wrote to the Press Council, I had access to only because that body showed the courtesy to forward a copy to me. Mr Messer did not, as Pamela Bone states, "on receiving Mr Rawson's original complaint to the Editor [go] to considerable trouble to re-assure Mr Rawson that there is no ban on him or his choice of topics or content." He did not speak to me on the telephone until well after my "original complaint" – he rang me well after my second letter to the Editor, and after I had forwarded my complaint to the Press Council. The response, such as it was, was too late then, and in any case had no chance of appeasing me.

My error in approaching the Press Council was that I should have placed more emphasis on a heavy bias shown towards religious belief (example: 21 letters or articles supporting religious belief, four letters opposing) and anti-logging rather than my own letters not being published. I believe that my assertions of bias would be easily established by a scrutiny of the letters page and *Opinion* at that time.

Pamela Bone finished her letter to the Press Council saying that “Mr Rawson in the future will of course be considered for publishing in the normal way.” Some time ago, I e-mailed a letter (one of many over a few weeks) to *And Another Thing*, a letter that criticized a journalist for what I thought was rudeness. Let me say that the letters’ editor very plainly has a number of favourites: I am not one of them.

To: Mr John Rawson, from The Australian Press Council – 29/8/1996

Further to my letter of 22 July, attached is a copy of *The Age*’s informal response to your complaint.

You will note that there is no ‘ban’ on you and that the paper has stated that “Any letters received from Mr Rawson in the future will of course be considered for publication in the normal way”.

I hope we have been of assistance to you.

If you require the services of The Press Council in the future, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely
Deborah Kirkman
Office Manager.

To: *Good Weekend* – 3/8/1996

As it would be reasonable to expect, when Cardinal Clancy was asked to comment on what he believed, he included support for religious belief in his reply (“I believe.”) Indeed, it seems unlikely that a Christian could manage not to mention religious belief in answering such a question. And yet, of the other people “who attempted to answer life’s’ big questions,” only one could be said to have referred to religious belief.

No doubt some valid reasons for that seeming discrepancy may be adduced. Just the same, I believe that there are many more non-believers in Australia than Census figures suggest. As to what constitutes being a Christian – well, that’s another matter.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 22/9/1996

Allow me to congratulate you on Leo Schofield’s truly sensational article in your progressive newspaper.

“The bad apple” metaphor will no doubt yet again be employed to excuse the vile practices in Schofield’s church school. But if “Itchy” was a “bad apple,” how are we then to describe the leaders, over the centuries, all the way up and down the church hierarchy?

How could they possibly not have known about matters that seem to be an inherent constituent of church culture?

To: *The Sunday Age* – 20/10/1996

There can be no question that representatives of religious organizations are able to exercise an enormous influence over the decisions of governments in this country. One reason for their success is that many politicians themselves act, in effect, as representatives. Some others, even though they may be atheists or agnostics, fear a religious backlash in their electorates. So, for example, they vote against euthanasia.

Now Religion is supposed to be “good.” Being good it should follow that religious opinion about ethical matters, those relating to euthanasia, for example, should be worthy of wide acceptance. But it seems that most Australians reject the religious arguments. Are those people, then, not good?

It seems reasonable to believe that religion is not, in practice, at least, possessed of the goodness claimed for it, that it promotes hatred on a wide scale is evidenced by events in the United States, Pakistan, Ireland, the Middle East and other, perhaps all, countries. How could it be successfully argued that during, say, the last two thousand years, religious belief has brought about more good than harm? Why is it that so many people on this earth need the myths of religion to help them live their lives? JS Mill, who was not one for confusing myths with truth, wrote this in his “On Liberty:”

“In the opinion, not of bad men but of the best men, no belief which is contrary to truth can be really useful.”

To: *The Age* – 11/1/1997

The reader could perhaps infer from a comment from Paul Davies about Einstein, that the great physicist believed in a personal God. It seems that he certainly did not. In his essay, “Science and Religion,” Albert Einstein wrote these words:

“In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such powers in the hands of priests.”

To: *The Age* – 19/1/1997

Any attempt by science to prove that God exists is, Albert G Waters argues, futile. Most scientists, themselves, would probably agree with that opinion. Mr Waters then goes on to write that “God is only perceived by faith.”

In the light of those two opinions, it seems to follow that he must therefore agree with the famous non-Christian, Bertrand Russell, who once commented that “faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.”

To: *The Sunday Age* 19/5/1997

In the fifties, Bertrand Russell predicted that “In 50 years time, religion will be regarded as an ancient superstition.” An over-statement, probably, but not too far off the mark just the same. Geoff Strong may, perhaps, agree.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 25/5/1997

In their letters, Judy Crake and John Arackal both assume the existence of God. Her reference to “miracles of design,” suggests that the former supports the argument from design as proof of God’s existence. She rejects evolution.

John Arackal, one gathers, would argue that since miracles have occurred, God must therefore exist. His claim for miracles at Lourdes and Fatima, that thousands of pilgrims have been cured, and his reference to eminent physicians (who and how many?) are not convincing.

Over the years, the arguments for the existence of God have been demolished. Faith takes the place of argument. When you want badly to believe something, but you are unable to find any solid evidence for your belief, you are forced to rely on faith: “A belief in something for which there is no evidence,” as Bertrand Russell wrote.

To: *The Sunday Age* – 9/7/1996

Terry Lane (I would say “God bless him” if I were not an unbeliever) asks, “Why are the opponents of assisted suicide so hysterical?” Perhaps one reason is that they, that is, those who oppose euthanasia on religious grounds, are, to use a term of Bertrand Russell’s, conditioned by the “effect of superstitious ethics.”

The great philosopher, in his essay, “Superstitious Ethics,” made a number of comments apposite to the current debate. He wrote: “The traditional moral code stands out stark and cruel and immovable against the claims of kindly feeling.” And: “Is it really credible that a wise, omnipotent and beneficent Being finds so much pleasure in watching the slow agonies of an innocent person that he will be angry with those who shorten the ordeal?”

To: *The Sunday Age* – 28/7/1996

In his conversation with Doug Aiton, Sir Rupert Hamer said, “I don’t see how you can live without any principles.”

That’s fair enough. The trouble is that he seems also to be saying that one has to be a believer in Christianity to have imbibed those principles.

Surely he did not really mean that. In fact, I can hardly doubt that he would agree with JS Mill, who wrote: “... a large portion of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who new and rejected, the Christian faith.”

To: *the skeptic* – 21/2/1999

In 1954, I was an instructor at the School of Army Health at Healesville, Victoria. Captain George Evans was conducting a hygiene instructors’ course with me as his assistant. There were something like 12 students on the course. They were non-commissioned officers.

Healesville is situated at the base of a section of the great dividing range. On one occasion, Captain Evans and I took the students to a forested area. We were going to do some water divining. We alighted from the vehicle and moved a short distance to a creek-bed-like depression. There was no evidence of water on the earth, but you could easily believe, because of the location, that there would be water underground.

Captain Evans moved to a tree – perhaps it was a willow – and cut from it a forked stick. It was about 50 cm long, I should say. He trimmed it and then demonstrated how it should be held. The stick was to be held horizontally by the fork at about chest level, the knuckles of the hands facing the ground.

The students took it in turn to hold the stick as directed. Before I had my turn, I plainly saw that the stick began to bend, its end pointing towards the earth. I am not able to say how many of the group experienced the consequence that I have described, but I would certainly say that most did.

I have no doubt about my own physical experience on that experiment. The attraction on the stick was of such forcefulness that I felt obliged within a couple of seconds not to resist it. Indeed, I felt that I would not be able to do so.

In the light of that experience, a sceptic though I most certainly am, I had to think that the claims of water diviners must have some substance. And, by the way, talking of scepticism, perhaps most readers have not read this from Bertrand Russell from his *Sceptical Essays*.

The scepticism that I advocate, amounts only to this: (1) that when the experts are agreed, the opposite opinion cannot be held to be certain; (2) that when they are not agreed, no opinion can be regarded as certain by a non-expert; (3) that when they all hold that no sufficient grounds for a positive opinion exist, the ordinary man would do well to suspend his judgment.

Comment: The above letter was printed, but a Tom Evans was named as the contributor.

To: *The Sydney Morning Herald* – 25/3/1999

Is Kosovo a part of Yugoslavia? Is it a state of that country in a similar way to, say, the state of New Mexico's being an integral part of the USA? If the answer to those questions is in the affirmative, then let us think about what may happen if the population of New Mexico became predominately made up of, say, Mexicans. And they decided that they wanted to have the state for their own. And they raised a guerrilla army to have their way. To harass and kill United States government troops and others would be their aim. (Mind you, there may be some justification for their behaviour.)

The USA would not like that a little bit. They would let loose their armed forces and very soon the lives of the guerrillas would be in serious jeopardy indeed. Next thing, however, some Western countries would say things in support of independence for the Mexicans, and NATO would be used to threaten the USA with harsh treatment such as bombing and whatever. And foreign soldiers would enter the USA to keep the peace and very soon New Mexico would be an independent state. As for Yugoslavia, if it joined the capitalist club as all good nations do, then it would be much less likely to get into trouble with Tony Blair and others.

To: *The Australian* – 19/2/1999

John Howard and Kim Beazley certainly seem to be very intelligent men. The former is a law graduate, the latter an historian. They both believe in a supreme being, we must understand, from what they are saying about the preamble to the Constitution. On the other hand, like many others, they may say that they are believers simply because it suits their purposes to do so. One certainly is entitled to suspect John Howard's motive here.)

In the course of their professional work, they would both be intent on the discovery of the facts of the matter on which they had concentrated their attention. Myths, they would quickly identify. Unproved assertions too, for example, would be examined thoroughly. Generally, in their everyday lives, they would not be easily fooled. They would think critically about, and then accept or reject, the opinions and beliefs of those with whom they had dialogue or dealings.

But it seems that they do not look – along with a big proportion of the rest of mankind – for facts and proofs when they turn their attention to religion. Why is this so? On what grounds does religion – the Christian religion in this case – not need to be subjected to the critical thinking processes that are used by most people in the conduct of their daily lives?

Many people think that religion is somehow 'good'. That is not what history shows us. There are a number of major religions. As Bertrand Russell pointed out years ago, because the religions are at variance with one another in important respects, only one of them can be true. He, like atheists everywhere, thought that none of them is true.

Here is Russell again: 'Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.' Perhaps our two leaders should be willing to write down for us their thoughts on the existence of God? Perhaps they rely on faith? Perhaps *The Australian* may be willing to publish convincing essays from them in its columns some time?

To: *The Sydney Morning Herald* – 2/4/1999

Ethnic Albanians in the Yugoslavian province of Kosovo established a guerrilla army. Perhaps they were justified in doing so. They did this, no doubt, with the aim of freeing Kosovo from Yugoslavian rule. (What of the Serbian residents?) Who could doubt that the ethnic Albanians were encouraged and aided in this programme by outside opponents of Yugoslavia?

Guerrilla armies are raised to kill people. In this case, the intended victims would be the Serbian troops, officials and others. So deadly conflict thus became inevitable. And inevitable, too, was the killing of innocent people — what some describe about NATO bombing as collateral damage.

The bombing by NATO, as they knew it would, has meant that some Serbians have taken revenge against some people of Kosovo. Large numbers of people have fled Kosovo. It is now time for the NATO attack, which should never have begun, to be called off. The United Nations should take over. Here is one thing that that

body could do.

The NATO nations, some of them rich, although greedy and selfish, should be asked to accept as refugees all those displaced and other persons from Kosovo that wish to migrate. The conditions of migration should be most generous. In this way, many people from Kosovo would be given the opportunity to make new lives for themselves. Australia is not a member of NATO but it could lead the way.

Finally, if Serbia embraced capitalism, it would not be in so much trouble with nations like the USA.

To: *The Age* – 1/5/1999

Peter Singer seems to be encountering the kind of opposition to his Princeton appointment that Bertrand Russell encountered in 1941 on being chosen to take up an appointment as Professor of Philosophy at the College of the City of New York — an opposition inspired mainly by fervent religious belief, it must be said. At the time, Russell was teaching at the University of California.

Earl Russell (1872-1970), an atheist, preferred to be known by his given name. He is regarded by many, perhaps by most, people of learning, as the most important philosopher of this century. Russell was denied the appointment. The bigots and haters beat him in what became a celebrated case. A judge named McGeehan was the principal instrument of those bigots and haters.

It is 1999 now — it is not 1961. Perhaps, then, it is less likely that people like David Oderberg (*Opinion*, 28/4) will succeed in denying the students of Princeton, not to mention others, the opportunity to benefit, in all sorts of ways, from the brilliant intellect and high ethical values of such a man as Peter Singer.

To: *The Age* – 2/5/1999

Phillip Bliss and Graham Leonard (2/5) made at least one curious and quite erroneous assertion relating to religious belief — perhaps they were simply careless — when they wrote these words: “The number of Jewish servicemen who fought for Australia in the first and second wars was in far greater proportion than their Christian counterparts.”

No doubt there were many Australian servicemen in both wars who would describe themselves as Christian. There is no doubt, either, that there were numbers of them who would not. As for the Jewish soldiers, surely a proportion of them would not have embraced religion. Albert Einstein wrote (*What is a Jew?*), “The Jew who abandons his faith ...remains a Jew.”

To: *The Age* – 1/7/1999

Joel Vernon (*The Age* 1/7) claims for himself the standing of a student of criminology and law. No doubt Justice Kirby (*The Age* 29/6) has some knowledge of those disciplines, too. It would not be surprising, either, that a person of the Justice’s erudition would be knowledgeable in the fields of evolution and genetics. It seems unreasonable, therefore, that his opinions on genes and criminality should be so irrationally dismissed by Joel.

Like many others, Justice Kirby might well have smiled to himself, and shaken his head in disbelief, that the opinions of criminologists 100 years ago should be supported so unconditionally. Perhaps he was saddened, as well, by having the words ‘distasteful,’ ‘anachronistic’ and ‘incorrect’ so recklessly used about his thoughtful opinions. Joel has employed what Richard Dawkins, the noted English Darwinian, has called, ‘The argument from personal incredulity.’

To: *The Sunday Age* – 7/6/1999

Many will welcome enthusiastically the comments made by Anthony Burke in his excellent letter (*Sunday Age* 6/6). Many atheists will muse ruefully on the strong likelihood that a letter from one of their number making

such telling assertions about the worth of many religious beliefs might well not have been published. It is undeniable that, over the centuries, religion has been widely regarded as somehow 'good,' and so it should be shielded from criticism.

Even so, atheists might well have noticed that in more recent times *The Age* has been pleasingly progressive in the way that it deals in its pages with matters relating to religious belief. I have in mind sorties from Terry Lane, to name just one writer. Allow me to quote JS Mill:

The beliefs that we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded.

To: The *Faith* Editor, *The Age* – 4/8/1999

I am a long-time reader of, and for some time now a subscriber to, *The Age*. Some months ago I welcomed the change of approach made to the *Faith* column in the Saturday edition of the paper: readers that were not believers were given a chance to contribute to the column.

It occurred to me that I should forward to you a contribution of my own. I am an atheist. I think that it would be a bit novel, not to say courageous, on your part to publish some controversial opinions on religion from an old and ordinary Australian male person, someone quite lacking the writing brilliance of some of the contributors. I know a number of people, and I am sure that there are many others in our community that would react similarly, who would applaud your taking the decision to publish a bit of unvarnished truth about religion. I have enclosed the article.

On Religion

It is time that atheists came out. And agnostics, too, for that matter. It is time that the acceleration of the decline of religious belief was given extra impetus by continual injections of contrary opinions from those that have been too silent for too long.

This silence — not a total silence, of course — is a state that has endured over the centuries.

The reasons for its longevity are many including, especially in earlier times, the punishment by death of the unbeliever. Further, the opinion that religion is somehow 'good' has been fostered over the years. People feel that it should not be criticized. So people with strong arguments of refutation of religious belief weaken in their resolve to take a stand, having thoughts like, 'Oh, people are entitled to their opinions, so I should leave them alone.' Some consider that their success, say, in business or in politics or in some other activity, would be jeopardized were they to reveal themselves as opponents of religious belief. And so on and so on.

Mankind is not up to the task of taking seriously and practising the tenets of the Sermon on the mount. You need only to look at much of the conduct of the so-called Christian nations over the centuries — and just recently for that matter. I have in mind the events in the Balkans. And I have in mind particularly here the reaction of the church to the bombing atrocities in Yugoslavia. What reaction? you may well ask. I thought the silence of the wide Christian community, not to mention other religions, contemptible.

Religion is not only not good; it is positively harmful. On top of that, and perhaps even more to its discredit, it is not true. (And I am about to use an argument of Bertrand Russell's here.) There are a number of major religions. They differ from one another in important respects. It follows logically that not more than one of them can be true. Atheists think that not one of them is true. As for the harm that religion does, consider first this example: in many parts of the world people kill one another in its name. That is true. Little children, in many parts of that same world, are indoctrinated with opinions that cannot stand up to scrutiny. That is true. Over much of the world unwanted little children are born because there is religious objection to other than church-approved means of contraception. That is true. Criticisms of religion are so very easy to come by. Not so praise, if truth be adhered to.

What of faith? If there are religious teachings that you badly want to believe, or being a religious leader

you badly want others to believe, but there is no proof of their truth, what do you do? You rely on faith. Russell said: 'Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence.' Someone else wrote: 'Faith is believing in what you know to be false.' (When I write of truth, I am using the opinion that a statement or belief is true when it corresponds with fact. If it is a fact that a god exists, then it is a true statement to say that he does.)

Atheists and agnostics should not be afraid to proclaim their unbelief or doubts about the existence of god and other religious so-called truths. They should not be afraid to come out. The media is more receptive to the opinions of unbelievers than was earlier the case. Religion has had its opportunities for so long now to show the world that, even if it is not true, it is at least 'good.' It has failed dismally the world's peoples. It is time for it to be regarded as the ancient superstition that it is.

To: *green guide* – 3/9/1999

Those two marvellous letters about The Ark and Signs of God may reasonably be regarded as constituting a major breakthrough in the way newspapers treat religious belief. The gloves have been taken off. Let there be more of that approach.

The two authors and *The Age* deserve the thanks of many, especially, obviously, the thanks of atheists and others who seek the truth.

To: *The Age* – 11/11/1999

I am curious about why it is that a quality newspaper like *The Age* seems hardly to have heard of square brackets. Do the keyboards of your writers not have the required keys? Do the writers not know what they are for anyway? Are they considered not necessary despite the important function that they perform? I am at loss to understand why such neglect is tolerated by those that would claim high standards for the paper and who should know better. Perhaps you will be willing to explain the reasons behind this failure to me?

To: *The Age* – 12/11/1999

You refer to pedants and split infinitives. I take it that you would be prepared to write, 'She began to beautifully sing' in one of your articles? Sometimes splitting an infinitive has an ugly effect. In those cases surely it is best not to split them. Perhaps you agree. In the main, people that split them do not know what an infinitive is anyway, I believe.

To: The Editor, *the skeptic* – 20/12/1999

In the editorial note on page 35 there are four quotes. Within three of the quotes there are one or more parentheses in brackets. Who it was that wrote the words within the brackets is unclear, except that it does seem very likely that they were your words at least in the first quote. Does your keyboard not have keys for square brackets? Do you not know what they are for? Perhaps you simply like to puzzle your readers?

As for "If any gentle reader thinks they would like..." well, it used to be the case that a singular subject takes a singular verb, although I agree that replacing "they" with "he or she" in the sentence does seem a bit silly.

Apart from ending a sentence with a preposition, I hope that I have not made too many grammatical errors myself in this brief letter. I very much enjoy reading the skeptic, despite at times struggling to grasp, because I am not brainy enough, the full content of some articles.

Your journal is so important. May it grow and grow in importance.

To: The Editor, *the skeptic* – 6/1/2000

I just now happened to re-read an e-mail I sent to you last month. I must be one of Hawkie's 'silly old buggers.'

First thing, I used 'sceptic' instead of 'skeptic' in your address. Then, in the second paragraph, I mentioned 'singular verb' when that was not the point at all; it was the plural pronoun 'they' that I should have referred to. My apologies.

To: *The Age* – 4/1/2000

It was nice to hear that God was so eager to ensure that Arthur Comer and his wife should have a happy married life. (I have noticed, though, that He does not manage always to do a good job in that area of human relationships.) God was good to me in that way, too. He arranged for the USA to drop an atom bomb on Hiroshima. Peace was declared and I met my dear wife of 53 years during celebrations in the streets of Brisbane. You see, He was kind to me even though I am an atheist.

To: *The Age* – 11/1/2000

Elaine Canty (*The Age* 11/1) is yet another visiting writer whose opinions of some very important aspects of Cuban society are admirable.

The USA, with some help from some of its friends, including Australia, has sought to destroy that society. Put simply, you can't have a bunch of commies creating a society like that, especially in our part of the world. Who knows, others may want to follow. The Monroe doctrine must be enforced.

To: *The Age* – 22/2/2000

Bob Hogg's article (Opinion 23/2) was interesting: it seems as though, in recent times, his turn to the right was only an incline.

It is curious, though, that on two occasions he constructed sentences that would agree grammatically with this one: "Kim Beazley and John Howard is good friends." Most writers use a plural verb after two singular subjects.

Split infinitives come readily to him: "to actually assist" and "to generously compensate." Does it matter? Surely it is best to avoid them when they sound ugly? Try this one (not Bob's): "She began to beautifully sing."

To: Bob Hogg, *The Age* – 24/2/2000

I decided that I should e-mail you a copy of a (failed) letter of mine to *The Age* a couple of days ago.

Bob Hogg's article (Opinion 22/2) was interesting: it seems as though, in recent times, his turn to the right was only an incline.

It is curious, though, that on two occasions he constructed sentences that would agree grammatically with this one: "Kim Beazley and John Howard is good friends." Most writers use a plural verb after two singular subjects.

Split infinitives come readily to him: "to actually assist" and "to generously compensate." Does it matter? Surely it is best to avoid them when they sound ugly? Try this one (not Bob's): "She began to beautifully sing." Good luck with your grammar.

To: *The Age* – 27/2/2000

It is not easy, the record shows, for those that are persuaded to believe the myths of religion, to accept Darwinian truths; even though Charles Darwin destroyed much of the basis of religious belief. Neil Mitchison (27/2) believes that the Darwinian theory (as Neil puts it) should be dumped.

Plainly, Neil belongs in the group that Richard Dawkins, the famous Darwinian, has labeled as being affected by the 'personal incredulity factor.' The group cannot believe that Darwin got it right, in which case, it must follow, he got it wrong.

There is some argument among the relevant experts about some aspects of the process of evolution, but those same experts agree on one thing: evolution is not a theory; it is a fact of existence.

Of course, if most of the finest intellects on this earth are wrong, and God did indeed perform all the functions of evolution, then since he is both omnipotent and omniscient, he must carry all the blame for all the horrid things that happen on this planet and elsewhere.

To: *The Age* – 1/3/2000

Bravo! *The Age*. Bravo! Philip Ingamells. The latter for his incisive attack on deviant behaviour as practised in the Catholic church. The former for slowly, but it seems surely, moving away from a centuries-old condition: it is best, and sensible, for many reasons, not to criticize religion.

Advocates of Christian religious belief, adherents like Bishop Pell, Muriel Porter, David Powys, Rowan Forster and many others, get such a good go in the media. Non-believers should be given comparable space. The opinions of those who, for very good reasons, believe religion to be both untrue and enormously harmful (simply look around the world) should be available for scrutiny in a fair contest.

To: *The Age* – 13/3/2000

Rob Benson, being a medical practitioner, perhaps believes that he knows that he was not hallucinating that night in the desert when he felt special, indomitable, invulnerable, wildly euphoric and very close to God.

Funny that believers have these experiences, whereas most of us never do; except perhaps when we have drunk too much, or smoked too much pot, or our team has won the premiership cup, or whatever.

To: *The Age* – 5/5/2000

It is hardly surprising, given their impregnability, that Justice Kirby's opinions on homosexuality (Opinion 2/5) have been received, it seems so far, at least, in silence by those that normally are quick to condemn what they with shallow and unscientific reasoning proclaim as unnatural sexual behaviour. What can they say? His arguments are virtually unanswerable.

May his contribution to the question of homosexuality among humankind stand as a glittering model of intellectual honesty. A model of deep sincerity, of clarity of thought, a model of the sort of kindness and intelligence that human society has in far too small quantities.

To: *The Age* – 15/5/2000

May Justice Kirby's recent contribution (Opinion 2/5) to the question of homosexuality among humankind stand as a glittering model of intellectual honesty. A model of deep sincerity, of clarity of thought. A model of the kind of kindness and intelligence that human society has in far too small quantities.

To: *The Age* – 20/5/2000

Recently, an editorial writer from *The Age* expressed the notion that Mr Joe Gutnick's principles should be respected - presumably his religious principles. The writer seemed to be saying that an individual's religious beliefs should not be questioned. I should make the point, just the same, that *The Age*, in recent times, has been admirably progressive in this area.)

Why should religious belief be protected from criticism? I am an atheist. People are welcome to criticize my non-belief. Why do believers not welcome criticism? I'll tell you why - they are quite lacking in counter arguments.

To: Mr Ross Gittins, – 24/5/00

Dear Mr Gittins

I find your articles very helpful in the task of trying to follow the economic picture. Thank you for them. I turn now to your '...anyone in their right mind...' (I am an old bloke, and a bit of a pedant.) Here we have a conflict of number with 'anyone' and 'their.' No doubt you realize that. Could I ask, do you do that to avoid using 'his' and 'her?' After all, you are saving only one letter.

Finally, it is good to read a journalist that does not reject the conjunction 'that.'

**Kind regards
John R**

To: John Rawson, from Ross Gittins, *The Age* – 6/5/00

Dear John

Yours was the friendliest letter I've had from a pedant in a long time. I use the ungrammatical 'their' to accommodate my feminist readers (not to mention feminist sub-editors - and you notice they let it through) and because 'his or her' is cumbersome and tiresome. I'm afraid this in a case where usage is changing to meet the changing attitudes of our times.

Ross

To: Mr Bruce Wolpe, *The Age* – 9/5/00

Dear Mr Wolpe

I liked your piece on Dick Morris. But how come you gave a plural verb to a singular subject: 'The last thing we need are...?'

Reply
sloppy writing and editing my apologies to you glad you liked the rest of the piece

kind regards.

To: Felicity Bloch, *The Age* – 24/5/00

Dear Felicity Bloch

I thought that your article on Joe Gutnick was first class. One reason, I believe, for the matter's being 'strangely muted,' is that it has to do with religion. An editorial writer in *The Age*, for example, recently said that Joe's

principles should be respected. His religious principles, no doubt.

I am an atheist. I would not want anyone to believe that I am not. I wish that you had made some reference to your own beliefs. Many people seem to think that Jewish people are all religious. Comment: Bertrand Russell wrote somewhere that the Russian Revolution was organized by American-educated Jews.

Kind regards

From Felicity Bloch, *The Age* – 30/5/2000

Dear John Rawson

Thank you. I appreciate your feedback.

**Regards
Felicity Bloch**

To: *The Age* – 27/8/2000

I am sending this to *feedback* rather than to the letters' page because, the record shows, I am in bad favour with *The Age* .letters' page.

I write about the two pathetic articles in *The Age* today, Saturday 26/8, one by David Powys, the other by Rowan Forster.

Powys, in addition to the highly improbable things that he wrote about, claims that religion does not get a fair go in *The Age*. (If he had complained that atheists do not get a fair go, he would have been right.) For years, I have noted his success; he has been treated over-generously by far by the letters' page and Opinion. During a short period in 1996, he and others with similarly strange opinions, were printed 21 times by the then letters' editor. *The Age*, displaying a reprehensible bias towards the support of religious belief, managed to print just four letters in opposition, two of the letters being from one contributor, and another letter was of *Access* length only.

The *Faith* column is another sop to the religionists. Admittedly, it sometimes prints an atheist's view of things. (Isn't Dick Gross able to live a fulfilling life without the aid of mythology?) As for Rowan Forster and his out-pourings this week ...

These people go on and on about god and Jesus Christ and resurrection and other fairy tales. They seem never to come out and say why it is that they believe that there is a god, or provide evidence for his existence, or for the existence of Jesus Christ. Which argument for the existence of god does Powys or Forster support? The reason that they don't provide us with arguments for the existence of god is that they are unable to provide one that would stand up to scrutiny.

Kant and others destroyed the arguments for the existence of god many years ago. Russell has written that it is extremely doubtful that Jesus Christ ever existed. But religionists are not into doubting things that they badly want to believe, things that many of them were taught in their infancy, or things that they were indoctrinated with later. Best for them not to mention any possibility of error in their beliefs.

A reply to the preceding letter

John

Thank you for your message.

I'm glad that *The Age* prints contributions from diverse sources, and sorry that you are not.

It appears to me that you missed the main point of my piece - it had to do with inaccurate reporting of Abp Carey. I believe that *The Age* printed the article believing that I had a valid point. Let's agree to differ

David.

To: *Saturday Extra* – 19/8/2000

I am an *Age* subscriber, and I have been reading the paper for at least 50 years. I do quite a bit of writing and I wonder whether the piece I have enclosed may be thought to be suitable for *Something Personal*.

I have much to do in the way of writing just now, and I do not have a great deal of time left. I should be so pleased if you could advise me soon of your decision. I am not, by the way, seeking any payment.

The Return Of The Big Donker

It was a tender, a touching moment. For a few giddy seconds there was a powerful tugging at his sensibilities. A tugging that brought the years back, a tear to his eye, and a catch to his voice as he said to his son, "I borrowed this from you 50 years ago." It was hard to be sure, but his son's demeanor gave the impression that he, too, was stirred emotionally by the poignancy of the moment. He smiled in a kind of delight and said, "You know, I can remember finding it that day at Pucka."

It was a tool that the father was returning to his son. A very useful tool. It was made of steel and was about 45 cm long. One end was fashioned in the manner of the tip of a crowbar. Exerting leverage was its main function. The other end, hook-like, curved 180 degrees, was slotted so that it was ideal for dragging out even the longest nails or other fasteners. Long, long ago, for forgotten reasons, they had begun to refer to it as "the big donker." Yes, long ago – 50 years is a long time in the lives of people, most would agree.

It was a small weatherboard house in a not unfashionable suburb of Melbourne, The end of World War Two saw shortages of many things in Australia – including rental properties. And they did not have a house – they had a room and the use of a kitchen (and, of course, the laundry and toilet .) The landlady was a kind person, living with her being her two young daughters and a de-facto partner. As for money to pay the rental (25 shillings and sixpence a week), money to provide for the family, well, there was regular money but there was not much of it.

The room, it was formerly a lounge room, was hardly spacious. The front door led on to a small verandah. (Later on, the landlady had it boarded up, a window inserted, and it became the bedroom for the wife's mother who came from Brisbane to live with them.) The double bed had a lumpy mattress. There was a fireplace in which pleasant fires could be lit. There was only one power point, and the husband – dangerously ignorant of the finer points of such things – would connect a small electric stove to a light plug. The house did not burn down.

He arrived at his first 'home' with his mother in a Yellow Cab early in June 1947. It was a difficult birth, and both his mother and he suffered much pain. The first few months of his newly-created life he spent mainly in a bassinet. And then he moved into a second-hand cot, the only light in the room fitted with a crudely-made shade that kept the light from falling upon him as he slept. Is there anything more beautiful to look upon, especially if the lighting is kind, than a sleeping child? He is just beautiful, the parents agreed, time and again. And so he began to grow up, to find his way along the path that leads to eternity.

Not long before Christmas in 1949, well before he turned three, the quartet from Caulfield, (his grand-mother went along too) moved to the military camp at Puckapunyal, north of Melbourne. His new residence was an army 'emergency' married quarter. It had much more space than his one room but it was, as dwellings go, crude indeed. It was of corrugated iron and unlined. There was a huge black wood-burning stove, and there were several showers and toilets. It had been part of the adjacent hospital – the venereal diseases treatment section. It was soon to be demol-

ished as were several other huts close by.

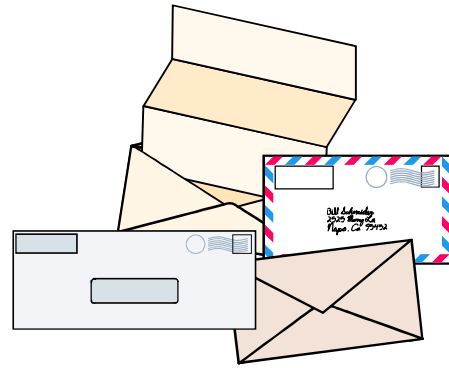
Before long, in the late summer of 1950, he moved again. He would be three in May. The family moved to another corrugated iron hut not far away. It was much smaller but it had been fitted out as a 'temporary' married quarter. There were two bedrooms. It even had a hot-water service and an electric stove. There were no fences. He had room now to move, but was never far from a watchful eye.

The workmen had demolished the several huts across the road and had departed the area. The big donker lay on the ground where children played. One day he came home with it. It was a very useful tool. The father decided not to search for its owner. The father kept it. And one day, as has been related, in the year 2000, he gave the big donker back to Richard, his son of 53 years.

Comment: The piece was not published.

Part Two

Brief Letters to *The Age*



Precedent – 1980

A cynic may well aver that Mr Hayden's approach to the wealth tax should follow established precedents. He should lie, make promises and break promises when it suits him, knowing a significant proportion of Australian voters is gullible and not concerned with a need for integrity in the nation's leaders.

Cricket character — 1980

It is disturbing to consider the possibility that the disgusting attitude and behaviour of an alarmingly high proportion of Australian cricket goers may reflect true Australian character.

Vultures — 8/4/80

No wonder the vultures are hovering over TAA. It carries more passengers, one reads, and has a better safety record, one suspects, than its rival.

Rich Proof — 22/10/80

If proof were needed that conservative governments represented the rich and not the poor, then the post-election frenzied stock exchange activity must go a long way towards providing it. Misguided ordinary Australians vote against their own interests to keep rich men's representatives in power.

Who's to blame? — 1980

"Who do we blame for time lost at parties?" reads the *Access Age* heading on Monday. "...who he married three weeks ago" writes Richard Yallop, in a tennis article also on Monday. Whom are readers to blame: the writers, the printers or a sloppy editorial policy?

1982

Poor Poland! As in most other countries in which religion has a strong influence, for example in Iran, Ireland, India, the South American countries, the standard of living is low and the common people experience much misery.

1982

One supposes that *The Age* has balance in mind in regularly printing the different viewpoints of Claude Forell and Michael Barnard. Balance may be one of the aims, but that aim is certainly not achieved. After all, Claude Forell manifestly does not write in support of the extreme left.

Poland's problem — 25/1/82

Despite a dearth of publicity, it is undeniable that the deadly conflict between Communism and Catholicism lies at the very core of Poland's huge problem. Separation of Church and State, as we in Australia and many other places know it, evidently does not apply there. Two relentless doctrines compete for power and meanwhile the people suffer.

Collective thought —1/3/82

June Borbidge (23/2) states that "couple" is a collective noun. Some would disagree, arguing that a noun meaning, for example, two, should not be so classified. In any event, a collective noun does not necessarily take a singular verb unless it is thought of as a single unit.

Sad Support — 5/3/82

Mr Fraser, much to his credit, has been consistent in his opposition to apartheid. It must sadden him at times knowing that many of his supporters, like their counterparts in South Africa, either support it, condone it, or make excuses for it.

February 83

Many of those Australians that believe in democracy and who saw democracy betrayed so scandalously in 1975, are unlikely to accept a repeat of that performance as threatened by Mr Fraser and, more recently, by Mr Anthony. Perhaps the new parliament house should contain the features of a fortress.

Wrong Side – 15/2/83

Mr Bonner is a member of an underprivileged section of Australian society, yet he chose to join forces with his people's oppressors. Some other ordinary Australians do a similar thing with their votes at election time.

17/2/83

Claude Forell's explanation of Mr Fraser's electoral scheming is dismayingly convincing. It follows, surely, that to vote for the Fraser Government is to condone, as Mr Nigel Jackson obviously does, the frightfully dishonest and unprincipled behaviour of an individual who is clearly not worthy of holding high office in our country.

8/6/83

Senator Chipp should have someone proof read his next letter to *The Age*. Perhaps then such an elementary error of grammar as is contained in " Mr Forell goes on to accuse two of my colleagues and I" would be corrected before publication.

Sensible System — 8/6/83

Swedes allocate an identity number to each citizen but perhaps such a system would be too rational and sensible for us to adopt. Furthermore, it may mean the end, for example, of tax dodging. As certain members of the Senate have recently shown, that would never do.

9/10/84

Bob Hawke has rejected alcohol. That required will power. John Larkin reports (*Age* 5/10) that Andrew Pea-

cock smokes but in private. Mr Peacock is an intelligent man so he knows that it is foolish to smoke. It seems to follow, therefore, that he lacks will power.

12/10/84

One supposes that the weather forecasters do their very best to predict weather conditions accurately. That they are often wrong points up the difficulty of their task. Those readers making sneering comments about their efforts should apply more reason to their thinking on the matter.

Total rejection — 25/8/84

Brian Lang (23/8), evidently believes that to reject or question religious faith is also to reject Christian values. In addition, he seems also to believe that not only atheists and agnostics, but all members of society, reject Christian values. Whew.

Not so rugged — 11/9/84

Surely it is time that journalists had the courage to use the term vicious rather than rugged to describe those footballers whose style of play it is deliberately to fell opponents with forearms, fists or elbows. That the Press confers on them a kind of hero-worship is sickening.

8/1/85

In his recent letter to *The Age*, and in signed remarks that introduced an advertisement in the newspaper that same day, Mr Kennett's use of the English language was deplorable. It is surely reasonable to question the leadership eligibility of an aspirant so poorly equipped in written communication skills.

Right again — 12/3/85

Labor is a party of the left, some members being more left than others, the Socialist Left. Conservatives form parties of the right, and it follows that some members must be more right than others, the fascist right, perhaps. Who are they? Over to you Michael Barnard.

17/5/85

If, in the coming months, in South Africa, frustrated blacks attack cricketers whom they regard as supporters of those who oppress their people, many Australians, including numbers of those who try to justify the United States invasion of Vietnam, will say, "Oh, I'm against violence." What do they expect?

18/5/85

In an imaginary state, its citizens all being atheists, one can imagine the Right to Lifers having a reverse philosophy on abortion.

Get it right — 3/6/85

If scores of Melbourne's journalists do know the name of their city's principal airport and yet call it Tullamarine, the reader or listener is entitled to wonder why. If they cannot get a simple thing like that right, how much credibility do they warrant?

11/8/85

Paul Ballantyne's simplistic opinions would be laughable, except that it is voters like him that keep the representatives of other greedy money hungry men in power in this country.

22/8/85

Probably Ron and Irene Batagol are correct in claiming that the efficiency of rail services was a big issue in the recent Nunawading election. — mainly with swinging voters, no doubt. Not for swinging voters the examination of real issues or any real commitment other than to self-interest.

2/11/85

If, on considering Mr Braybrooke's ' I am tired of seeing people like me...' we substitute 'myself' ' for 'me' (Ray Hicks 1/11), we are employing a reflexive pronoun inappropriately. Some people (including Bob Hawke) do this often, being in doubt about the correct usage of 'I' and 'me.'

Stairway to the top — 4/3/86

If, as some claim, Paul Keating wants badly to be Prime Minister, he should defect to the Liberal Party. His undoubted talents, his love affair with capitalism and the mediocrity of his new colleagues, should assist him fairly quickly to replace the hapless Howard. Then only time would tell.

Selfishness — 12/3/86

What has been described as "The ugly face of capitalism" is surely exemplified by the grasping selfishness of the Australian medical profession. Strongly supported by John Howard and his party, doctors' continuing display of greed lowers even further the community's perception of their character.

5/5/86

It is a sad and undeniable fact of human experience that many will be disappointed that the Soviet Union has managed to quench the nuclear fire. Consider, for example, the huge reservoir of hatred in the bible belt of the USA.

15/5/86

As ardent supporters of conservative governments, whose role includes only marginally the succoring of the poor, most farmers have long played a part in the rejection of the needs of the underprivileged in Australia. Now, as the old saying goes, their chickens are coming home to roost.

Judges and politics — 9/5/86

Does Peter Ferwerda seriously believe that when the Government appoints judges who are not members of Parliament or members of a political party, it is punctilious in paying no regard to the political views of any of those whom it appoints? Or does he think that judges do not have political preferences?

Strange allies — 6/6/86

Those Australians genuinely concerned about civil liberties must flinch at the thought of being allies of those who oppose the introduction of the ID card on grounds of pure self-interest. What would be the proportion of the former to the latter?

Unloved neighbours – 11/6/86

Arthur Comer demands that wearers of certain T shirts in Darwin be jailed, and that they be made to wear suitably emblazoned shirts proclaiming their intentions to love their neighbour. The tone and content of his letter suggest that he certainly does not love the offenders. Shouldn't he practise what he preaches?

18/6/86

The South African Ambassador in Canberra must smile to himself, and think that the Australian media is rather less than accurate, when they refer to one of his office staff as an envoy or diplomat.

27/6/86

Why in Brian Lang's view is it codswallop for Paul Robinson to write of beatings at school for Norm Gallagher, when Mr Lang agrees that he copped his share too? He is entitled to defend such a system. His impression, however, that results were far better in his case than in Norm's, throws doubt on the efficiency of the system, though, surely.

18/7/86

The Australian statistician, I suppose, checked the draft front cover page of his Census 86, in which case I wonder why he allowed "Who to include on your form" to stand. Perhaps he decided to adopt the popular approach towards the tricky who/whom choice: "whom" is fast becoming a non-word.

Stridency — 30/7/86

Circumstances certainly do at times place individuals in the most contradictory, not to say hypocritical, positions. John Howard, largely a failure as Federal Treasurer, compelled by (among other things) his strong wish to be Prime Minister, almost endlessly offends our ears with strident assertions of failed government economic policies.

4/8/86

The Age should have put on the front page (not page 5) in large headlines, the contemptible comments from that odious Queensland politician about the gravely ill Justice Murphy. Perhaps then even some of the former's admirers would have become convinced of his glaring character defects.

Status in doubt — 7/8/86

Constance E. Little's self-appointed status as an intellectual must now be in some doubt. Not so much because she does not like Picasso, but because, like many others, she has no doubt that her own judgement in the matter is wholly correct.

4/9/86

Years ago, political theorist, Harold Laski, wrote that "Fascism is the outcome of capitalism in decay. Wherever Fascism has been successful it has been built upon a protest by the business interests against the increased demands of the workers." Who then is more likely to support Fascism? Mr Hawke or Mr Brown?

22/9/86

Some take the view that those innocent, ordinary Parisians slain and mutilated by terrorists' bombs recently are,

because of certain of their government's actions, hardly worthy of sympathy. Presumably, then, some would have been similarly unsympathetic had General Pinochet been assassinated a week or two ago.

6/10/86

On occasions, inadvertently, no doubt, *Access* publishes twice the same letter from one of the readers. Perhaps this could be done with Rod Matthews' most recent letter, suitably emended, however, so that we may know for sure what he is talking about.

20/10/86

John Halfpenny needs to be careful. Should he continue to speak out against those in our society that are both privileged and parasitical, and if, too, he shows concern for the underprivileged, people will start calling him a communist. Certainly he won't be invited to join the new right.

3/11/86

In writing (*The Age* 3/11) that "Seven women committed suicide by self-immolation," Simon Holberton contributed to a long series of journalistic errors involving the meaning of the word "Immolation." Self-immolation means self-sacrifice. The use of fire as the means is nowhere even implied in the meaning.

13/3/87

It would be pleasing if every now and then ABC announcers would take the trouble to avoid splitting infinitives. Sometimes the result offends the ears (as in "He began beautifully to hit the ball"), this being, perhaps, the main reason for objecting to the practice.

Democracy is preferable – 2/5/87

Despite its flaws, most Australians and New Zealanders would agree that democracy as we (and Fijians until recently) know it is far preferable to a military dictatorship. We and the New Zealanders should make it absolutely plain to Fiji's military dictator that we believe that some wars are just wars.

Joh's admirer — 17/6/87

Over the years, when Sir Joh's supporters have sought to praise him, many of them (with good reason, it must be said) could offer little more than something like, "Oh, he says what he means" or, "He does what he says he will do." What do those admirers say now?

19/6/87

If those other two (rather less than quality) Melbourne newspapers have now become biased towards Labor, it is certainly for the first time. Over the years their anti-Labor bias has been so unfair, sometimes venomous, indeed, that it is rather surprising that any thinking Labor voter would stoop to read them.

22/6/87

Does Mr Howard really believe — Max Walsh and Ken Davidson obviously do not — that a government led by him will be able to implement his taxation policies? If he does not, then Bob Hawke's deception about an election date is of comparatively minor importance.

Labor capitalism — 5/8/87

It may be that Bob Hawke's government is controlling Australia's economy with reasonable confidence. But surely he must realize that many Labor supporters that reject capitalism as an economic system, simply won't accept capitalists being invited to buy any of those institutions that belong to the people.

19/8/87

Not so long ago, in other parts of the world, the execution of children was fairly commonplace. Had those favouring capital punishment today lived their lives in one of those places in those times, some, at least, would have supported that barbaric practice. Proponents of capital punishment should pause and think a while.

7/9/87

Bob Hawke advocates consensus but we often see the combative side of him, too. Imagine the stupendous arguments that he, a Labor Prime Minister, must inevitably have with people like Kerry Packer and Peter Abeles. They, after all, bitterly oppose much of what he stands for. Pardon? I must be joking, did you say?

Racists' concern— 3/10/87

Probably it is because the destruction of democracy in Fiji affects mostly black people that many Australians are not concerned. Our racists seem mostly to support the descendants of the original inhabitants. On South Africa, of course, the racists have a rather different attitude.

Don't sell airline — 13/10/87

If Bob Hawke and his government, after what they said at election time, sell Australian Airlines, what are we to think? Either they lied then or they were later persuaded (by whom?) to change their minds. The airline belongs to Australians. It must remain theirs. Lead the way, John Halfpenny.

Different democrats — 27/11/87

Bob Hawke has, with some stealth it may reasonably be argued, dropped the pretense of being a traditional Labor leader. We are entitled to know, too, the names of those in his ministry who, like him, are not democratic socialists but social democrats. Where, for instance, does the treasurer stand?

14/3/88

It is comforting to have Bryan Puls' assurance that a .22 rifle would not be used either to massacre people or as a weapon in other situations of violence. Or was that not what he meant?

Hampered leaders — 9/11/88

The United States, like the Soviet Union, needs massive change. The paradox is that in that great democracy there is virtually no chance that a president could effect significant changes for the better, even if he wanted to. If he wanted to, he would almost certainly be disposed of — one way or another.

7/12/88

One would hope that at least some of Frank Knopfelmacher's right-wing admirers cringed when he made that chilling comment about the bombing of Dresden. What, for example, does Mr Santamaria think about it? Even Genghis Khan might have shuddered had he been at the dinner.

19/12/88

Did Fred Menzies view the same ABC programme on the Hoddle Street massacre as the rest of us? When, for example, was Julian Knight shown ranting and raving? Such inaccurate assertions serve to destroy credibility, throwing serious doubt on the worth of the entire criticism.

22/12/88

One suspects that many of those people that are loud in their condemnation of abortion, would be much less concerned were it intended that the children be raised as atheists or communists or both.

28/12/88

I suspect that Maclaren Gordon well knows that the Pope would never condone the use of condoms, even to help combat AIDs. It is one measure of the failure of the church that such taboos, born of ignorance and superstition, are accorded more value than thousands and thousands of lives.

1988

If some Fascists would not join a group assembled to promote and retain the advantages of the privileged economic classes in Australia, who would? How can Mr Powell's central comment on the HR Nicholl's society be denied?

1988

One can just imagine Mr Ruxton glowing with (misplaced) pride over the weekend, *The Age* having published another of his letters. Oh well, one function of a quality newspaper is to present all kinds of opinions to its readers — even abusive, immature opinions expressed in puerile English.

2/2/89

One can just imagine biologists everywhere (in Christendom, at least) blushing in shame upon reading Arthur Comer's letter. To think, so their thoughts may go, that our belief in the fact of evolution is really a cover for our engaging in immorality. Perhaps genetic defects are our problem?

20/2/89

It is not only in Iran that religious fanatics promote human misery and death: there are many such fanatics throughout the world. How lucky we are to have an atheist as our head of state!

14/3/89

Since Bob Hawke and Paul Keating (and who else in cabinet?) are Social Democrats, not Democratic Socialists, it should be no surprise that they want to sell off the people's property. Let the Labor Party decide on privatization and it should be no surprise when many Democratic Socialists begin voting informally.

10/7/89

Mr Namaluis' declaration that he would support legislation to bring back capital punishment in Papua New Guinea because "People were used to it in their own tribal settings," sounds uncivilized, to say the least. He would have plenty of supporters in Australia.

14/9/89

It seems that a majority of Australians reject the grasping selfishness of the pilots, and yet the letters printed in *Access Age* number heavily in their favour. Of course, it is a good opportunity, too, for concentrated denigration of Bob Hawke, particularly from a very much favoured contributor.

21/1/91

Bob Hawke's speech writer made something of a mess of the "we shall" section of his speech to parliament. The writer seems to believe that "we shall" implies firmness of intention. It does not. Used as it was in the first person, "shall" denotes simple futurity. "We will" was required.

A different story — 24/1/91

The resolution in the Parliament about Australia's Gulf commitment would almost certainly have fallen far short of being passed if all those that supported it were required immediately to go to the Gulf as participants in the war. The members, of course, are no more hypocritical than most of the rest of us.

29/1/91

People like Gerard Henderson and Michael Barnard deserve a chance to do their bit in the Gulf war despite their ages. The Defence Force should have special units for such people — mine clearing platoons or suicide squads, perhaps. Even Billy Graham may decide to enlist — if he can get a clearance from the White House.

1/2/91

Belief in a supreme being and in immortality is, as Bertrand Russell noted, a quite fundamental tenet of Christian belief. Can that opinion be disputed? Experience shows, however, that many so-called Christians are not able to accept both, or even one, of those things. So there was no chance that the Census could be accurate.

6/2/91

The ABC is accused of bias because three people that oppose the Gulf war were interviewed on Romana Koval's program the day after the war began. No doubt Gerard Henderson would also have made a fuss had three supporters of the war been on the program that day. Not likely!

Singular writing — 13/5/91

"What we need is brains and courage." Peter Smark, it is not surprising to note, realizes that a singular subject ("what we need") requires a singular verb. Most would have used "are."

18/5/91

If, as Robyn Dixon reported, Mr Kennett intends to privatize Tullamarine Airport, his opponents have at least one thing to be thankful for: he did not make any threats about Melbourne Airport's future. Perhaps he does not know the name of our principal airport?

24/5/91

The big question is this: will Mr Kennett be proven correct in his assumption that the citizens of Victoria are so lacking in moral soundness that they will endorse his shameful threats by voting his (equally culpable?) party into power?

Weakening with age — 18/6/91

Bob Hawke usually quick to reject irrationality in arguments. It is odd that he, an agnostic, should view so charitably the irrationality contained in the religious views of the Jawoyn. Is he, himself, in his final years, moving towards an acceptance of religious beliefs? Some weaken in that way.

11/7/91

Last weekend. Faulty power line from street pole. SEC replaced it — no charge. Burst water pipe from main to meter. Board of Works initially helpful then issued urgent notice (using twisted syntax) to householder: engage a plumber to effect repairs or “Water supply may be shut off without further notice.” Anyone surprised?

20/10/91

Brian Howe and John Howard have both told Doug Aiton (reported in the *Sunday Age*) that they are Christians. Could it be that they both use the word rather loosely? Do both of them really believe in a supreme being and in immortality?

28/11/91

No doubt there will come a time when “Thanks for your time” will not be almost the standard conclusion of radio and TV interviews on the ABC.

20/2/92

Bryan Harris’ opinions, as they have been expressed in *Access Age* over the years, give the firm impression that there are unlikely to be any circumstances in which he would condone abortion. Is this fair comment?

1992

Vitali Vitaliev in writing “Everyone knows everyone else by his first name” and “Despite his having to leave school, ” shows that he probably learned English grammar thoroughly. The ugly split infinitive (“to derogatorily call”) was not a slip of his but of someone he quoted. Doubtless, he knows about infinitives.

Hypocritical critics — 22/2/92

Bob Hawke supports capitalism not socialism. Nearly all Australians do, too: they vote for capitalism election after election. Why, then, should he not do what nearly everyone else would do if given the chance — make lots of money? Most of his critics are not only his inferiors but hypocrites.

Representing the privileged — 4/3/92

John Hewson speaks of his lowly beginnings, the implication being, one gathers, that he understands, has sympathy for and wants to help, ordinary people. A conservative politician, his primary role, put simply, is to represent the privileged. If, in that process, there should be some spin-offs for ordinary Australians, well, that’s all right.

11/3/92

Paul Keating denies John Hewson’s accusation that he is splitting the nation. He cannot deny, however, that when he says ‘to not accelerate’ and ‘to not try’ he is splitting infinitives. Perhaps he picked up the habit from the ABC? (Another thing: does he call Melbourne airport Tullamarine airport?)

A lack of nous — 25/3/92

The latest opinion poll results should surprise no one. If John Hewson dropped the GST and declared himself a republican, his chances of winning the next election would improve markedly. His poor assessment of the likely reaction of the Australian people to his tax says little for his political nous.

Exclamatory policy — 1/4/92

John Hewson and Tim Fischer in their Fightback document manage, surely, to insult many of its readers. What makes them think that their inappropriate, inconsistent and childish use of dozens of exclamation marks would serve to influence the opinions of mature persons?

Delights of capitalism — 7/5/92

“The penultimate delights of multiculturalism beaming into our sitting rooms from Los Angeles”—this from Frank Knopfelmacher. He could at least have mentioned the “delights of US style capitalism” surely being at least a factor in the disintegration of US society.

Keeping the pews filled — 22/5/92

Jobs, jobs, jobs. The Catholic church cares about jobs, as the Archbishop of Canterbury surely realizes. Indeed, what would happen to many of the jobs (not to mention the power) of the hierarchy of any church were the numbers of its adherents reduced by considerations of world over-population?

29/5/92

It is surprising, surely, that the circulation figures of that other Melbourne daily paper have not fallen much more dramatically. One wonders why Labor supporters would ever buy it regularly. In recent times its efforts to remove the State Labor Government have become even more assiduous.

Ban is reasonable — 25/6/92

Geoffrey Barker’s opinions about homosexuality and the Australian Defence Force go to the heart of the matter. The culture of the defence forces being what it is, it seems reasonable that the ban on open or revealed homosexuals serving in the army, navy or air force, be maintained.

Who dares to point a finger? — 11/7/92

Governments are blamed for high unemployment though history has shown that, sporadically, it is integral to the system that we choose to have. Why won’t someone blame the system for a change? Perhaps potential critics are afraid of being called democratic socialists or something nastier.

13/7/92

Some of us, though we support women’s rights, reject religion. Given undue media prominence, *The Anglican church* priesthood controversy has become boring indeed. Will all the fuss soon be over?

An obtuse lot — 19/10/92

John Hewson recently, on ABC TV, told Paul Lyneham that , although Lyneham and other intelligent people at the ABC may regard the conservatives present TV attacks on Paul Keating as childish, most (presumably unintelligent) Australians would not so regard them. Is he right? Are most of us as obtuse as he judges us to be?

19/10/92

One is entitled to be sceptical about Peter Coghlan's opinion on the sanctity of life. Years ago, for example, when Hanoi was being savagely bombed, one heard little or nothing in protest from people with beliefs closely similar to his. There were, of course, lots of communists in Hanoi.

21/10/92

The Australian working class should have no doubt now that the alternative government holds them in contempt. John Hewson recently expressed his contempt for their intelligence on television. John Howard obviously believes that they are foolish enough to accept his industrial relations policies. Workers of Australia, keep them out of government.

People power remains — 16/11/92

Events in recent years in the Philippines and in eastern Europe, have demonstrated this: give enough people enough reason to believe that social injustice has gone too far, and they may well take to the streets, in huge numbers, reducing governments to near impotence. Could it happen in Victoria?

26/11/92

The United States has been trying for decades to destroy the Cuban nation, the means including a blockade. By its actions at the United Nations recently, the Australian government has given support to the intention. One hopes that that sort of groveling upsets at least some of the Labor caucus.

The people's profits — 28/11/92

Ben Chifley thought that the people should own the banking system. We might have been able to have free health care from the profits. The High Court just had to find a way to stop that. Many people were pleased. People like Kerry Packer should get the profits they reckoned.

23/12/92

Rob Nyhiu regards Christianity as the "only true religion." Bertrand Russell wrote that since all the great religions of the world disagree in important respects, it is evident as a matter of logic that not more than one of them can be true. He thought them all both untrue and harmful.

31/12/92

I suspect, though he would probably deny it, that Geoffrey Barker admired those other oaths he writes about because they made reference to God, Kings, Queens and flags. Really, otherwise, is our new oath of allegiance more than marginally different from them?

29/1/93

Heartless though one would need to be to sack people in their scores, hundreds, thousands, it would be unreasonable to criticize the perpetrators too much. Changing conditions in the economic system leave them little choice, apparently. But one must not blame the system Governments should be able to manage the unmanageable.

Which party cares? — 15/2/93

Paul Keating and John Hewson are both, naturally enough, heavily influenced by the demands of the rich and

powerful. But the record shows that non-conservative governments in Australia are much more likely to act in the best interests of ordinary people than governments of conservative persuasion. For example: Medicare.

1993

John Hewson's child care promises illustrate this: conservative parties, in or out of government, representing as they do the holders of economic power, move to help ordinary people only when this action is forced upon them. Gaining or remaining in power, certainly not concern for the masses, is the real motive.

2/3/93

It would be nice to think that most Australians are mature enough to have been at least slightly put off by the fatuous goings on at the Liberal Party launch.

4/3/93

The interview that Mary Delahunty had on ABC television last Wednesday evening with Dr Edgar and Peter Collins about the vicious behaviour of some young people was interesting but biased in content. No mention was made of the effects of heredity, of mankind's evolutionary background.

Future shock — 10/3/93

When John Hewson hacks at and then finally massacres Medicare; when his GST hits home; when John Howard reveals and gets going on his industrial relations nightmare; then, too late, the folly of voting for conservatives will be starkly presented to many Australians.

11/3/93

Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were arch-conservatives. They were about creating conditions that would lower the living standards of the many, but would allow their wealthy supporters to buy mansions, Rolls Royces (and Ferraris) and other luxuries. Australians can well do without people like that in government.

15/3/93

Paul Keating is in a position to act magnanimously towards his political opponents just now. They, with a severe dearth of leadership talent available to them, may be most appreciative if he were to give them a loan of, say, Gareth Evans or Kim Beazley.

20/4/93

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the struggle in the former Yugoslavia, one thing is almost certain: in a conflict involving Muslims, Catholics and communists, the West is highly unlikely to favour the last-named group.

22/4/93

The Australian Government, Paul Keating has as good as said publicly a number of times, is embarked on Social Democrat policies. That being so, is it not dishonest and misleading, especially in the light of the party's history, to continue to use 'Labor' in the party's title?

12/7/93

Surely Ray Chapman is not serious when he asserts that the government is “occupying all its time on peripheral matters.” Who could believe that? If, as it is reasonable to think, he did not really mean “all,” why did he not choose to be more specific?

30/7/93

Brian Lang attacked with vehemence, and not with even a modicum of fairness, Peter Craven’s opinion on the censorship of pornography. Many Australians, though, must surely have enjoyed reading the opinions of two such impressive intelligences as those of Peter Craven and Robert Manne.

Equestrian events — 1/10/93

Ray Chapman declares that he will not allow wild horses to drag him into supporting the Labor Party. He should not, however, allow himself to be too much influenced by donkeys, either.

4/10/93

In his Aussie- bashing *Spectator* article, Paul Johnson concentrates his criticism (of course) on attacking members of the Aussie Left. At least, unlike Johnson, Keating, Hayden and Manning Clark have never been turn-coats. In the middle sixties Johnson, a Catholic, was editor of the (very) Left New Statesman.

A different perspective — 11/10/93

Digger James goes a bit far when, in effect, he asserts that our great Australian society is a result of our being a constitutional monarchy. Who knows? He seems to believe, also, that if a government is very busy with one matter it cannot give proper attention to other matters. Necessarily?

13/1/94

The junk mail we are receiving now is, it says on the pack, “Proudly delivered by Australian Post.” Someone should write to them to tell them that ‘proudly’ means “with inordinate self esteem” according to Webster’s dictionary.

31/1/94

The TV industry has much to answer for, but so does the Pope. Consider, for one thing, the millions of women throughout the world, many of them living in poverty who, whether they want them or not, have child after child because of his opposition to artificial birth control.

14/2/94

Of course Peter Singer got very few arguments about his opinion that God does not exist. Even a person as clever as Dr Ganting must be was unable or unwilling to advance one. Are there, by the way, any arguments still standing?

18/2/94

Les Carlyon wrote that Mr Keating was on SBS “yarning about God.” The fact is that the panel should have asked him about God but they squibbed it. Philip Adams, an atheist himself, perhaps did not want to pin him down about his beliefs.

22/2/94

A couple of things that the Bosnian Serbs could do if they want the West not to put almost all the blame on them: shed any socialist ideas that they may have, and embrace an influential religion.

24/2/94

John Howard is reported as calling Mrs Kelly a “pathetic, stupid, dishonest minister.” Really, then, they should get on well together if he is right. That would mean that they have much in common.

Howard’s crowd — 8/2/94

It’s hard to believe that any but a small minority of Labor supporters would clap John Howard in any circumstances. So most of the public gallery must have been supporters of the conservatives.

Trail of blame — 12/2/94

In Bosnia, it seems, there are Muslims, Catholics and Serbs. The West blames the Serbs most of the time for the troubles in Bosnia. Perhaps the West thinks that too many of the Serbs are communists?

Judging on impulse — 7/3/94

Plato, it seems, believed that the common man “will judge on impulse, sentiment or prejudice, and though his heart may be sound, his head will be muddled.” Do the famous Greek’s opinions have any application in Australia just now?

11/3/94

Could it be that conservative elements in the leadership of Greek citizens in Melbourne have taken an opportunity to influence Greek Labor supporters to change sides in their voting?

Public ownership — 19/3/94

Perhaps a big proportion of the people that chose Telecom over Optus did so because they liked the idea of public ownership. The Social Democrats, they are not socialists, in Canberra, like the conservatives, don’t want the people owning things of that sort. We have not much left.

24/3/94

Many would have been surprised by John Button’s comments on smoking. He deserved the hiding Simon Chapman gave him in Thursday’s article.

Well-off — 24/3/94

The trouble with the Democrat’s budget proposals is that they would be too tough on the well-off. If governments in Western societies do not favour the well-off over everyone else, they do not remain in office.

28/3/94

Bryan Long claims that *Access* these days is biased towards contributors from “the hard and loony left and assorted ideologues.” It is reasonable to infer from his opinions that he thinks that the loony right don’t get a fair

go. Many would disagree.

30/3/94

The political chaos in Italy over many years now, suggests that a mix of capitalism, the Mafia and the church is less than an ideal ingredient for good government.

Risky business — 2/4/94

What is there in the sordid records of oil companies everywhere, that persuades the Industrial Commission that it is not a huge risk to free them from almost all restrictions?

6/4/94

When we say or write “most importantly,” don’t we really mean something like, “What is most important?” In which case, why “importantly,” an adverb that means “In an important manner?”

8/4/94

Judge Nathan’s comments, reasonable though they may seem to many, would probably bring criticism upon him. The Jewish people, Albert Einstein asserted, have a great respect for intellectual striving. If he was right, that characteristic alone may, perhaps, help reduce inclinations towards violence in many Jewish households.

20/4/94

Brian Harradine asserts that no one is starving from the effects of over population. How does he know this? Is not his opinion on this matter heavily influenced by a belief that birth control is a “sin against nature?”

Equal before the law — 22/4/94

It certainly is the case that some sections of society, rightly or wrongly, are considered by many to be superior in worth to some others. But should that be a consideration when a rapist is being sentenced? Surely not.

25/4/94

If Melbourne Airport is sold, perhaps the new owners may rename it Tullamarine Airport. Then those that have got its name wrong since it was named in 1970, will at last get it right.

Admirable Africans — 8/4/94

Though most of us probably support the political aspirations of the dispossessed people of Africa, we should be mindful, too, that many admirable white people also live there. Let us hope that the elections initiate a peaceful merging of cultures in that tragic country. Long live democracy.

29/4/94

Jennifer Goldie’s letter about Senator Harradine was lacking in one important respect: she did not mention that the influence of religious belief probably forms the basis of his opposition to birth control. He did not mention it either in his letter of 20/4.

On the wrong track — 9/5/94

Ken McIntyre points out that unmanned railway stations mean that some people are unable to pay their fares. Another worrying aspect of reduced railway staffing is that young people, especially, are thereby encouraged or tempted to cheat — and, perhaps, to cheat elsewhere.

13/5/94

Geoffrey Barker was spot on, as usual. Social Democratic parties are surely entitled to use the term Labor in their titles. In Australia, however, Labor has always been predominantly socialist in ideology. Who then are Mr Keating's true believers — democratic socialists or his social democrats?

17/5/94

If there is a chance of a shoot out with shotguns, the police, being fearful for their lives, having the advantage in numbers and possessing knowledge of the plan, are likely to make sure that they do not lose.

Busy, and nasty — 20/5/94

John Stone reproves Gerard Henderson for a lack of precision in the latter's use of "retired" and for describing Mr Keating as "increasingly respected." There clearly was a second reason for his own letter: a chance to describe Mr Keating as detested, loathed, despised, hated. Pretty nasty stuff, that.

Case for flexibility — 1/6/94

If, indeed, the docklands site is suitable to replace Albert Park as the Grand Prix venue, and if Mr Kennett's private opinion happens to correspond with that view, then, even though there would be media headlines of "backdown," his reputation for flexibility and good judgement may well be considerably enhanced.

Travel by junk — 2/6/94

So now some gems of the advertising world are to be thrust upon us in trains, too. When you think about how much of it is garbage, it does not say much for us that we tolerate it so readily.

It's no disgrace — 21/6/94

One assumes from Fred Menzie's letter, that he was not, as he describes Paul Keating, a school drop-out. If he is good at history, as he implies, then he should know that many successful people left school early, learning about history later.

Afternoon of the fawn— 22/6/94

Is it reasonable to think that Frank E. Robins has the same fawning attitude towards the monarchy as he does towards Dame Pattie Menzies? That is one of the very things that many supporters of an Australian republic reject.

23/6/94

Tiny little minds in Australia gave the admirable Jim Cairns a hard time for his "A kind of love." No doubt minds of a similar dimension will react in the same way to Paul Keating's reported comment about Australia being at the bottom end of the earth.

24/6/94

The quote from Montaigne on grammar is grammatically in error, I believe. The subject, "The greater part," is singular, so the verb should be "is" not "are." "of the world's troubles" is an attribute of the subject, not the subject itself.

28/6/94

Bob Hawke's behaviour lately may show what can happen when capitalism gets a grip on erstwhile socialists. He was a democratic socialist wasn't he?

8/7/94

Les Carlyon implies that Mr Keating has managed economics and foreign affairs badly. But in last Wednesday's *Age* we read that Sir Roderick Carnegie had said that it was 'quite remarkable' what Labor had achieved since 1983. Whom are we to believe?

Our resilient democracy — 15/7/94

Constance E. Little lumps all politicians into the "grubby" category. She makes plain her dislike of multiculturalism. She fears for our democracy if the politicians, not the voters, decide who is to be president of our republic. Does she need to be so concerned? Ours is a great democracy.

8/7/94

It is unreasonable for Phil McCann to place all the blame for a lack of consultation about the republic on Mr Keating. Is it not the case that the opposition has refused to join in discussion of the matter with the government?

19/7/94

It is so easy to be intellectually dishonest about the question of human rights. Whose human rights? If, for example, the people suffering human rights abuses in East Timor were, say, communists, there would be relatively little concern in Australia.

1/8/84

Fancy the United States, given the record, objecting to the right-wing military dictatorship of Haiti. Perhaps that's another reason why President Clinton is so unpopular.

2/8/94

It can hardly be questioned that political conservatism and racism very often go hand in hand. It follows that racism may be presumed to be an influence in the opposition to Mabo of some State governments and the Federal Opposition.

4/8/94

Errol Chick associates logic, the science of reasoning, with religious traditionalists. Does not religious belief, in the main, eschew sound logic, substituting dogma?

6/8/94

We may, influenced by an awareness of our own inadequacies, have sympathy for Mr Downer's inability to handle some recent issues. But he must not be seen to be inadequate. He, like many others, will find it hard to match the abilities of the prime minister.

8/8/94

Constance E. Little's arguments against Australian overseas aid, along with some of her other previously expressed opinions, seem hardly to have been inspired by the spirit of the Sermon on the mount.

11/8/94

The Police Commissioner accused the Coroner, Mr Hallenstein, of losing the plot. After that drug raid he may justifiably be similarly accused.

19/8/94

Australia has Medicare despite the opposition of powerful interests. Similar, but even more powerful and undemocratic, forces in the USA, have no intention of allowing Mr Clinton to provide health care for the people.

22/8/94

Surely John A. Santamaria is wrong when he says that the Catholic Church is "opposed to abortion on any ground." Surely, such a venerable institution could not be so heartless?

23/8/94

Some believe that we should reduce or even break off contact with Indonesia, the grounds being their treatment of the people of East Timor. The Cuban people have been treated abominably by the USA for 30 years, yet we are great mates with that nation.

24/8/94

Australian athletes have shown themselves to be outstanding at the Commonwealth Games. Could there be a correlation between their achievements and the fact that Australia itself, as a society, would be hard to beat?

29/8/94

Kevin Rugg believes that Barry Jones is not an intellectual, but he does not define the term. Lord Bullock wrote that an intellectual is "a highly educated person with critical and creative opinions about normative ideas." Does that fit Barry?

13/9/94

John Dobinson asks Victorians to think, think. That very many of us do not think clearly is demonstrated by those of us that, against our own interests, vote conservatives into power. They then do the things that he is right to deplore.

14/9/94

Nothing that the AFL says can alter the fact that whereas the Eagles come East every second week, Melbourne and Footscray go West not more than once a year. This built-in advantage for the Eagles now is to apply to the finals.

19/9/94

To the number of those already opposed to a Grand Prix at Albert Park, may now be added those drawn in to the controversy by the recent anti-democratic legislation passed by the government. It may not be overstating the matter to suggest that potentially explosive circumstances have been created.

21/9/94

It is understandable that Robert Manne, whom Henry Rosenbloom left wounded, would support the conservative, Alexander Downer. The latter, however, seems unable to convince the people that he is up to the job even if he is 'likable,' 'caring' and 'trustworthy.'

26/9/94

If Carlton, not the Eagles, had finished on top of the ladder, how would the AFL have rewarded them? Some finals at Optus Oval, it seems to follow.

18/10/94

Frank Knopfelmacher, always having seemed likely to do so, has finally gone right overboard.

13/10/94

One notices that Keating the Christian believes that Saddam Hussein should have been killed, while Evans, the atheist, seems not to think so.

The bright side — 21/12/94

More than 60 years ago, Bertrand Russell got it right about people like Mr Skase. "Everybody knows that a businessman who has been ruined is better off so far as material comforts are concerned than a man who has never been rich enough to have the chance of being ruined."

23/12/94

Most that approve of our having a timber industry would, one would think, also accept the good economics, the common sense, of woodchipping the inferior material remaining. It seems to follow that most conservationists must not approve of a timber industry. Do they ever say so to the public?

27/12/94

"A special day for our account customers — an exclusive preview of our half-yearly clearance." With those words through the post, David Jones fooled their account customers into being there on Monday. The store was open to everyone, even though newspaper advertisements, too, indicated that the store would be closed.

4/1/95

It was sad, but not surprising, that Barry Dickens found a group of young people to be un-forgiving towards agents of violent crime. Mankind has been long to ready to forget that we, after all, are animals, requiring, for one thing, the right kind of civilizing education. Whatever that is.

5/1/95

Edgar Vial, being one among those unable seriously to challenge the arguments of forestry expert Glen A. Kile, resorts to accusing the latter of irrelevance. Were Mr Vial's comments about soil erosion relevant, especially since trees are planted to replace the ones logged?

12/1/95

Alistair Graham, does not even seem to know that government ministers have expert advisers, and that, therefore, Geoff Coleman's letter was not "obviously penned with the help of a few trite slogans." Straight away, Mr Graham's credulity was damaged.

1/2/95

It is a sad fact that many uninformed people do really believe the fiction that old growth forests are felled for woodchips. Hard core Greenies know better, but they use the expression, too. It suits their purposes.

3/2/95

Ignoring a "No junk mail" sign, someone, on behalf of Senator Spindler, placed a propaganda sheet in our letter box recently. It included a photograph which the caption said showed an "old growth forest after it was cleared for woodchipping." A deliberate twisting of the facts — it was cleared for timber.

7/2/95

If the devastating criticisms made by PP McGuinness about the anti-logging movement are flawed, then no doubt a luminary among the Greens will soon address the task of destroying his assertions point by point. Which luminary? Senator Faulkner, perhaps?

Tunnel-vision Greens — 9/1/95

Since Fenella Barry and June Redwood get such a good go in *The Age* letters column, you would think they may make an attempt to reply to forestry expert Glen A. Kile. Perhaps PP McGuinness is right when he says "Extreme Greens are not interested in compromise nor in analysis."

10/1/95

Charles Niles, I did read PP McGuinness. Did you read Geoff Coleman? Did it not occur to you that he and his advisers may know what is going on in the forests? Why would the extreme Greens be more honest and more in possession of the facts than they are?

Observation — 10/1/95

Keith Remington writes of the poorly educated and under-privileged masses of the Philippines. He might have added that those conditions apply in many countries where religious belief of any variety has a powerful influence.

12/1/95

Alistair Graham does not even seem to know that government ministers have expert advisers, and that, therefore, Geoff Coleman's letter was not "obviously penned with the help of a few trite slogans." Straight away, Mr Graham's credibility was damaged.

19/1/95

Bob Menzies, years ago, sold pig iron to Japan. Critics claimed that the iron came back to us in lethal form in WW2. Paul Keating intends to sell rifles to Indonesia. For his and all our sakes, let's hope that he is not making an error similar to Bob's.

Frosty Castro — 20/1/95

Senator Evans, in visiting Cuba, can hardly be expecting a warm welcome from Castro. Not long ago, at the United Nations, the senator had the opportunity, but did not take it, of opposing the US in its determination to starve the people of Cuba into submission.

24/1/95

Prime Minister Menzies, years ago, sold pig iron to Japan. Critics charged that the iron came back at us in lethal form in WW2. Prime Minister Keating will sell rifles to Indonesia. Let's hope that he is not making an error similar to Sir Robert's.

Prickly issue — 27/1/95

Perhaps it will be at least some compensation for Mr Downer that he won't be the one having to execute a back-flip on the republic question. Is John Howard sufficiently agile to do it convincingly?

30/1/95

Since John Howard is a politician, and since opinion polls indicate that most Australians hold politicians in low regard, does it follow that he is widely held in low regard? If so, only a small minority must think of him as "Honest John." And even they must have had doubts lately.

3/2/95

Ignoring a "No junk mail" sign, someone, on behalf of Senator Spindler, placed a propaganda sheet in our letter box recently. It included a photograph which the caption said showed an "old growth forest after it was cleared for woodchipping," deliberately twisting the facts: it was cleared for timber.

7/2/95

If the devastating criticisms by PP McGuinness about the anti-logging movement are flawed, then no doubt a luminary among the greens will soon address the task of destroying his assertions point by point. Which luminary? Senator Faulkner perhaps?

13/3/95

John Howard, as well as being popular with Kerry Packer, seems also to have an admirer among *The Age* editorial staff, escaping as he did any criticism for his involvement in the secret papers' scandal.

31/3/95

It would be difficult to fault the very intelligently reasoned editorial opinion on euthanasia, free as it was from the influence of religious dogma. As it said, "Individual choice is the heart of the matter."

8/5/95

Camp Pell, at Royal Park, in the war years, was an American camp, wasn't it? Next door to it was the 3rd Military District Recruit Reception and General Details Depot. The Depot's address was Royal Park.

19/5/95

The opinions expressed by Dr Syme on euthanasia and on some aspects of religious belief, virtually deny refutation. That is one reason, probably, why, so far at least, no one has made an attempt to provide us with counter arguments.

24/7/95

Arthur Comer makes some untenable assertions, among them being his dismissal of evolution, the explanation for our existence. If, as he claims, evolution is the "very antithesis of science," how is it that virtually all scientists seem broadly to accept it?

9/1/96

Republican politicians in the USA have been doing their utmost to dismantle an already dreadfully inadequate welfare system. John Howard and his conservatives, who think like Republicans, have in their sights not only trade unionism. Give them half a chance and they will wreck our welfare system. Welfare recipients beware!

17/1/96

No doubt some that criticize Mr Kennett's intentions to change the name of Flinders' Park, themselves refer to Melbourne Airport as Tullamarine Airport.

19/1/96

PP McGuinness was at his childish, readership shedding best in describing the Prime Minister as "trying to look like a statesman" in Malaysia and Singapore. Does he, himself, still try to look like Socrates in his dress?

22/1/96

The juxtaposition of large photographs of Paul Keating and John Howard on the front page of the *Saturday Extra*, and the wording, "The choice is yours," would suggest to most readers that Morris West would express a balanced viewpoint. He did not. But then, most rich men favour conservatism.

23/1/96

Day after day, PP McGuinness puts his small-mindedness on display. His comments about Dr Rotblat, poorly expressed, suggest that that scientist was a tool of the Soviet Union. Probably he would say that about anyone who took a stand against nuclear warfare. Albert Einstein included.

24/1/96

About 80 years ago, Bertrand Russell wrote that “The aim of politics should be to make the lives of individuals as good as possible.” That’s hard to argue with. Who is more likely to achieve that aim: Labor or the conservative parties?

Serving the rich — 30/1/96

If sections of the working class in Britain had not foolishly voted for Margaret Thatcher, she would not have gone her ruinous way in that country. Australian working people should keep in mind that conservative governments are there to carry out the bidding of the rich and powerful.

31/1/96

Conservatives in the United States have been doing their utmost to destroy the welfare system. Conservatives everywhere concern themselves with the welfare of ordinary people only to the extent that their chances of gaining or retaining power in government are thereby sufficiently enhanced.

5/2/96

After WW2, Britons, despite Churchill’s wartime leadership, rejected him electorally. Just as well. He would never have introduced the National Health Service. Nor would his self-proclaimed Australian counterpart ever have introduced Medicare. He would simply love to see the end of it. And bulk billing. And...

6/2/96

To use John Dobinson’s self-important way of beginning his Access letter, frankly, I’d like to know how he could possibly hope that John Howard would take any action on the casino affair.

7/2/96

One of the silliest, not to say saddest, things about elections, is that hordes of people who, so to speak, will never have two bob to their names, will vote for the representatives of rich men.

8/2/96

The editor of *The Age* should send a notice worded on the lines of the following to all reporters: “I saw that on 8/2 the title of Tullamarine Airport appeared in our paper yet again. This time at least twice. Please use the correct title: Melbourne Airport.”

14/2/96

Wayne Goss must surely have been kidding when he expressed hope that Liz Cunningham would support his government. How could he possibly have expected someone so typically conservative to support Labor? Did he never hear her express herself?

15/2/96

A national plebiscite would be a straight-forward clear-cut way of finding out whether the Australian people want or do not want an Australian head of state. The Howard plan is too complicated, too time consuming.

16/2/96

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the struggle in the Balkans, one thing is pretty certain. In a conflict involving Muslims, Catholics and Serbians, the Serbs are the most likely group to be blamed by the West. And that is what has happened.

19/2/96

Bill Hayden has long been known as a socialist and atheist. He has dropped socialism Shaun Carney tells us. Is he still an atheist? We were not told. Some freethinkers, growing old, scared of dying, turn to religion in the hope of attaining immortality.

Reign gauge — 20/2/96

The favourable British views on the merits of Margaret Thatcher turned out to contain serious errors of judgement. It does seem likely, however, that they will eventually exercise sounder judgement in the case of the monarchy — and drop it.

22/2/96

John Murray comments on “Labor voter stupidity.” One of the silliest, not to say saddest, things about elections, is that hordes of people who, so to speak, will never themselves have more than two bob to their names, will vote for the representatives of rich men.

27/2/96

The United States determined long ago that Cuba’s economy must be destroyed. Many Americans will be delighted with this new excuse to increase the hardships of the Cuban people. Who does Castro think he is, trying to create a society for all the people?

14/6/96

Beverly Lewis seeks a definition of truth. It seems that many philosophers, but not including pragmatists, consider that a belief is a true belief when it corresponds with fact. So one is speaking the truth, for example, if one says God exists, if in fact God does exist.

17/6/96

Dr Powys gives us his belief about the Christian view of truth. Some philosophers say that a belief is a true belief when it corresponds with fact. So one is speaking the truth, for example, if one says that Jesus Christ exists if in fact he does exist.

18/6/96

Readers of *The Age* letters columns must surely have noticed, again, just how biased someone there is. Religionists have their say, some several times, but James Gerrand, a humanist, is allowed no support. This is my fourth attempt to contribute to the discussion. The editor should step in.

29/10/96

Even though there is little doubt that religious belief forms a very important part of the basis for the anti-ethanasia stance of some politicians in Canberra, religion is rarely mentioned. Why is this so? Why do they

conceal those beliefs which they would say they sincerely hold?

17/11/96

Doug Aiton wrote that “There are aspects of Adams that are constant.” Probably Doug did not have in mind, however, one thing that the admirable Philip has constantly done over the years, and that is to construct sentences like these: “People like you and I are privileged ...” and “For Patrice and I to have a car...”

29/11/96

Surely Constance E. Little is right in believing that “Teachers should not be subject to religious hassles.” In any case, is it wise to encourage children to believe that mythology is truth?

3/12/96

Elizabeth C. Clarke should realize that a sizeable proportion of Australia’s citizens, whom she does not bother to consider in her letter, reject religious faiths of all kinds. Many of them, no doubt, would not want their children to be encouraged to believe in myths, either.

Who’s making myths? — 3/1/97

What kind of world does Madeleine Bunting live in? One of the many silly things she wrote in her piece about religion was to express doubt that secularism exists. Millions of people on this earth manage to live rewarding lives without the aid of myths.

13/1/97

Frank E. Robins contends that Tony Bullmore was saved by a “banging miracle from heaven,” which he sees as evidence for the existence of God. He should try convincing, say, Paul Davies, of the soundness of that opinion.

Heart in the right place — 31/1/97

Being the Romanticist that he is, it is not surprising that Leunig says something pretty illogical from time to time. As the saying goes, though, perhaps his heart is in the right place. But if it developed a fault, would he trust medical science?

3/2/97

Michael Gwenda is but one of many that deplore the unjust, the undemocratic, operation of the school system in Victoria. But you cannot expect conservative governments (especially) anywhere to worry too much about that: The constituents that they truly represent do have certain advantages in the situation.

8/4/97

Bertrand Russell wrote that “Most people believe in God because they have been taught from infancy to do it.” It is perhaps hardly surprising, therefore, that a proportion of scientists are influenced by childhood indoctrination, even though mythology and their profession are worlds apart.

10/4/97

Capitalism, even in Australia, has a host of detestable aspects. Consider the banking system. But we vote to keep things that way. Being able to say that the people own the banks is not for us.

Discerning readers — 26/5/97

The continued increase in the readership of *The Age* is due, partly, no doubt, to a creative staff. Our community is becoming better educated and so, perhaps, increasingly more discerning: a community more likely to demand first-class newspapers.

7/11/97

One thing is made clear by Mr Kennett's attitude towards euthanasia — his reasoning process is not heavily influenced by religious dogma.

Politics — 17/2/99

God in the preamble to the constitution? That would be anathema to many people. John Howard knows that. He has come up with a move that he hopes will destroy the quest for a republic. As for Kim Beazley — God help him at the next election.

18/2/99

John Howard the lawyer, Kim Beazley the historian. Both should seek facts. Neither, however, is capable of providing facts that will prove God's existence. So they rely on faith? Bertrand Russell: "Faith is a belief in something for which there is no evidence."

Republic — 22/2/99

Many will not agree with John Santamaria's criticism of your editorial on a reference being made to God in the preamble. Unconvincing? Superficial? Simplistic? Untenable arguments? Surely he was describing his own letter. For example, people with no religion who nevertheless believe in God. Whew!

26/2/99

Jim Stynes writes, 'I felt it my duty to hate them' [the Protestants in Northern Ireland]. We may reasonably presume that that hate was reciprocated by the Protestants. Yet later, he writes that 'The problem in Ireland is not about Catholics fighting Protestants.' Really, Jim?

25/3/99

Millions of Australians do not believe in God's existence, so they can hardly have hope in him. John Howard should tell us which of the several main arguments for the existence of God he accepts. So should Kim Beazley. But neither would dare to so argue publicly.

Serbia — 27/3/99

Kosovo is a province of Yugoslavia. Quebec is a province of Canada. If the ethnic French in Quebec established a guerrilla army to gain independence from Canada, would the United States and Britain have NATO attack Canada?

30/3/99

I conjectured in my brief letter of 27 March on the possibility that NATO would attack Canada in particular circumstances. Brent Davies has replied to my question. He believes, apparently, that there would be no NATO attack, only an international outcry. So we agree on that important issue.

1/4/99

If argument is to be productive, it is always a good idea for participants to stick to the point. My point about Kosovo was simple: would NATO have not gone on the attack if, however unlikely, Canada, not Serbia, was the perceived transgressor?

12/4/99

Gareth Evans, in his otherwise good attempt at a preamble, let atheists down badly by mentioning God. Jeff Kennett will not be so voter conscious, atheists must hope. He did not — good for you, Jeff.]

Foreign — 15/5/99

What is it that makes seemingly humane men such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair display tragically such cruel instincts as were required to set the NATO bombing atrocities in motion? Now they have depopulated Kosovo. What a mess they have made of their reputations.

1/6/99

If Australians were suffering relentless bombing, which to our shame most Australians evidently think Yugoslavs should suffer, then perhaps Mark G. Hoysted may find justification for some “dirty dealings” on our part. Did not Steve Pratt admit to spying? Do we know that there was sufficient duress to wring a confession from a strong character?

3/6/99

The brutal assault of the barbarians (are they not professed Christians?) on the civilization of Yugoslavia continues. These latter-day vandals, though, seem to lack the courage needed to order a confrontation with their heroic prey, man to man.

7/6/99

Meg Lees has taken sides against the interests of many Australians. She has shown herself to be a supporter of the holders of economic power. Surely she has alienated thousands of non-conservative supporters. She deserves a place in parliament – but on the Right not the Left as we might have thought.

GST — 11/6/99

Meg Lees has shown that she is not a genuine friend of the economically powerless, and that she is quite willing to help perpetuate a society framework in which the holders of economic power and privilege continue their virtual omnipotence. She should leave the Democrats and join John Howard. Imagine his ‘ecstatic’ welcome.

14/6/99

The sustained cruelty of the bombing of Yugoslavia by the so-called Christian nations has ended. In contrast, something that should have begun was, predictably, doomed from the start. Australia’s advocates of Christian

ideals should have protested vigorously and publicly about that huge contravention of moral values. They chose silence.

24/6/99

Fergus Shiel wrote a clever piece in *Today* about the film, 'The Spy Who Shagged Me.' I think that 'Who Shagged Me' is a defining clause and so needs 'That' to introduce it not 'Who.' Anyone agree? Who cares, some will think.

25/6/99

Plaudits to *The Age* for publishing Jeff Gray's letter with its strong and valid criticisms of astrology. Jeff's letter heading, 'Dangerous Mumbo Jumbo,' would be appropriate as a sub-heading for the astrology column (plaudits end), a column that serves to encourage mindless superstition and gullibility, for just two things.

8/7/99

Has the name of the privatized Melbourne Airport been changed to Tullamarine Airport? Or is *The Age* simply continuing its nearly 30 year habit of frequently misnaming it? Imagine the *New York Times* frequently calling the John F Kennedy Airport the Long Island Airport.

Religion — 4/8/99

Dick Gross seems at least to suggest that morality is religion based. JS Mill wrote: 'A large portion of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who knew and rejected the Christian faith.'

5/8/99

Unlike Frank E. Robins, there are millions of people who do not need faith in going about living their lives. We, as someone said, think 'Faith is believing in what you know to be false.'

9/8/99

Remove the reverence-for-royalty factor — the fawning factor? — from the consciousness of some voters and what will we Aussies get? A republic.

13/8/99

Uninspiring declaration that it is, with a meaningless opening phrase that is acutely offensive to many, the proposed preamble will surely reduce the stature of the Australian nation. Imagine the sniggering in England, for example.

20/8/99

Unless I misunderstand him, David Powys asserts that eye-witness accounts of two thousand years ago are enough to prove the miracle of a resurrection. Eye witness accounts, especially of supposed miracles, are notorious for their unreliability. How can he be so convinced?

9/9/99

The Indonesians displayed their capacity for slaughtering people back in 1965. General Soeharto (Paul Keating's friend) arranged the slaughter of, it has been estimated, at least 500,000 of his own people. The victims were communists, however, so few except their loved ones cared much at all.

6/10/99

Paul Keating writes of moral absolutists. There would be few such people on this earth. If the suffering East Timorese people were communists, most so-called moral absolutists would have looked the other way.

1999

Another election. Another working-class disaster. Another vote by that purblind section of the working-class, against their own interests, to betray their own class. They seem not to realize that secretive, undemocratic governments like Kennett's, and the wealthy class that rules with them, care nothing about egalitarianism.

17/9/99

If Leslie Connold is correct in saying that Victorian intellectuals oppose the Kennett oligarchy, then it follows that, since *The Age's* disgusting advocacy of a vote for that abomination, the editorial board must be lacking in intellectuals.

Republic — 2/11/99

Hands up those on the political left whose opinion of Peter Costello has taken a marked turn towards one of respect, and even of admiration.

9/12/99

A self-funded retiree I, over the past three years, have gained a pay rise total of 2.4%. Politicians? Tough: 10%. Of course, as human beings go, they are far superior in character, just for one thing, to people like me, so that's fair enough. And what's more, they really need the money.

24/2/00

There are countless numbers of people around who are unable to grasp a couple of simple facts: weather forecasting is not an exact science; forecasters are worthy people doing the very best that they can.

Political – 26/2/00

Isn't it great that the bombing of Yugoslavia by Clinton and Blair, considered justifiable by most Australians, fixed up the problems in Kosovo?

26/2/00

The churches protesting the Mardi Gras? Methinks they do protest too much. If you follow what I mean.

2/3/00

Claire Miller (Opinion 2/3), in her article demanding that Sherryl Garbutt should do as she is told by the anti-

loggers (presumably Claire is representing that aggressively active group), did not, at least, use the big lie: "... destroying native forests for woodchips."

9/3/00

Brian Harris (9/3/) describes China's one-child policy as 'barbaric.' How does he describe those countries where millions of unwanted children are born into misery because the religion that he supports forbids efficient birth control methods?

12/4/00

The Cronje episode, although a grim affair, is not without more than a touch of humour. A supporter asserted that since he was a Christian he would not do such a thing.

19/4/00

Who is to bester the waggish Pat Lester, when it comes to having Your Say? He is so breezy, so nice and easy, that he's sure to carry the day.

1/4/00

Sue-Ann Post is surely the most
In the art of delicious debunking.
She cares not a smidgeon for the myths of religion,
Setting believer's hearts a-thumping.

23/4/00

How marvellous that Elian Gonzalez has been returned to his father! The USA immigration agents were fully justified in using force to remove him from the clutches of the Miami exile community.

27/4/00

Please, oh, please no! It seems inevitable that we are in for another spate of those deadly boring articles and letters about mythology from luminaries and others in The Anglican community.

March 00

Just as scary, Tim Hunter, as the prospect of seeing Jeff portrayed in oils, is the possibility that any of his current group of potential successors makes it to his severely blemished former office.

Society – 14/5/00

What attitude would Joe Gutnick take if the Melbourne Football Club decided to draft a Jewish player who was an atheist?

17/5/00

It is some effects of Joe Gutnick's beliefs that people are criticizing, Des Files (14/5), not his race.

Football – 18/5/00

Which sports commentator in the next few days will be the first to refer to the Blues - Kangaroos match on Sunday as a grand-final replay? My bet's on Tim Lane.

22/5/00

Geoff McClure's item about James Hird was unkind and, surely, in bad taste. Geoff should concentrate on not so often using interminably long sentences. Has he ever heard of the conjunction "that"? (Yes, I know – journalists habitually leave it out, thus spoiling their prose.)

26/5/00

Take a gun into your hand, threaten others with it, and the chances are that you yourself will be shot. That's the way it is. Exception: terrorists subverting democracy in Fiji.

27/5/00

I am no "Johnny-come-lately" to Access. (Darryl Calderwood 27/5.) It was at first edited by Peter Couchman (?) My first letter was in 1980, so I am almost a "foundation member" – with a total of – modesty forbids. My nominations for the most prolific contributors are: Constance E Little, John Dobinson and Pat Lester.

4/7/00

What does it say about the mindset of John Howard that he said, "112,000 miles to London." (England?)

7/7/00

Good points, Rosslyn Nives (7/7), about Christians and the 1996 Census – the figures are far too high. Additionally, if a person doubts or denies the existence of god (just for one thing) how can that person be a Christian? Many so-called Christians do have such doubts.

28/7/00

It seems that the Australian cricket captain is addressing other sporting teams and encouraging them to sledge their opponents in his own nasty manner. Are Aussies complaining? Hardly. What great sports we are!

4/8/00

I'll tell you what: *The Age* may cop some criticism for publishing letters like the one from Warren Parfoot (1/8: God bless him), but how marvellous it is that our favourite newspaper is playing such a welcome role in helping strip away religion's centuries old and undeserved protection from critical scrutiny.

5/8/00

The journalistic habit, surely a deplorable habit, of leaving out the conjunction "that" even when it is plainly required, is ubiquitous. Consider this one in Saturday's *Age*: "Sentence reflects a life was taken: gay partner." Please don't give us the "save space" excuse. It's poor writing.

8/8/00

About 50 years ago, Bertrand Russell said that, "In 50 years time, Christianity will be regarded as an ancient superstition." He should have said "widely regarded," then Muriel Porter (Opinion 8/8) may find it difficult to dismiss his opinion.

9/8/00

Muriel Porter (9/8) writes of Matthew Arnold, his religiosity, his times: mid-19th century. William Paley's "argument from design" was powerful then. One understands its influence. But Darwin destroyed that argument. If Muriel Porter could devise a good argument for the existence of God, perhaps the church would attract more support.

9/8/00

The Age editorial goes on about the appointment of a new governor. The same newspaper told us that we should re-elect the Kennett government. Now, as then, the paper shows itself to be out of touch with the people.

10/8/00

The church, as W. Bruce Nixon (10/8) puts it, "has a strange habit of mysteriously resurrecting itself." Perhaps. If and when and where it does, it will be very much because some people seem not to be able to live their lives without the aid of myths.

10/8/00

It is a curious thing that the keyboards used by nearly all journalists are not fitted with square bracket keys. Or perhaps we see them used so rarely because the journalists don't know what they are for?

23/8/00

Some parents that say that they are in a bad way financially, nevertheless send their children to public schools. Is it unreasonable to say that they are 'living beyond their means?' Most would not regard that practice as a virtue. Why should the rest of the financially deprived people subsidize their aims for their children?

Football – 5/9/00

It can't be said too often: Wayne Jackson stripped away 5000 grand final seats from AFL members, seats that the members had paid for in membership fees, and gave them to the rich. What an example of capitalist arrogance!

8/9/00

There is all this fuss about which brand of religion. is the repository of 'truth.' The fact is that if you take away the concept of a God, then the whole edifice collapses. And, so far anyway, nobody has ever managed to prove that God exists.

WEF – 15/9/00

Put a crowd of protesters together and some will be violent. Put a crowd of capitalists together and some will be crooks. Australians seem to be more concerned about the former. than the latter.