

## SOFiA Newsletter 170, February 2023

### Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality



Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

### Clandestine Auckland Group Continues...

While the main Auckland group has come to an end, as there were no volunteers to continue the roles of Chairman and Treasurer, a small group has continued to exist on the North Shore. It seems to be some kind of clandestine cell, as there is no publicity of any kind making others aware of its existence. Moreover, meetings are organised using encrypted email and held in the depths of the Settlers Lifestyle Village, out of reach of prying eyes. The following is a brief report on its November meeting, held on 30<sup>th</sup> November.



Brian Ellis, one of our number, led the discussion, based on three short articles from the book *Hand in Hand* by Ian Harris. The Editor recommends this book, as a useful resource for discussions, as each of the chapters in the book are quite short. Please note, that since this group's cover is now blown, anyone can apply to the group and ask to join.

## Book Review: The Ministry for the Future

I became aware of this book while listening to Radio New Zealand on my way to visit in-laws in Tokoroa. The author, Kim Stanley Robinson, was interviewed by Kim Hill and his answers impressed me.

The book is a work of science fiction and follows the story of Mary Murphy, the director of the ministry, as she attempts to put into practice the mission of the ministry, which is to be an advocate for future generations, that don't have a voice. Her story is closely linked to Frank, the sole survivor of the catastrophe described below. I am not usually very interested in works of fiction, but this held my interest and kept me reading through 563 pages. There are more than 100 chapters, often very short, and with a great variety of narrators.

The book begins with a tragic event in India. A combination of high temperatures, high humidity, and a power cut because of network overload due to many air conditioning units operating at full load, leads to the deaths of possibly 20 million people. My Zoology professor stated that we humans could comfortably sit in an oven and watch a chicken being roasted next to us. However, this was only true if the humidity was kept very low, allowing copious sweating to evaporate and cool the humans. The situation is quite different when humidity is high.

Robinson was unwilling to commit to a particular temperature, but it seems like somewhere around 35 degrees Celsius with high humidity is enough to kill humans. That is the scenario that Robinson began his novel with. A shock tactic, the more so because most of us don't realise how vulnerable we humans are to high temperature and humidity.

Frank survives but suffers from very bad PTSD. Mary's first task is to respond to the Indian catastrophe. Her ministry has not much power or funding but is able to have conversations with governments, powerful people, and experts from around the world. The Indian catastrophe resulted in a change of government, a desire to take the emergency step

of spraying sulphur dioxide into the stratosphere to initiate a temporary cooling, rather like Mt Pinatubo.

The novel explores the operation of the Ministry and other options for combating climate change. Mary Murphy gets to hear many arguments, pro and con, for the options under discussion. Often, the situation represented is exactly our current one, giving the novel a special relevance. For example, I was struck by the one-page summary of the situation in Greece, in which the financial institutions insisted on loan repayment, at the cost of impoverishing the Greek people, because they didn't have a viable Plan B and had to agree to their terms, requiring devastating cuts to public spending, superannuation entitlements, and causing high unemployment.

One of the author's unconventional ideas is that we have to pay the oil producers to keep the oil in the ground. It is counter-intuitive to pay already wealthy countries like Saudi Arabia for not producing oil. Another possibility is to re-purpose oil drilling equipment for extracting water from underneath Antarctic glaciers.

Frank tries to join an ecoterrorist group, the Children of Kali, but is declined. However, he wants to do something, reflecting the urgency of the situation, so he takes Mary Murphy prisoner and harangues her with the need to do more. Meanwhile, Mary is trying to get the banks to agree to a carbon coin, one coin for every 1,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> saved or sequestered.

When 60 passenger planes are shot down by drones, killing 7,000, the bottom falls out of the flying industry. There are some hints that such violence is the responsibility of a black ops wing of the Ministry. Drones were also used to infect cows with Mad Cow Disease, rendering them unfit for human consumption. Violence was not limited to those fighting for the environment. A bomb goes off overnight at the Ministry headquarters, so Mary is given police protection.

Due to the warming climate, Antarctic glaciers were moving ten times faster than previously. One of the best schemes was to pump water up from below the glaciers, so that they grind to a halt and stick to the underlying bedrock, dramatically slowing their movement.

Some said that we need a new religion, a religion of the future, or perhaps just the oldest religion. This finds its climax towards the end of the book, when three billion people sing earth's praises together on Gaia Day.

## How to split a society

*Societies that once had a strong sense of collective identity are being split into mutually hostile camps, based on a 'them vs us' mentality. NZ must do everything it can to stop political elites deliberately fuelling divisions to enhance their own power.*

*by Dame Anne Salmond 13/01/2024. Reprinted from Newsroom with permission. For the original, see <https://newsroom.co.nz/2024/01/13/dame-anne-salmond-how-to-split-a-society/>*

Thirty years ago, in 1993, I attended a conference at Oxford which included a workshop on what was happening in Bosnia, where war had just broken out.

Young anthropologists who had been conducting their field work in that country described how a society in which many Serbs and Croats thought they had solved their historical differences was deliberately split apart.

It began with small acts of violence that rapidly escalated. In mixed communities, where families had intermarried and strong friendships had been forged, soldiers from one ethnic group forced men from the other at gunpoint to rape their neighbours' wives, in places where their children had played together.



Villages were destroyed, their inhabitants killed or transported to concentration camps, survivors were tortured and mass rapes carried out. The anthropologists who witnessed this process were shocked by its improbability and the speed with which it accelerated.

I vividly recall one young anthropologist telling us, "This could happen anywhere". Given the wrong kind of leadership, they said, no society is immune from this kind of destruction. Peaceful relationships among different social groups should never be taken for granted.

I have never forgotten that workshop, and its message remains pertinent. In the contemporary world, democracies that were once robust and resilient are splintering and falling apart.

Societies that once had a strong sense of collective identity are being split into mutually hostile camps, based on a 'them vs us' mentality that denies any sense of common purpose.

In a process described by scholars as 'pernicious polarisation,' self-interested elites generate Us and Them perceptions by deliberately activating, exploiting or distorting latent social cleavages.

Identities – political, ethnic or religious – may be reduced to simple binaries: Republican vs. Democrat, Left vs Right, black vs white, Iwi vs. Kiwi, Catholic vs Protestant, Serb vs Croat.

According to comparative analyses of this kind of ploy, "identity can become all-encompassing as people view those in the 'other' camp with distrust, suspicion, or fear, and cease to interact with them – even segregating themselves in their neighbourhoods, social relationships, and news-feeds with like-minded people".

The middle ground becomes a battle ground (sometimes literally); moderate voices are silenced, and those with cross-cutting loyalties are cancelled. In the process, absolute power may be sought, by authoritarian leaders, for example.

The comparative studies are very clear about the dangers. If left unchecked, this kind of escalating division can devastate nation states, wreck their economies and destroy the lives of their people.

This has happened in countries of all kinds – Serbs and Croats in Bosnia; Catholics and Protestants in Ireland; Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza; Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, and in many other African nations, for example. Many analyses are being written about 'pernicious polarisation' in America at present.

Accounts of pernicious polarisation describe how political elites deliberately fuel divisions to enhance their own power:

"Polarising speech articulates or even suggests a grievance, stoking fears, anxieties and resentments that then become expressed as hostility, bias and eventually enmity. By choosing the cleavage or grievance to highlight, political elites drive the polarisation."

They note how this impacts upon politics, the civil service, the media and the economy:

“Structural changes also tend to happen in the economy, bureaucracy and key sectors such as the media that enable or reinforce the weakening of the middle ground in public and political discourse. Accordingly, ownership and/or management of institutions shift to opportunistic or ideological loyalists of one bloc or the other. This results in a situation where, for example, independent journalists find it increasingly more difficult to shape the news, or, worse, maintain their jobs.”

The grievances may be genuine, in radically unequal societies, for instance, or those with unresponsive, technocratic governments, or where ethnic, social or religious groups are stigmatised and unjustly treated.

This escalating dynamic, however, destroys goodwill in ways that are likely to prove devastating for all parties – from vilification and personal violence to terrorist attacks to civil war, as in Bosnia.

As for political parties involved in such processes, according to the comparative studies: “Incumbent polarising parties typically attempt to govern on their own and eschew norms for bipartisan or multi-partisan decision-making.”

With enough division, any society could be susceptible to the kind of devastation wrought during the Bosnian War.

That may include governing with an absolute majority without consulting the opposition or the wider electorate; forging alliances with smaller, more extreme parties; or governing by autocracy, repression and violence.

No country is immune from this kind of politics. After the 2020 election in New Zealand, for instance, when Labour won an absolute majority, the government engaged in unilateral decision-making that accentuated existing social cleavages – central vs local government, rural vs urban communities and Māori vs other New Zealanders, for instance.

In their turn, other political agents played upon these divisions. One can see this in the virulent social media and other attacks upon a once popular Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, fuelled by male-female and

urban-rural polarities (in elements of the Groundswell campaign, for instance), or 'Iwi vs Kiwi' polarities in relation to Te Tiriti.

While in the past, genuine grievances have been addressed with bipartisan support through the Waitangi Tribunal, equal opportunities programmes or the creation of ministries to address the needs of women, Pacific Islanders and Māori, some politicians now depict these as forms of privilege, stoking popular resentment.

Any reader of the literature will recognise these as well-rehearsed strategies from the pernicious polarisation playbook.

In forming the new Government, the National Party forged alliances with smaller, more extreme parties intent on amplifying their power, entering dangerous territory.

With its immoderate attacks on the media, te reo, women and the environment, New Zealand First plays upon ethnic, gender and rural-urban polarities to increase its influence far beyond its 6 percent share of the vote.

National's other partner, Act, with its wealthy funders and well-documented links through the Taxpayers' Union and the New Zealand Initiative with the Atlas global network of far-right think tanks, attacks equal opportunities programmes, ministries for women, Pacific peoples and Māori, and seeks a referendum on Te Tiriti.

There is no thought of asking these groups, far more than half of the population, what they think of its proposals. At the same time Act is targeting key structures in the civil service and the education system to implement its right-wing philosophies, far in excess of its 8.6 percent mandate.

Although the authors of comparative studies of pernicious polarisation offer no silver bullet for combating its threats to democratic checks and balances, they warn that responding in kind with vilification and reprisals only speeds up the process.

Rather, they suggest casting light on such stratagems and those who deploy them, and the deliberate strengthening of the middle ground through bi-partisan policymaking, advisory groups that are representative, not packed with members of one's own political tribe,

wide civic engagement and well-moderated, inclusive conversations about divisive matters, in citizens' assemblies, for example.

Most New Zealanders want to live in a peaceful, prosperous, and inclusive country. No society is immune to these divisive strategies, however, especially when backed by large-scale funding, designed by artificial intelligence and delivered by social media.

As a small and relatively isolated nation, New Zealand is vulnerable to this kind of manipulation, and the violence it can engender. We saw this in the recent occupation of Parliament grounds.

Perhaps naively, I think most Kiwi politicians want to serve their fellow citizens. Socially responsible strategists in all political parties must stay alert to deliberate polarisation, realise that it can become uncontrollable and do their best to avoid it. At the beginning of a new political year, this places a huge responsibility on the shoulders of our new Prime Minister, Christopher Luxon, and his advisors.

Like arsonists who light fires that destroy entire communities, self-interested elites who stoke "fears, anxieties and resentments that then become expressed as hostility, bias and eventually enmity" can do the same.

The media need to conduct independent investigations into this kind of politics in New Zealand, and who is funding and guiding their activities.

Ordinary citizens also need to be astute and recognise when they are being played by self-interested political agents, whether domestic or international.

In our small, intimate society, we would be wise to hold fast to mutual goodwill and a sense of decency, recognise genuine grievances and do our utmost to address them, and look for the best in each other.

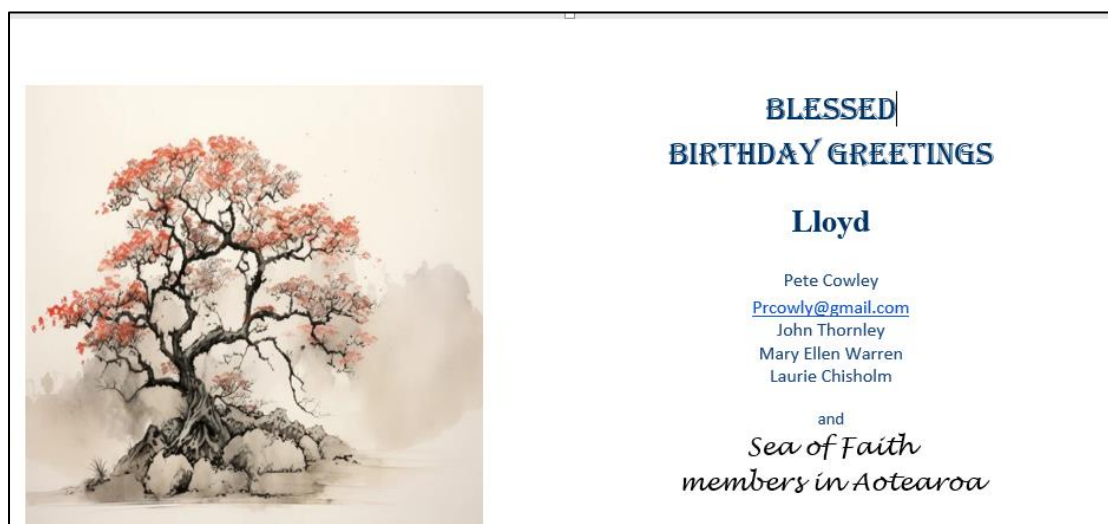
As I learned in 1993, when countries fly apart, there are no safe places to hide.

Dame Anne Salmond

## Happy Birthday, Lloyd!

Believe it or not, the founding father of SOFiA (formerly Sea of Faith), Lloyd Geering, has just celebrated his 105<sup>th</sup> birthday. Cause for celebration all round!

The national management committee sent him a specially designed birthday card to mark the occasion:



## Manawatu Community Radio's First 2024 Programme

Four songs for justice and peace by two women artists open the Wesley Broadway community radio activities for 2024. Gillian and John Thornley share the presentation of a weekly show airing each Tuesday and Saturday, at 11 am. Programmes can be downloaded at the Manawatu People's Radio 999AM.

The February programme shares songs from African-American jazz/soul singer Bettye Lavette and the USA singer/songwriter Natalie Merchant.

Bettye Lavette covers Paul McCartney's song 'Black Bird' from the White Album 1968. Paul writes: 'I had in mind a black woman rather than a bird. These were the days of the civil rights movement, which all of us cared passionately about, so this is really a song from me to a black woman, saying 'Let me encourage you to keep trying, to keep your faith, there is hope.' Betty Lavette makes this song her own, as a tribute to earlier black women songsters, like Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan – and herself – who struggle to have their artistry heard and supported by the wider White audiences. She also covers Billie Holiday's song about lynching 'Strange Fruit'.

The other artist is Natalie Merchant. Her ancestors came from Sicily and her family enjoyed classical music and jazz. In 1993 she formed her own band and set up her own recording company. Her 2023 record, titled 'Keep Your Courage' was included in the NZ Listeners Top Pop recordings

for 2023. The accompaniment for her songs include strings and woodwind instruments.

‘Tower of Babel’ portrays our wounded world, using the ancient image of a large tower. The legend is found in many ancient tales, where people build a high tower to reach the heavens where their gods live. But squabbles and in-fighting bring the tower crashing to the ground. The Dr Seuss book Yertle the Turtle retells the story for the enjoyment of children and adults. Merchant’s version is a more sombre story for a current world in disarray:

Everybody spellbound and waiting  
Everybody roped and tied  
It’s just a tower of Babel  
Nobody get out alive  
Everybody so confused.

Her other original song, ‘The Feast of Saint Valentine’ is an anthem for the future battles we face. There is no denial of harsh realities ahead, but her final lines are a prayer of faith that ‘love will win, love will conquer all’.

Listen to the programme at this link:

[https://bit.ly/wesley\\_methodist\\_merchant-lavette](https://bit.ly/wesley_methodist_merchant-lavette)

The Wesley Broadway partnership with the secular community access radio network offers an outward-looking/listening programme – including interviews, news, and a variety of music that links the sacred and secular worlds – especially the hymns of Aotearoa by Shirley Erena Murray, Colin Gibson and others. The presenters would love to hear from listeners: John and Gillian Thornley: [johngill@inspire.net.nz](mailto:johngill@inspire.net.nz)