



# VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.  
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## African activist visiting Melbourne


**L**eo Igwe is the International Humanist and Ethical Union's representative in West Africa. Based in Nigeria he leads a colourful life, working to combat widespread human rights abuses stimulated by belief in sorcery and superstition. His campaign attracts hostility, not only from powerful religious leaders who organize 'witch hunts' but also from political leaders who object to international publicity about these human rights abuses. In January, while rescuing two children accused of witchcraft in Southern Nigeria, he was imprisoned for kidnapping and was beaten by the police.

His speaking tour of Australia, in association with National Science Week (15–23 August), is sponsored by CSIRO and Australian Skeptics.

Two events in Melbourne we urge Humanist to attend.

Thursday 25 6pm La Notte Restaurant, 140 Lygon St.,  
Carlton. Smorgasbord dinner. Booking details page 3

and



Victorian Humanists  
and Vic Skeptics  
present  
**LEO IGWE**  
Saturday 27th August 2pm  
Trades Hall New Council Chambers  
\$10 (\$5 concession)

## Oslo tragedy

**M**indful that Norwegian Humanists are hosting the 2011 World Humanist Congress, 'Humanism and Peace' in Oslo 12–14 August, we have sent a message of sympathy and solidarity to the Norwegian Humanist Association. We expressed the hope that the horrific mass murder of many young Norwegians would not affect the travel plans of Humanists from around the world who plan to attend the World Congress. Among those attending will be HSV president Stephen Stuart and Jennie Stuart.

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N. B.

NO Monthly  
Public Lecture  
THURSDAY  
25 August

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# Saving the Murray River

HSV Public Lecture on 23 June, Balwyn Library.  
Given by Amelia Young from Environment  
Victoria, a not-for-profit NGO, previously known  
as the Conservation Council of Victoria.

## Report by Margaret Elliott

Amelia's work focuses on seeing that there is enough water in Victorian rivers and that the quality is good. Despite all the recent good rains, the rivers Loddon, Campaspe, Murray, Goulburn and Ovens are still stressed and some are at only 10 per cent capacity.

Environment Victoria's campaign for this year is to save the Murray River for ever. She described this river as 'the heartbeat of the land.' To guarantee water security, EV asked for action from all parties in the state election to secure an adequate, legal entitlement of environmental water for delivery to our parks for 2012. Buying back water was deemed as the most efficient way of returning water to the environment.

EV's vision is that these rivers can support abundant life so that we can enjoy good food, clean water and a place for us to enjoy. The Murray Basin is regarded as the food bowl of Australia.

In 2008, the Brumby Government declared new national parks, on the Goulburn River, parts of the Ovens and all the way to the South Australia border. A proper environmental water programme needs to be put in place for these parks and wetlands to survive.

We have completely changed the way our rivers function by the addition of irrigation channels, locks and weirs. By releasing water for farmers during the summer months the ecological flow has been reversed. Once upon a time the high flow period would have been in the cooler months, now the high flow is during the summer months. Only one catchment that is least regulated and has the fewest dams in the whole of the Murray-Darling Basin is in good condition.

Due to the long drought, the number of water birds has plummeted by 80 per cent. The native birds, including the egret and ibis, are not breeding in great numbers so their recovery will be slow. The number of migratory birds is also down, and without a good supply of water they will not come. A great friend of the farmer is the ibis. It can eat 500 tonnes of grasshoppers in a season.

EV's campaign is to see that the environment receives a fair allocation of water. During droughts the allocation of water to the environment suffers most, although some irrigators did not receive their allocation during the drought either.

### Water use 2007–08

Domestic and Stock	5%
Urban and commercial	17%
Power generation	3%
Irrigation	75%.

### Top 5 users of irrigation water in Northern Victoria, 2001–02 were

Sheep	5%
Fruit	3%
Grapes	4%
Beef	3%
Other	7%
Dairy	78%.

Dairy uses most of the water out of our rivers. Dairy farmers have made some very important changes to be more efficient in the way they handle their herds and the way water is used in the milking process. Amelia spoke about virtual water, which is all the water used at all stages in the production chain. A whopping 2,345 million litres of virtual water goes overseas in the products we export. Dried powdered milk is a big contributor to the amount of virtual water going overseas.

After recent summer rain the health of the rivers was looking very much better. However, what is of concern is that by May the rivers were again in crisis. Also during the floods huge amounts of organic material flowed into our rivers. The consequences were algal blooms, so we can't swim or fish in those areas. Another problem is 'black water', which is very low in oxygen.

There are many different water entitlements. The main ones are high reliability and low reliability. High relates to residents and irrigators, low is water allocated to the environment. EV would like to change the Victorian Water Act so that it is more fair and equitable.

### Murray-Darling Water plan

The Murray Basin plan will be a high-level plan to ensure the water resources of the Murray-Darling Basin can be managed in a sustainable way. The Federal Government recognised that we have a very sick basin and they responded with a review of the Commonwealth Federal Water Act. A requirement of that was to set up the Murray-Darling Water Plan. The Commonwealth Water Act of 2007 was passed by all members of Parliament, bar one, so it had strong bipartisan support.

As campaigners EV was very excited and so were some of the irrigators. It is not just the Greens: there are plenty of irrigators out there who want to see the problem solved. For the first time all our water will be managed by a legally enforceable plan.

The plan is based on the best science and socio-economic data. The draft plan was released in 2010 and there was mass hysteria amongst the irrigators – with book-burning in the street.

Part of the plan is to limit the amount of water that can be taken from our rivers. How much water should be returned to our rivers? The Murray-Darling Basin Authority has confirmed that a paltry 2,800 gigalitres is being considered for the river systems, well short of the 4,000 gigalitres that independent scientists say is needed to revive the system.

The plan is already compromised as it failed to look at the benefits of returning enough water to the rivers. They took into account a 3 per cent drop in flow which is far too low it could be as much as 20 per cent. An inquiry was set up led by the independent member for New England, Tony Windsor. The inquiry recommended that all non-strategic water buyback be stopped, which is very worrying as it is such an efficient way of restoring our rivers.

It was pleasing that the very next week the government opened a tender for a water sale and it has been massively over-subscribed. Every time the government opens a tender for water buyback, irrigators flock to sell their water.

### Local campaign

EV took to the streets in Moonee Ponds and Werribee for a community doorknock to talk to householders about the two most important environment issues we are facing, namely putting an effective price on pollution, and saving the Murray-Darling. They found there was a high level of public support for an important national water reform. This result is that's all the more important given the hot debate that has sprung up around the science behind the soon-to-be-released Basin Plan.

In coming weeks EV will be stepping up the pressure and doing its best to ensure that the Murray-Darling Basin Plan is based on sound science and delivers results for the Murray River. A billboard has been placed by EV on the left as you drive out to the Tullamarine Airport. It shows cupped hands holding water. It is there so that politicians and members of the public can see the message as they leave Melbourne.

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## Get involved

### Sunday discussions

On Sunday 10 July, Tom Mole led a lively discussion on 'Science and Humanism'. The committee would like to continue with this idea, so we invite you to offer to lead a discussion on a topic of your choice – subject committee approval. Or perhaps you'd like to just suggest a topic of interest.

Please contact HSV secretary if interested. New members: we'd especially like to hear from you.

### Can you read French?

HSV receives numerous overseas Humanist publications each month. Several are in French. They give accounts of freethought activities in France and Switzerland. It is some years since we had a member interested in reading and making the occasional translation of selected articles.

Anyone interested in these magazines should contact *VH* editor Rosslyn Ives.

### Receive reminders

Send your e-mail to [rosslyn@netspace.net.au](mailto:rosslyn@netspace.net.au) to receive Humanist meeting reminders.

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## Letters

### Postmodernism and pragmatism

THE POSTMODERNISTS deny that there is such a thing as Truth. But if this is so then there can be no lies.

However, we find language useful in many ways. If there are no truths and no lies but simply statements of greater or lesser utility, then we can judge them only by their practical results.

This is exactly the position of the pragmatists. So we can see that postmodernism is a rather devious route to pragmatism.

Perhaps I was wrong about postmodernism in times past. At least the postmodernists are going in the right direction as far as I'm concerned

I'm aware of the limitations of pragmatism. But I am also aware of the limitations of rationalism.

Peter Sherbrooke, Clayton

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### Crabbed age and youth

[A response to a reflection on 'Aging', by Paul Murchison, *VH*, June]

FOR MY PART, I look back to the time when I was a Socialist with something like regret. I have convinced myself (for the moment) that we had better leave these great changes to what we call great blind forces: their blindness being so much more perspicacious than the little, peering, partial eyesight of men. I seem to see that my own scheme would not answer; and all the other schemes I ever heard propounded would depress some elements of goodness just as much as they encouraged others. Now I know that in thus turning Conservative with years, I am going through the normal cycle of change and travelling in the common orbit of men's opinions. I submit to this, as I would submit to gout or grey hair, as a concomitant of growing age or else of failing animal heat; but I do not acknowledge that it is necessarily a change for the better – I dare say it is deplorably for the worse. I have no choice in the business, and can no more resist this tendency of my mind than I could prevent my body from beginning to totter and decay. If I am spared (as the phrase runs) I shall doubtless outlive some troublesome desires; but I am in no hurry about that; nor, when the time comes, shall I plume myself on the immunity. Just in the same way, I do not greatly pride myself on having outlived my belief in the fairy tales of Socialism. Old people have faults of their own; they tend to become cowardly, niggardly, and suspicious. Whether from the growth of experience or the decline of animal heat, I see that age leads to these and certain other faults; and it follows, of course, that while in one sense I hope I am journeying towards the truth, in another I am indubitably posting towards these forms and sources of error.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1877)

## Census campaigns

SEVERAL countries around the world, including Australia, are conducting a census of this year. This has encouraged Humanist and other freethought groups to campaign to maximise the 'no religion' numbers.

While we know that active religious involvement is waning in western countries, the puzzling thing is that the number identifying with a religion is still quite high. Lyn Allison discusses this in her contribution to the Sunday session at the CAHS Convention on Sunday 1 May. (Text in *AH* No. 103.)

An American sociologist, Barry A. Kosmin, writing in the *International Humanist News* May 2011 writes as follows.

'Most people who have attended a social science or survey methodology course soon learn that the way questions are worded affects the results that are obtained. This is particularly a concern in an arena which is ideologically contested and where terminology is not agreed. In the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) series which I have led since 1990 we make clear distinctions between Belonging questions – *what is your religion, if any?* – Belief questions – *Does God exist?* And Behaviour questions – *Do you pray?* or *Did you have a religious marriage ceremony?* The pattern of answers in the three realms does not run in parallel across most populations because the secularization process varies across these realms. The general tendency is that among both people and societies, religious behaviour erodes first, then religious belief declines and only later is religious belonging or identification abandoned.

He also points out the pattern for the religion question on censuses is to list main religions and place the 'no religion' languishing below all other possibilities.'

### Receive your VH by e-mail

Please advise Dan Kerr [victorianhumanist@gmail.com](mailto:victorianhumanist@gmail.com) and Marie Hodgens [hmhodge@netspace.net.au](mailto:hmhodge@netspace.net.au) if you'd like to receive future VHs by e-mail.

### Think Inc. Conference 18 September 2011

Speakers include: Neil deGrasse Tyson, Christopher Hitchens, Tim Flannery, Michael Shermer, Shane Koyczan, Josh Thomas, Fr. Bob Maguire, and others.

Australian Humanists are official promotional partners of Think Inc. Conference.

For bookings and more information go to <http://www.thinkinc.org.au/edm>

## Worth quoting

[Source: *Humanist Anthology*, Edited by Margaret Knight, Rationalist Press Association, 1961.]

NONE sees a religion die; dead religions are like dead languages and obsolete customs: the decay is long and – like the glacier march – is perceptible only to the careful watcher by comparisons extending over long periods

Charles Bradlaugh, *Humanity's Gain From Unbelief* (1889)

HUMANISTS have been debating for years the proper definition of Humanism. It is clear that Humanism is not a dogma or creed and that there are many varieties of, and meanings given to, Humanism. Nevertheless, one may suggest at least four characteristics that contemporary Humanists emphasize.

First, Humanists have some confidence in man and they believe that the only bases for morality are human experience and human needs. Second, many or most Humanists are opposed to all forms of supernaturalistic and authoritarian religion. Third, many Humanists believe that scientific intelligence and critical reason can assist in reconstructing our moral values. And fourth, Humanism is humanitarian in that it is concerned with the good life and social justice as moral ideals.

Paul Kurtz, *The Humanist Alternative* (1973)

HUMANIST beliefs are based on human knowledge, especially on the knowledge-explosion of the hundred years since Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, which has revealed to us a wholly new picture of the universe and of our place in it. We now believe with confidence that the whole of reality is one gigantic process of evolution. This produces increased novelty and variety, and ever higher types of organisation; in a few spots it has produced life; and, in a few of those spots of life, it has produced mind and consciousness.

Julian Huxley, 'The Faith of a Humanist' (Talk broadcast in 1960)

### Global Atheist Convention Melbourne 13-15 April 2012

The Atheist Foundation of Australia's next convention "A Celebration of Reason" will feature Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens (health permitting).

[www.atheistconvention.org.au](http://www.atheistconvention.org.au)

### Have your say

Contributions to *VH* newsletter, most welcome. Send to *VH* editor c/o PO Box 1555, Melbourne Vic 3001 or email [rosslyn@netspace.net.au](mailto:rosslyn@netspace.net.au)