## From the Kitchen

8 December 2010



The question of "What is truth?" is being debated and argued about around the world as are the questions: "Is truth important?"; "Should truth come out, no matter what?"; "Who should control truth?"; "Who does control truth?"; "Should anyone be punished for telling the truth?"; and many other related ones.

We bring up our children to believe, and tell ourselves and each other, that the truth is important and that lying is (usually) a bad thing. Yet we learn (again) that governments lie to their citizens with apparent impunity and immunity. Those who elect their respective governments seem so jaded that they expect governments to lie and don't punish them for it – the Australian Government's obvious and repeated lies about asylum seekers in the first eight years of this century is an indication of this, as was their repeated re-election.

The reactions to the publication of leaked diplomatic documents (although most seem to be decidedly undiplomatic) are indicative of the disparate views on the issue of truth. There have been public campaigns (some run by governments) to teach people that they should not put in writing anything that might embarrass them if made public, yet that is precisely what many governments and their agencies have been doing. The publication has been and continues to be embarrassing, as has the scramble to label the publication as illegal, dangerous, against the public interest and even an act of terrorism. In the USA politicians have been publically calling for the assassination of those involved and anyone associated with those involved. The embarrassment is so acute that those who feel affronted by the publication of the inappropriate missives seem to have forgotten the basic tenets of civilisation and its institutions of law enforcement and justice.

When Salman Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, politicians in the USA, the UK and Australia vociferously condemned the Jihad calling for Rushdie's assassination. Now politicians in the same countries are declaring their own Jihad, or at least failing to condemn those who are calling for blood.

It would be comforting to believe that the outing of these inappropriate and often hurtful remarks by government ministers and diplomats about others will change how intergovernment business is conducted in the future. However, it is more likely that scapegoats will be chosen and punished, that some apologies will be sent to aggrieved governments and that after a suitable period of mourning and self-flagellation, governments will carry on as they have always done.

Unfortunately, the carrying-on will include lying to the populace about important issues, such as why wars are to be waged, what the benefits of intergovernmental agreements are, why more action to protect the environment is bad for he economy and why it is good for our society that governments enter into commercial deals with private enterprise, the details of which must be kept secret.

One would be forgiven for suspecting that not much has changed since feudal times other than the identity of those in power, the means of their coming to power and the average standard of living. Theoretically our democratically elected governments can be held to account but they rarely are and those politicians who perpetrate outrages on society frequently avoid the dire consequences that should be their due.

Politicians routinely promise, at election time, that, if elected, their government will be more open and more transparent with information more readily available to the media and the public. When elected, they rarely deliver on those promises and, even if they do, the often limited 'openness' progressively disappears and the hurdles to be jumped to obtain information are steadily made higher. We owe much to those sections of our media which are willing to invest in good journalism that gives us at least some access to important information on which we can base sound choices in our complex lives. The more that information is withheld from us, the more we act blindly and the more easily we can be manipulated.