



Clockwise from left, a logjam on the Rajang River caused by widespread logging; the new landscape of oil palms and electricity pylons; and the palms planted near the resettlement site at Asap, on the Koyan River. Photos: PAUL MALONE

Jingle bells of crass commercialism

WE OFTEN get a laugh in this job, as I did last week when reading a publicist's blurb that the *Australian Book of Atheism* will be published "just in time for Christmas."

Little wonder Christians despair at the general lack of understanding of one of their major religious festivals. The "just in time for Christmas" suggests this book on atheism is an ideal Christmas gift. For some, perhaps it is, but to even link the title with Christmas is to disregard or disrespect the religious significance of Christmas.

Christians are generally generous in welcoming people of other faiths or none to share Christmas, despite the fact that many reasonably regret the commercial intrusion or, more correctly, the almost complete commercial domination of the season.

Even for many people of limited or no religious commitment, the values of Christmas – encouragement to peaceful living and generosity of spirit – permeate their lives. These values are not echoed in the crass commercialism which treats Christmas as the best opportunity to top up the books.

With a heading which included the phrase "The Grinch who stole Christmas", the Australian Retailers Association last week targeted the Reserve Bank of Australia for increasing interest rates. The association's executive director, Russell Zimmerman, says retailers needed the bank to continue its freeze on interest rate rises in the lead up to Christmas to give retailers a chance to recoup after a year of slow trade.

"History tells us that when consumers have to deal with increased mortgage repayments in the few months before Christmas it has disastrous impact on retail trade during the festive season," he said.

By all means have a point of view on whether the increase was good or bad, but to regard Christmas as nothing more than a commercial opportunity is disrespectful to those who value it as a religious occasion. Imagine the outrage by



politically correct, multicultural champions if major religious festivals of other faiths were treated this way.

Recently, also taking advantage of the approach of Christmas to solicit funds, three worthy church agencies suggested 10 per cent of Australians live in poverty. The figure is fanciful, though much of the poverty identified by Anglicare Australia, CatholicCare and the Salvation Army is a result of poor choices by people buying products

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they cannot afford or could do without. And retailers will use Christmas to offer an increasing supply of new and unnecessary stuff we can all do without.

Anglicare Australia's executive director Kasy Chambers says Australia doesn't give everyone a fair go. But it must be acknowledged there are successive generations of children who through neglect and a lack of encouragement are destined to be financially and socially poor. If this could be overcome, they and Australia would be greatly improved.

Nevertheless, the approach of Christmas is a reminder that there are people who through unforeseen circumstances need and deserve support by those who are better off. That NSW and Victorian residents last week bet a record \$98.1 million on the Melbourne Cup indicates there is money to spare.

No rhyme or reason to big dams

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

The authorities now realise that this costly option is uneconomic.

Nevertheless, this problem has not fazed the Government and the planners. Another 12 dams have been proposed for the region and development of the Murum Dam, up another tributary of the Rajang river and 70km from Bakun, is well underway.

Opposition MPs have questioned the need for the dams and called for a halt to further work. Kuching MP Chong Chieng Jen Chong said there was no need to construct more dams as Sarawak already had excess power capacity of 30 per cent. The state used 900 megawatts at peak hour and the Sarawak Electricity Supply Corporation provided 1300 megawatts. The Bakun Dam would add 2400 megawatt to capacity and the Murum Dam an additional 940 megawatts.

Chong said that the dams were constructed by crony companies of the Chief Minister and the abuse had to stop. They were neither economically viable nor environment friendly.

But such comments, which would fire up a significant proportion of the electorate in Australia, appear to generate little interest in Sarawak. Partly this is because of the tame media and partly it is due to the power and economic influence of the Chief Minister and Government.

The wider indigenous community does not see, hear or read of the environmental destruction across the state. Nor is there any understanding of the economic lunacy of the plans. In addition there is a long tradition of open government payments to headmen in each small village or longhouse community. This link with the Government helps keep these leaders docile.

There are some signs that the

younger generation of potential leaders – better educated in democratic rights and with a better understanding of how their communities have been ripped off through the hand-over of their forests and rivers to the logging and palm oil companies – will take a stronger stand in the future.

But time is rapidly running out. Primary forest now survives only in the most remote and inaccessible regions and only the Penan maintain a consistent stand against its decimation.

An election is due by July next year, but there is speculation that it could be called sooner. The 74-year-old Chief Minister Taib has announced that he is willing to again lead his Barisan Nasional Party and Government, and commentators speculate that this is an indication that the state will go to the polls soon.

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WHERE TO DONATE BLOOD

CANBERRA DONOR CENTRE

RED CROSS HOUSE, Dann Close, Garran. Open tomorrow 8.15am to 3.30pm; Tuesday 7.30am to 3pm (whole blood), 7.30am to 5.50pm (plasma); Wednesday 11.15am to 6.45pm; Thursday 7.30am to 3pm; Friday 7.30am to 2.45pm.

DONOR MOBILE

COOMA Massie Street Council carpark. Tomorrow closed. Tuesday 9.40am to 3.30pm; Wednesday 9.40am to 3.30pm; Thursday 9.40am to 3.30pm; Friday 9.40am to 3.30pm. BARTON, 38 Sydney Avenue, Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy. Open Monday, November 15, 9.30am to 3pm; Tuesday, November 16, 9am to 2.30pm; Wednesday, November 17, 9am to 2.30pm.

PARLIAMENTARY TRIANGLE, Sir John Gorton Building, Parkes Place East, Parkes. Open Thursday, November 18, 9am to 2.30pm; Friday, November 19, 9am to 2.30pm.

TALLIES PUBLIC SECTOR

	No.
Australian Defence Organisation	284
Immigration and Citizenship	218
Centrelink	127
Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry	110
Health and Ageing	106
%	
Sports Anti-Doping Authority	27.69
Cancer Australia	21.74
Australian Organ and Tissue Authority	19.23
National Water Commission	19.05
Crim Trac Agency	16.67

HIGHER EDUCATION

	No.
ANU Medical School	66
University of Canberra	55
ANU Students of Arts and Sciences	37
ANU Bruce Hall	34
Canberra Institute of Technology	19
%	
ANU Medical School	18.33
ANU Bruce Hall	10.63
ANU Mathematical Sciences Institute	6.67
ANU Facilities and Services	4.29
Canberra Institute of Technology	1.9

PRIVATE SECTOR

	No.
CEA Technologies	27
Community CPS Australia Ltd	19

CORPORATE BLOOD CHALLENGE

Fujitsu	15
SMEC	15
Pharmacy Guild of Australia	11
%	
Face 2 Face Recruitment Ltd	160
Niemsoto Investments	140
Teddy Bear Shop	80
Wisdom Learning	50
Kazar Slaven	47.06

EMBASSY SECTOR

	No.
United States	38
Netherlands	7
Syrian Arab Republic	2
Britain	1
Indonesia	1
%	
Netherlands	47.67
United States	19
Syrian Arab Republic	12.50
Iraq	10
Indonesia	3.70

COMMUNITY SECTOR

	No.
Retiree Volunteers	44
Corpus Christi Parish	43
Scouts ACT	43
Rotary Clubs	27
BMW Motorcycle Club ACT	11
%	
Rotary Clubs	122.73
Gourmet Walkers	87.50

Marymead Child and Family Centre	64.29
Weston Creek Uniting Church	55
UNIFEM Australia	42.86

LEGAL SECTOR

	No.
Sparke Helmore	10
Blake Dawson	7
Dibbs Barker Lawyers	7
Australian Government Solicitor	6
Blumers Lawyers	3
%	
Sparke Helmore	27.03
Blumers Lawyers	20
Dibbs Barker Lawyers	18.92
Blake Dawson	10.94
Law Council of Australia	8.7

VAMPIRE SHIELD

LARGE SCHOOLS

	No.
Narrabundah College	67
Canberra College	41
Erindale College	25
Lake Tuggeranong College	21
Dickson College	9
Lake Ginninderra College	8
Hawker College	5
%	
Narrabundah College	7.26
Canberra College	5.13
Erindale College	2.78
Lake Ginninderra College	1.33

Australian Red Cross BLOOD SERVICE

Dickson College	1.2
Hawker College	0.55

SMALL SCHOOLS

	No.
Merici College	65
Queanbeyan High	52
Karabah High	39
Daramalan College	36
Marist College	20
Radford College	16
St Clare's College	13
Canberra Girls' Grammar	9
Braidwood Central School	8
Mackillop Catholic College	6
%	
Queanbeyan High	52
Karabar High	32.5
Merici College	30.37
Braidwood Central School	16.67
Daramalan College	8
Radford College	5.33
Marist College	5
St Clare's College	4.06
Canberra Girls' Grammar	3.75
Mackillop Catholic College	1.65