

# Overview of the Restraint Project

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It all started when I wrote a book on the history of Australian philosophy called [Corrupting the Youth](#). I understood “philosophy” widely and found myself in the strange world of character education of a century ago. The secular Australian school system had no intention of abdicating responsibility for forming the moral character of students, and developed a range of ideas from civics education to Boy Scouts to surf lifesaving for doing something about it.

I said:

In the decades up to 1940, there were large falls in the rates of murder and suicide; drunkenness was contained; the age of marriage rose and births fell to levels not seen till decades after the Pill. The story of the spread of restraint in the first half of the twentieth century, when great sections of society pulled themselves out of the cycle of poverty, violence and alcohol addiction through intense

effort devoted to temperance, thrift, self-control and hard work, has yet to be told.<sup>1</sup>

I recalled accounts of the depression, where people's mentality was different. Here's a memorable example from someone born in 1932:

You couldn't say my mother squandered anything. It was her pride that she had once walked half a mile to say a penny on a cabbage. Our Sunday roast was served up cold on Monday, and minced into rissoles on Tuesday. She remembered the bread and dripping of her childhood and often told me that "of those to whom much is given, much will be expected". She wished her own mother could see how comfortable she was, with her refrigerator, and electric iron, and the three-piece suite and the chiming clock. ... In the evenings when my father was at work my mother would produce her wooden darning mushroom and sit under the parchment standard lamp while she listened to *The Amateur Hour* on the wireless.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia* (Sydney, 2003), 224-5.

<sup>2</sup> L. Cunningham, Who would fardels bear? *Quadrant*, June 2000, 50-52.

(If the younger people here don't know what "darning" is, please ask an old person at morning tea.)

Plainly there was a story there – of restricted lives but also of people struggling to raise themselves out of poverty by self-control. It benefited their children but in the end also enraged many of them, and the generation of the Sixties complained endlessly about how grey, boring, and oppressive their parents' set of values was. Since 1970, we haven't heard much positive talk of temperance, self-control or restraint. Or have we? Every so often, there's a sudden campaign about binge drinking or similar, and everyone seems to understand the concepts in some implicit way.

I talked to Cathy Legg about it and she said, that's interesting, let's get on with telling the story.

So we applied for a grant, as you do. In the way of grant applications, we promised quite a lot about what we were going to do. We said that for a complete picture we'd have to cover:

- Philosophy/ethics: There's a well-established tradition of virtue ethics which situates temperance as a moral virtue alongside justice, courage and prudence; it's necessary to

say something about human nature to establish what the point of self-control is (and how much is too much). My conception was that temperance is not a good in itself, but a means to having a character that is in control so as to do what's morally necessary. My model is a teenager proud that he's the sort of person able to drive his friends home safely. And here we have to consider in-principle objections to restraint as an ideal: for example from people with abuse for "wowsers" and "moralists" – in my view those words are mostly just abusive rhetoric, but they can be justified accusations, in that the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean applies: one can have too little, but too much is also possible

- History of ideas: Ideas on temperance and how to educate people in it have developed since Plato, not only in philosophy but in literature (Jane Austen is possibly the classic novelist on the topic) and psychology, educational theory, medicine and so on
- Australian history: I was particularly interested in the contrast between the pro-restraint Depression era and the

post-Sixties let-it-rip era, but I suspected the contrast was not as stark as it seemed, in that people's current behaviour, with regard to risk for example, was much more restrained than public discourse might suggest

- Psychology and health studies: Individual and family differences in desires and attitudes are plainly important in skills of self-control and have implications for what kind of drug and alcohol education is effective. I have my doubts about the relevance of the most common paradigms of research in those fields, which concentrate on "causal factors", as if you understand, say, binge drinking when you've found it's correlated with social disadvantage or extroversion or some such measurable quality. The Restraint project, coming as it does from ethics, prefers to concentrate on individual decision: someone under peer pressure to take a dangerous drug is in the end on their own with a decision to make, yes or no. Any emphasis on individual moral decision will cause accusations from some parties that the Restraint project is an exercise in "blaming the victim".

- Education: Recurrent debates on “values education” could move out from a fixation on the virtue of tolerance to include some of the others, temperance included. It’s a difficult virtue to make attractive – but not impossible, which is why *Casablanca* is such a success
- Sociology: if the rate of births to teenagers in Walgett is 13 times what is on the Lower North Shore,<sup>3</sup> obviously some inquiry is called for on the differences in behaviours among communities
- Indigenous affairs: I was concerned at the contrast between “our” society and remote indigenous communities with regard to restraint, especially restraint of violence. I was appalled by happy crowds streaming across the Harbour Bridge celebrating “reconciliation”. That's all self-congratulatory bullshit, I said to myself, while it’s a mess, and no real inquiry into why those communities lack the skills in self-control that our ability to walk down the street safely is founded on. I thought it

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<sup>3</sup> A. Evans, The outcome of teenage pregnancy: temporal and spatial trends, *People and Place* 11 (2) (2003), 39-49.

was not very likely however that I would be able to find expertise in that area

Then I was surprised when \$146k fell out of the air.

So how's it gone in the 3 years?

There's good news and bad news.

We have had some successes:

In the history of ideas: Judy Stove, a classics expert originally, has been surveying ideas on restraint from the ancient Greeks. She's now up to about 1800.

In literature we had some interesting work by Susan Moore and again by Judy on Jane Austen and Henry James

In 2007, I found myself addressing briefly 2000 people at a Darling Harbour conference on "Happiness", and there was some [newspaper coverage](#) of that.

Cathy has worked on "cognitive restraint" and the social aspects of knowledge, which in a community of scientists, for

example, restraint individual eccentricities of belief to achieve stability of communal knowledge.

On indigenous violence, I did get to know an expert, Jenness Warin, and we wrote a [Bennelong Society paper](#) based on her long experience. This is not strictly part of the Restraint project itself, but a spinoff has been an Australian Database of Indigenous Violence, now on the web in a trial version, <http://www.indigenousviolence.org>, There is a <http://www.quadrant.org.au/magazine/issue/2008/451/the-cultural-roots-of-aboriginal-violence> last month by me on cultural factors in remote violence and there is further work in preparation by Jenness and by Stephanie Jarrett, who has a PhD already in the area.

We had work on an unexpected topic: [Anna Christie on nappies](#) and the rise in age of toilet training since the 1960s. Since toilet training is where humans first train in restraint, this is important.

Failures:

I didn't know what I was doing with grants and asked for the money mainly to employ casual researchers. I have advice: If you're applying for a grant, don't do that. It's an organizational nightmare, and that's if the people actually complete their work.

I'd like to remember especially Mairead Costigan, who submitted preliminary work to the project based on her thesis on Plato but shortly afterwards committed suicide, possibly caused by sleeping pills.<sup>4</sup>

We have got really nowhere on Australian history, sociology or health.

OK, here we are, let's start talking...

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/did-a-sleeping-pill-end-her-brilliant-life/2008/02/18/1203190740530.html>