



LETTERS

Divided Nations

May I comment on a couple of points in David Burchell's item in 'Margins', ALR 125 (February).

While there were those in the anti-Gulf War movement in the United States who espoused horror at all wars, the most vocal and the most numerous participants were led by the churches and Vietnam veterans who have consistently campaigned against the use of the Contras against Nicaragua and El Salvador's rightwing government, losing some of their own people in those struggles. Clergy and priests have been jailed in the United States for harbouring and assisting refugees from El Salvador and Chile.

It is unfair to give the impression that those who could not differentiate between a just and unjust war were a large slice of the United States protest movement. I must admit that there were grounds for confusion when a group formed to support the war effort answered its phone by saying "Peace Committee" and one of the main anti-war groups called itself "The Military Family Support Network" (families of some of those in the desert who opposed the war).

It is not the integrity of the United Nations that should concern us but that of the United States who, after years of refusing to pay its share of UN funding suddenly comes forward with its dues, making all sorts of promises to all sorts of nations. Will the United Nations now cease ignoring the 1 March 1980 resolution calling upon Israel to withdraw

from the West Bank and Gaza Strip? Who runs the UN? Two days after the 1980 vote President Carter disavowed US support even though his representative had voted for it!

For those of us involved in "the great struggle" for "collective security", we were about defending the USSR, not oil. At that time it wasn't a mistake. But this time?

Betty Searle,
Mosman, NSW

Witch-hunt

I read Yvonne Preston's article on ritual child abuse (ALR 126, March) with interest and concern. Protecting children from harm is a very human and commendable goal. But there is an old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In her last paragraph Preston derides "male columnists" who fear "witch-hunts". Yet her article itself demonstrates that it is not only males who are being accused. I refer to the allegations about the old Sydney woman whom children called "the hag".

A few centuries ago, witch-hunts were more than a figure of speech. "Hags" were regularly hanged or burnt at the stake for tormenting the innocent to please the Devil. Children and adolescents were key witnesses in many of the classic witch-hunts, including the one at Salem, Massachusetts. Ann Putnam, 12-year-old leader of the group who identified the Salem witches and wizards, was later to admit that her evidence had been wrong—14 years after the trials and hangings.

While the Salem charges weren't identical to those in Preston's article, the purge demonstrated two important things. Firstly, that children aren't always reliable witnesses. Secondly, that fear of devilish religion breeds injustice. Out of such fears grew the "blood libel" against European Jews, the claim that they killed Christian infants for ritual purposes, especially at Passover. More recently, a nation's fascinated horror with the idea of child sacrifice led to the false imprisonment of a Seventh Day Adventist called Lindy Chamberlain. Rumour had it that

the name Azaria meant "sacrifice in the desert". In this instance forensic experts, not children, came up with the prosecution evidence—demonstrating that adults can get things wrong too.

In the days of the witch-hunts there may well have been a few people who experimented with "satanic" inversions of church rituals, as there are in Christian countries today. Conceivably, some of these activities caused physical or psychological harm, either to children or to adults. But the harm done by well-meaning witch-hunters was (and perhaps will be) much greater.

I object to any practices (ritual, sexual or otherwise) which injure or upset children. Inquiry into children's allegations would be welcome, if only it could be accompanied by enough sensitivity to avoid worsening any trauma, and by enough scepticism to avoid smearing or convicting people who have done nothing wrong. Children are not little angels incapable of falsehood or confusion, nor are they imps perpetually full of mischief—they are human.

But Preston equates scepticism with "slander". She points to "the inappropriateness of the adversarial court system" for ritual abuse cases. She also approvingly cites "a member of a special investigating unit in the United States" as saying that "occult crime should be seen as the outcome of the decline in rationalism, disenchantment with traditional religion, the influence of Eastern religions, para-psychology, the popularity of pseudo-satanic heavy metal music and the proliferation of occult literature."

For consistent defenders of human rights there can be no exceptions to the principle that an accused person is innocent until proven guilty. The right to a defence and the benefit of any reasonable doubt must be granted even to such un-American elements as Buddhists, heavy metal fans and tarot card enthusiasts. Even to Jews and Seventh Day Adventists. Even to "hags".

Otherwise we are back in Salem.

Colin Robinson,
Sydney, NSW.