

**"Australia and the World
at the Dawn of 2004"
Report of a Listening Post
held on Wednesday 14th January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Participants were invited to identify, contribute and explore their preoccupations and experiences in their various social roles.

Issues came up around terrorism, the incarceration of refugees including children, shame, Australia's protection of its borders, loss of an old way of life, our now being 'in the world' because of globalisation, a culture of narcissism, guilt (or lack of it) in youth, ethics, disability, treatment of the 'other', increasing gaps between rich and poor, Christianity and Islam, educational opportunities and fears for our children.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

Major themes were identified by the participants.

1. A major theme was around the experience of disconnectedness and anger. This was expressed through various sub-themes.

1. (a). The first was expressed as feelings of disconnection with the politicians

who are supposed to represent us. Participants felt angered and shamed with the Australian Government for its role and decisions with respect to asylum seekers, in particular, for the holding of children in custody, the incident of the Tampa* (refusal to let boat people into Australia even when their lives were at risk) and our presence in the war with Iraq.

* The Tampa incident in 2001 occurred when a Norwegian cargo ship the 'Tampa' rescued asylum seekers off isolated Christmas Island as they tried to sail to Australia in an unseaworthy boat from Indonesia. These people were stranded for several days on the ship while Australia refused to take them. They were later located on Naru, a pacific island awaiting processing of refugee status.

1. (b). The second was a disconnectedness felt between people globally in terms of the Christian - Islamic split.

1. (c). The third more minor expression, was a disconnectedness between the generations. This was expressed through stories of the 'younger generation' as being either without guilt or angry and dispossessed.

(It came out in the discussion that the youngest person there felt it hard to put her view forward and a New Zealander felt shut out).

2. The second major theme was around the experience that life and society are becoming more polarised. This was seen in terms of racism, generation differences, rich and poor, educational opportunities. Linked to this was a debate around whether we are in real danger from the 'other' (from terrorism or other cultures) or whether this idea of danger is manufactured by the government who play on fears. Are the real dangers the polarities within ourselves? between rich and poor, for example? Other differences are between those who have an agenda of social justice and those who support the government and its (racist/ anti-refugee) undertones. Who are the racists?

3. The third major theme was called 'the loss of illusion'. There was a feeling (especially amongst some of the older men) that the 1950's had been a golden age for Australia and that this was now lost. What Australia once stood for was no longer there. This was recognised as an illusion because people recognised that we had had the infamous 'White Australia Policy' that there was the stolen generation (of indigenous people) and that many (eg, minorities, women) had not shared in the golden age. But there was a feeling of loss for white men.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

It was difficult to come up with articulate hypotheses. The discussion had been lively with many ideas. But some hypotheses emerged. Interestingly they emerged from individuals and a great debate to refine them into group hypotheses did not really occur. Was this more evidence about our individualistic culture or also reflecting the small amount of time we had for this work?

Analysis and Hypotheses 1,2&3

Analysis: The discussion about the asylum seekers was dominant. This issue is seen as a racist issue. Individuals don't want to be part of it. Yet where are those who vote for the government? A million people voted for Pauline Hanson* and the Howard government has collected her constituency. Government manufactures public opinion. But, the anti Iraq war rallies were huge and there is strong feeling about the asylum seekers being incarcerated, particularly children. Government often does not represent the majority view and there is anger about this.

* Pauline Hanson with David Etteridge created a new political party the 'One Nation' party in 1997 after Hanson had been elected to the federal government in 1996 as a Queensland representative on the Senate. This party promoted racist ideology and attracted over a million votes in 1998.

Hypothesis 1: There is shame and anger in Australia about the way we (through our government) have treated the asylum seekers.

Hypothesis 2: We have outgrown the current political system which perpetuates us being seen by what our government says. We need new ways of being represented.

Hypothesis 3: Australian public opinion will cease to be manufactured. People will stand up against what they are being fed. This will show in elections.

Analysis and Hypotheses 4,5&6

Analysis: There was an attempt to look at the listening post membership. Most were in their 40's or 50's. One member said that she was neither 'baby boomer' nor 'youth' (two poles of the age theme) and to her the discussion had felt like a history lesson. She spoke of the 'burden of the past' with no 'lightness of the future' although she felt that there was optimism and energy in her organisation which was young and multicultural. Did the loss of an illusion and the smashed ideals (about what Australia represented before the Tampa, the Bali bombing and the shame about our governments treatment of the refugees) mean our identity has changed, in our own and others eyes? What is our identity?

Are we a narcissistic society? Is youth without guilt? What of the disposed youth? What do the other countries think of us? Do they even know us? For example, 70% of US citizens could not find Australia on the map, yet practically all Australians know quite a lot about the US.

Hypothesis 4: Younger people want not to be part of the group that is the older generation. We (the older people) cannot let go of the past.

Hypothesis 5: A robust, mature community can hold past, present and conflicting views without polarising. We need to link knowledge of the past with hope for the future. Being without guilt leads to a narcissistic and fragmented community. But, guilt does not lead to good relations either.

Hypothesis 6: We are mourning the loss of egalitarianism and compassion in Australia. We are not even sure if they ever were or if we are mourning an illusion.

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