

**"Australia and the World
at the Dawn of 2008"
Report of a Listening Post**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

A. Themes

This year's listening post surfaced themes of marginalisation linked with generational change, the seeming collision of worlds and its corollary of hypocrisy in the external world, and a (continuing) theme of death and its related themes of survival and violence. Participants spoke from their social roles as parents, as professional workers engaged in humanitarian and social work, and from the perspectives of people who were in their middle years and older stages of life.

Experiences of being a refugee from a violent political state struck a deep chord within the group, where the idea of being a refuge, or taking refuge, was as powerful as the idea that 'once a refugee, always a refugee'. Participants noted that wider societal issues such as global insecurity, financial inequality or radical powerlessness were not present in their preoccupations.

Eight people participated in the event (9 January is smack in the middle of our summer holidays and many people are away on leave). This raised some concerns about whether their views could be thought of as representative of Australian society. However, within the group itself, there was considerable diversity of age, ethnic origin, life experiences, gender etc. A common factor was an interest in the social and psychological welfare of humanity.

Marginalisation

Marginalisation was experienced in feeling disconnected from 'the action', no longer feeling that 'I am holding the future' as it is embodied in the life of youth, feeling eclipsed by a younger generation who are 'overtaking' the older generation, and also of feeling eccentric to the mainstream world. The baton is changing hands.

However, a retired participant noted how much she enjoyed the inter-generational rhythm of life experienced in her role as a retiree. Another participant noted that the [christian] image of madonna and child depicts a young woman with an older child.

But it is not just about generations, it also seems to be of our culture becoming marginalised and overtaken by other cultures. What was once the 'developing world' (India and China) has become the developed world. The test cricket match currently underway in Australia is generating great controversy – racial taunts and accusations of racism have raised hackles on both sides. It was pointed out that the most powerful cricket nation in the world is India, and that their peak cricket body could bring the tour to a halt. There is a feeling that the developed countries are getting their 'come-uppance' from the 'old' third world countries.

A participant told a playful story about 'intelligent playing' with politicians that 'serves to preserve the world I'm in, but makes little difference to the other'.

Collision of Worlds

The collisions seem to be between what is real and unreal, the old and the new, the past and the present, running away from or staying present with events occurring in front of you. A story was told of a group visiting the external world of war in the middle-East, with the intent of peace-making action, but internally, the group was at war with itself.

The forthcoming Catholic World Youth Day to be held in Sydney (June 2008) felt disturbing for one participant. The event will bring half a million young people here, to meet the Pope. "It makes no sense theologically, but sociologically there is something going on". It was felt as disturbing and with an element of violence in it, emphasised by the facts that defence lands and a race-course will be used as camp-grounds, and that the local leader of the organising group is seen to be 'a bully'.

Another participant spoke of what feels to be a collision of professional models of working between younger and older professionals. The professional meetings run by younger people are seen to be more along the lines of 'tribal gatherings' rather than the orderly manner familiar to older professionals. The younger generation seem not to be prepared to live through the 'apprenticeship' model of working life, wanting to be at the 'top' from the very beginning of their working life.

One person met an escapee from a detention centre at a social BBQ; he felt so angry that this man was put into detention that he helped the man hide from the authorities. This raised an interesting discussion on refugee roles: being a refugee from what is familiar but unsafe, or taking a role as refuge for another's safety etc.

Language is experienced as a powerful tool for connecting and disconnecting people, for making people invisible, and that while our technologies have a tremendous capacity to connect us, the sustainability of our [English] language is at risk of no longer speaking directly and plainly for us. There is a preponderance of 'weasel words' & hypocrisy. Then there are those who do not speak the local language at all, or very little – 'without language a person essentially doesn't exist'.

Death and survival

Many of the stories related by participants told of 'men destroyed' by violence through civil war, an alcohol-related car accident, being held as an 'illegal migrant' in a government detention centre, or of not existing in society when one does not speak the local/native language. Women seem to be invisible as a consequence. A link was made to the long years of the George Bush-John Howard alliance that is now nearing its end. It was felt by some female participants to be a particular male paradigm that alienated and angered them. It was felt as an oppressive paradigm. A collective relief was felt around Australia with the defeat of John Howard in the recent Australian federal elections. The US elections are of interest too, and curiously it feels more radical to elect a young black man than an older white woman, who was also once a first lady.

A preoccupation with stories of violent deaths – of a man who was stabbed in his house, of a drunk man who dies in a car accident – reveal the violence beneath the superficiality of life. The experiences of one participant who came to Australia as a refugee 15 years ago, and who feels defined by this in the external world, as if the task

of a refugee is 'to survive your refugee-ness'. Beneath the civility and politeness of 'we accept refugees here' is a permanent judgement of that person is 'a refugee'.

The media and its constant communication of war, famine and death connects people everyday, in their living room, with the world and its impact. It is like we 'see' death everyday. Then there are those of us who don't watch and can pretend it doesn't exist, or feel guilty about our privileged life (survivor guilt).

B. Hypothesis

The mainly middle aged and middle class group struggled with a deep sense of survival anxiety in the face of profound global changes such as, mass migrations, shifts in global economics, economic inequality and poverty, environmental degradation, racial and religious differences, spread of war and violence. There was a concern that the resulting sense of powerlessness was driving people into an individual world and a loss of community.

As this was shared there arose reports of 'new cells' being created, which valued connection and creative action, e.g. 'Get Up' groups, younger work groups, intergenerational groups, 'social justice' groups. These 'new cells' influenced how people voted in the recent national election, when people voted for specific agenda change for the future. Hope was rekindled.

*We are refugees from a cultural home
and we feel unsafe.*

*We are not sure where we'll find sanctuary
or meaning or hope.*

*We see a destruction of the familiar (a disaster scenario),
and that a new world order is emerging to take its place.*

*We are in the process of apprehending that,
and while we experience and connect
with its darkness and violence
we are yet aware that out of the darkness can come growth
and the potential to resolve present day problems.*

*We experience the death of an illusion
that we can be 'saved' by 'newness'
— it is the 'death of a god' —
but we are not without hope.*

*Hope is in having the kind of intercourse
that will generate meaning and understanding
and the potential for change.*

*However, if we take refuge from the dark and powerful issues
we deny ourselves the opportunity to instigate change.*

*Our future lies in providing a refuge
for the intercourse and connection
so that from the darkness hope can occur.*

Conveners: Jinette de Gooijer and Bryan Gray