

**"Australia and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"**
Report of a Listening Post
held on 14th January



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives,' that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

The election of Barack Obama and the financial crisis were the major events that pre-occupied participants – the exploration of experiences in the social world are nearly all linked to these two factors. In a sense, they symbolise 'the end' pointed to in the theme of 'death of a way of life as we know it' that has been dominant in the past three Listening Posts. Unlike previous years, the environment did not feature as a core concern – it has been pushed into the background by the economic crisis. Participants are concerned that society has pushed it to the background. "Without a decent environment it doesn't matter what the economy looks like."

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The themes link to underlying feelings amongst participants that the world is spinning out of control (wars, economic crisis, radicalising more Muslims – "the Palestinians have won") and that reality is overwhelming (uncertainty, a barrage of media pessimism, speed of change and connection, differences feel more visible and starkly frightening).

Theme 1: Living with the juxtaposition of hope and fear

Participants talked of the hope generated by Barack Obama's election, while equally afraid of what cannot be pinned on one man, or the limited time available to deal with significant issues. There was expressed a sense (un-defined) of foreboding and doom, much of it linked to the financial crisis and the uncertainties it has brought. Some specific fears were named as: concern that the Australian hero worship of USA will mean "we become a lapdog of the USA;" that we will retreat to protecting ourselves and ignore our neighbours' needs; that some will profit from others' misery; and a fear of dashed hopes. It was noted that Australia elected Kevin Rudd on the basis of much hope and that these hopes have turned to disappointment – that nothing has really changed.

Participants expressed awareness of the unrealistic hope held in politicians and public leaders – especially the individual leader (such as a Prime Minister or President) – and also the dark side of this 'the personality cult is a fascist orientation.' However, the

hope and optimism remained alive, while reality felt overwhelming. “We are living with multiple multi-layered crises simultaneously.”

In addition to the hopes felt to be invested in Obama and the simultaneous fear that we will be disappointed, there are also hopes and fears placed on the younger generation, especially Gen Y (those in their 20s). Participants spoke of the place of values and social responsibility in this generation's world. They are doing things differently from the 'baby boomer' generation, who are seen to have left a legacy of 'there's nothing left for the younger generation;' 'post-war baby boomers are 'exiting' and look what they have left us?!' A participant shared a story of bringing up her son to be educated so that he could choose his own values. “My son has chosen to join the military to kill 'those Indonesians' because of that country's political decision to invade and commit atrocities on East Timorese. His decision is not religious intolerance. I'm shocked. Not my values or beliefs that I worked so hard to put him through school so that he could choose.” The optimism seen in this generation – who are perceived to have had freedom to change jobs and travel at will – will be tested by financial crises. “Change has hit the Gen Y generation.” It is feared that “they may become a disappointed generation, who may not be able to travel as intended, and will lose their jobs.” They are seen as ‘the generation that wants’, making them prone to disappointment, but “it also making us prone to them carrying both our resentment and expectations.” Gen Y is also experienced by the older generation (most of the participants) as connecting in mystifyingly different ways – “they are looking in ways I cannot, some excitement in that;” “they show lateral ways of thinking but pall at what their parent's generation has done;” however, “Facebook is not a connection but more an expression of the self.” They are seen to have a different sense of time and a hard headedness (‘like the Peruvians’).

There is hope and fear for the ‘collapse of difference’ that our technology connections have brought us. “We are connected at the speed of light.” “The financial crisis demonstrated how connected we are by the fact that every country is affected and by the speed at which national economies collapsed.” A fear that in fact we are losing touch with our neighbour; ‘read a book rather than talk to a neighbour.’ But also a question of ‘Who are our neighbours?’ as if we no longer know.

Theme 2: Loss and lament for what has ended/is ending

Participants were struck by how much talk about loss occurred during Part 1. General statements such as ‘George Soros wrote years ago we are at the end of an era, the 50 year post-war boom;’ and ‘we are getting so much closer to the end as we know it.’ The ending is seen in things such as:

- Loss of familiar rituals – ‘subscribing to a religion is declining;’ ‘the environment has become the new religion’
- Values are lacking in behaviours – ‘we've lost touch with deep, intrinsic set of values and purpose.’ This also generates a feeling of guilt that we may betray what values we do hold in the face of the current crises (links to ensuring own survival)
- Discovered we are naive citizens – ‘we've been conned by government and financial institutions’
- Centre of the world is shifting from western democracies (esp. USA) to India & China

- Loss of 'real-time travelling, where you experience the continuum of villages and neighbours; our ability to travel long distances without stopovers does not give us time to adapt to differences of where we have come from and where we are going to'

These give rise to a lament for the old ways of connecting (before 'Facebook') and for education that teaches our children to resolve conflict – 'How do we engender conflict resolution skills in my children. Have we lost something?' all parents wanting a better life and a better world for their children; and that 'it' is about money and economics.

Theme 3: Ensuring one's own survival

The third theme follows the previous two in that participants shared preoccupations about responding to the global crisis and how it 'happened to us all at incredible speed; individually we feel impotent.' It was noticed that there is a retreat to family, "my mum is stashing goods and not spending – she grew up doing that." Survival has become personal: "I'm worried about my retirement, and worried about me;" "I now read the business pages of the newspapers everyday, intensely;" "sales of books on survival techniques has shot up in America." Others noticed that people are shutting down and protecting themselves. 'Being in the city and feeling a blindness amongst people who are not connecting beyond themselves.'

Theme 4: Personal responsibilities in tension with social obligations

Participants noticed a theme of tensions in society about social obligations and personal responsibilities, "I am concerned about how unconcerned Australia is about social justice and inequality. How can we help families who have lost their earner?" "Respect for other human beings – how to think and not act out?" There was a sense that citizens are blaming others (especially governments) for not redressing social problems, but we are also aware that individuals collectively can do something together without the need for governments (such as 'save water'). But why does this not happen? There seems to be an avoidance of personal responsibilities, accountability is displaced onto someone else. "We have become less tolerant of discomfort."

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

Working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, participants collectively identified the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at this time, and developed hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at this moment. Here we worked more with what might be called the 'psycho' or 'internal' world of participants. The hypotheses created by the group were finessed and added to in the writing up of the Listening Post.

Analysis:

The end of the world as we know it is nigh. The fantasy that we are NOT all connected has been blown sky high by the financial crisis of 2008. Our glimpse of the future feeds hope for a more connected world, led by a new generation of leaders. We feel hope for and hold a desire for the end of the culture of narcissism. We put hope in the next Generation (Gen Y) who are doing it differently from the generation currently in power.

There is fear too: we are afraid our hopes will be dashed and that our fascination with the new leader of the most powerful western democracy – Barack Obama – is a phantasy for a new saviour, a new Messiah, who will redeem us, forgive us, and above all save us from ourselves and our complicity in the economic and environmental disaster the world is facing.

Hypothesis 1:

Because of the tension experienced in the opposing forces of hope and fear, destruction and redemption, members of society are seeking connections to what feels safe (the family, ideologies, personal protection), resulting in a retreat to individual survival responses.

Hypothesis 2:

Because of real concerns about the future (economic and environmental) over which individuals feel they have no control, members of society feel helpless, a foreboding of doom and invest their hope in a leader of another country (USA), resulting in a projection of potency onto another individual and a phantasy of a new Messiah who will save us from our overwhelming anxieties about the unknown future.

Hypothesis 3:

Because of rapidly depleting resources (economic and environmental) in a world of rising expectations of individual prosperity, members of society are protecting their own turf, resulting in displacement of guilt onto others through blaming, or holding others responsible for the depleted resources.

Hypothesis 4:

Because of the speed of change and global connections, members of society feel less emotionally connected to their neighbours and lament the old ways of connecting, alongside a projection onto Gen Y for ways to re-engage with the world. The desire to re-engage results in an idealistic hope for collective re-connection and the end or decline of a culture of narcissism.

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