

**"Australia and the World
at the Dawn of 2005"**
Report of a Listening Post
held on Wednesday 12th January



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

A major theme involved the issue of individual powerlessness in the face of broader global and societal dynamics. These dynamics ranged from the political/ social situation in Iraq and the Tsunami disaster in Asia, through to a range of domestic issues in Australian politics, economics, the community and family.

This preoccupation of powerlessness featured in a hypothesis that was partially formulated around the response to the Tsunami disaster of December 2004. It was felt that the generosity of response to this disaster was significantly due to it being a situation where people felt they could make a difference. A question arose. Was this also unconsciously a displacement from guilt that came with the deep helplessness of being unable to influence man-made disasters? The focus of generosity was linked (in this case) to a natural disaster which has eclipsed responses to man-made wars and famine which are often far more devastating and the effects more enduring. This phenomenon is surely worth pursuing psychodynamically.

Part 2. THEMES

A great deal of the discussion was about

- (i) political process in Australia and
- (ii) the effects of and response to the tsunami situation in Asia.

Other preoccupations were about local social processes and issues about the nature of 'community'.

1. Impotence, irrelevance, helplessness and powerlessness

This theme came up in many ways throughout the discussion of preoccupations but was first named in a discussion about the recent Australian and US elections. Some felt shocked by the election results and the strong move to the political right. One member was putting forward the idea the this swing to the right was a backlash to a complacent left (small 'l') liberal consensus that has been tacitly in place for a long time. He wondered, despite being shocked, whether this might in some ways be a healthy response to what has become sterile in the political left. Others raised the idea of the political swing to the right as being a reflection of fears about terrorism. However, some pointed out that in Australia there were still large numbers of the political left (4.4 million people did not vote for Howard). Nonetheless, there was some feeling that in a global context the 'cafe latte set' of liberal intellectuals was a minority under threat - and that this was where some of the fear came in. There was a sense of 'irrelevance' of this group. First in that they were not listened to in the political process, but secondly

because they are such a small group in the broader scope of the world's population. Yet it is this group that is most represented in the listening post process.

Impotence and powerlessness was felt in regard to the events in Iraq but also in terms of the economic and environmental issues currently faced in western democracy. The author Alice Walker was mentioned in terms of environmental issues. The world is being poisoned. This seemed not to be under dispute. Economic pressures are such that young people find it hard to purchase a home (the old Australian dream). The old, (seemingly) safe world has disappeared.

A sub-theme identified was: *1.b) Fear of 'power' that cannot be influenced*

This was connected to discussion about fundamentalism (Islamic, Judaic and Christian) as well as right wing political revival. It joins with the theme about personal powerlessness. This theme was woven through the discussions about politics, the Iraqi war, terrorism and the Tsunami. The powers were

- i) political leaders and movements,
- ii) terrorism (although this was only briefly mentioned),
- iii) natural power such as seen in the Tsunami and the recent devastating bush fires in South Australia, and
- iv) power of the unknown 'other'. This last was not explicitly stated as a power that cannot be influenced, but in going over the notes there were hints of the unknown other, eg, Asian immigrants; the many others who live quite differently to 'us'; religious fundamentalists.

The idea of natural vs. man-made disasters became a point of discussion. The response to the Tsunami brought forward biblical references of the flood and the parting of the Red Sea: Noah and Moses. Somehow humans are implicated in something beyond them. The man-made disasters are often more devastating, but often ignored (eg. as the problems of Aids, wars and famine in Africa). It is as if humans are more implicated in the latter and unconsciously the victims may have some degree of guilt.

2. Housing, homelessness and households

This was a smaller theme, but it was the first preoccupation mentioned in the listening post. A member began by talking of the difficulties for young people getting housing in the current economic situation. This was linked to a feeling that younger people often resented what they saw as the easy time had by the baby boomer generation. We asked 'was it easier then?' The member who raised the issue also spoke of going to housing auctions where increasingly the buyers were immigrants from South East Asia, China and India. The theme later emerged in a discussion about the nature of households. It seems from government statistics that we are living in a social context where there are many living isolated individual lives (often the elderly and increasingly single women) and others are homeless (one group) or unable to afford their own housing (often younger people). In essence then, this theme was about the nature of current individualistic society as expressed through issues surrounding housing, economic and social.

3. Global vs. local

This theme was expressed through discussions of

- (i) how much the elections were affected by global issues (eg, Iraq) or specifically local issues (interest rates) and
- (ii) how global issues seemed to swamp our capacity to have an individual effect. It was linked to the theme of powerlessness insofar as many global issues seemed impossible to influence. A question arose as to whether we should look at ourselves (small shrinking

group of middle class intellectuals) or at the larger populations globally when we think of the future. What is going to survive and be sustained?

4. Connection and disconnection; Community and tribalism vs. individualism and isolation

This came up particularly in terms of local community. One man told the story of moving to a new area, meeting neighbours and introducing them to each other. These people had not previously met despite living near each other for twenty or more years. A story of meeting neighbours through 'walking the dog' seemed to resonate and others then described how they were able to connect to other people through their dogs. Another talked of connection through children. This seemed to imply either a difficulty with direct communication and connection, or the use of pets and children as transitional communication objects (writer's term). The feeling was that we live in an increasingly disconnected society, with many people living isolated lives, including the elderly and women in their 40's onwards (see theme 2 above).

Later in the discussion, the issue of Western individualism, linked to isolation was contrasted to the more 'natural' (?) condition of humans as 'tribal animals'. Western individualism has brought us many benefits but much of the world lives in more communal settings, albeit with poverty. This seemed to link with a 'cross-cultural' theme that emerged 'between the lines' as it were. Western individualism was tacitly contrasted to the cultures of more impoverished nations where people live more communal lives.

One member raised the idea that community is experienced and expressed very differently by different people. There seemed a small ray of hope that we might find a different yet creative way of communicating, as was done, for example, by young people on the internet. It was hard to sustain the hope however.

5. What is the nature of giving and generosity?

This theme was noted in the discussion about the Tsunami and the response in Australia. Many individuals have given financial support. The government has given considerable financial support although there was a great deal of scepticism about this move. Was it a political ploy on the part of the Howard government to gain favour with the Indonesians (our close and ambivalently related neighbours), or with the electorate because of the response of the public? Why this sudden flow of generosity from many quarters? Was it easier to respond to a natural disaster such as the Tsunami than to the effects of war, aids and famine in Africa? All seemingly man-made?

6. Hope, cynicism, despair, intellectual pessimism - some gender difference

Not so much an openly discussed theme as a note that the genders seemed to be taking up different positions to some of the issues raised in the listening post. On reflection, what we identified as the 'male' position seemed to be embodied by a few more vocal older men. What was noted was that the men were voicing a cynical, despairing and intellectually pessimistic position. The optimistic or 'softer' notes seemed to come predominantly from women. The scepticism most at issue seemed to be about the motivation for generosity with regard to the Tsunami.

There was, however, agreement from both genders about the dishonesty of the government prior to the elections. This was seen as a 'grip on power kept by lies'. Disgust was expressed about things done in our name as a result of the war on terrorism - Abu

Graab prison, and the torture of suspects for example. Surprise also, that issues of truthfulness and honesty that had been so much in the public eye prior to the election, have just disappeared in the wake of the Tsunami news. One female member admitted to feeling some relief after the elections. Some felt this resonated with them, others not. The basis of this relief was difficult to pin down.

7. Intellectualisation vs action

On reflection, many felt that issues were intellectualised but that action was limited. Despite the disillusionment with political process (or perhaps because of it), when the question was raised 'Are you a member of a political party?' no-one answered 'yes'. Were we the split off intellectualisers or enacting that position? During the listening post process, it also seemed difficult to express feelings directly - although as has been mentioned there was evidence of disgust and scepticism. As an observer, my impression was that the emotions were there, but were muted and intellectualised.

8. Generational differences: resentments, who had it easy, who has it hard

This was a minor theme. Our youngest members were in their 40's and there could only be speculation and some second-hand reports about the feelings of the younger generation. One hypothesis was about resentment by younger people of the baby boomers for having it easier. But there was not full agreement with this.

Part 3. HYPOTHESES

A few hypotheses arose in an exploratory way and were not fully formulated.

1. It was felt that the generosity of response to the Tsunami disaster was significantly due to it being a situation where people felt they could make a difference. A question arose. Was this also unconsciously a displacement from guilt that came with the deep helplessness of being unable to influence political leaders, wars and man-made disasters? The focus of generosity was linked (in this case) to a natural disaster which has eclipsed responses to man-made wars and famine which are often far more devastating and the effects more enduring.

A linked hypothesis is that in addition to displaced guilt, the Tsunami evoked deep primitive fears of vengeance by God, as evidenced through reference to the flood and the parting of the Red Sea: Noah and Moses. This supports a hypothesis about displaced guilt. The biblical stories are about a God having vengeance for the guilt of humans. The question arose - is it that we feel we are like the victims of the Tsunami? 'There but for the grace of god, go I' is implied?

Yet, another interpretation arises. It was mentioned in the discussion that with the Tsunami somehow humans are implicated in something beyond them. The man-made disasters are often more devastating, but often ignored (eg. as the problems of Aids, wars and famine in Africa). Humans are more implicated in the latter and it may unconsciously be believed that the victims have some degree of guilt. With a natural disaster they are guiltless.

[One is left to wonder from where guilt and punishment arise in a non-religious world and how the unconscious struggle between humanism and religiosity is re-emerging or expressed in the climate of returning fundamentalism - writer/ convenor's addition.]

2. One hypothesis put forward was about resentment by younger people of the baby boomers for having it easier - especially financially. There was not full agreement with this. A question arose: to the extent that this is the case: was this just a manifestation of typical generational resentments or something specific to our time?
3. Another hypothesis put forward (taken from some reading by a member) was that the current political swing to the right was a backlash against a previously long lasting but now sterile left wing political position.

Conveners: Susan Long and Tania Nahum

Members:

Faye Adams; Neil Baird; Ora Bernard; Tudor Bostock; Carol Clarke; Lynette Coad; Paul Dore; Lorraine Freeman; Helen Goodman; Anne Hartican; Kerrie Little; Alan Nahum; Brigid Nossal; Jamie Pearce; Himadri Potter