

**"Australia and the World
at the Dawn of 2007"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 10th 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. This part was concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that related to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. Four distinct themes were discernible in this year's listening post. These were: the natural environment, politics and religion, citizenship, and our humanity. As will be seen in the discussion below, there was a strong pre-occupation with the dichotomies in everyday experiences of these themes. Participants also noticed that no-one talked about work, the focus being very much on experiences and pre-occupations of our personal roles. There was an underlying theme of death throughout the Listening Post, concerning death of life as we know it, of liberal values, and also in images such as Saddam Hussein, dying fish stocks, of a dying planet from unsustainable human practices, and in the individual's sacrifices (or not) for the common good.

THEMES

1. The Natural Environment.

South-eastern States of Australia are in the grip of a severe drought which is being felt by all: one person who had intended to come along decided that the threat of bushfire to his country home was too great; others described the many personal inconveniences being experienced with limited water; and the failure of the spring rains in 2006 seemed to have awakened people to 'a crisis in how we relate to our environment'. These local events were connected with global events of climate change, the release of Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* and a larger concern with the planet's sustainability. Some vivid images accompanied the discussion - of the polar bear trying to get up on an ice flow (Al Gore's film), of carrying buckets of water to save precious plants, and of the current rainfall map of Australia which shows a continent split between a northern tropical environment with excess rain while the south is in drought. It was remarked that we now have to change our behaviour to the natural environment rather than continue to try changing the environment itself. However, it was also noted that our anxieties about 'environmental sustainability' are in contrast with the continuing desire to have the pleasures of our existing lifestyle, e.g. to travel to other parts of the world, to invest our superannuation funds in profitable companies even when these might engage in unsustainable practices. It seems as if 'our' survival has become linked to the

need for 'our planet' to survive. Yet, there are still so many people starving and dying in other parts of the world, who can't get fresh water. The question was asked, 'What comes first, care for the planet or starving people?' A participant shared a poem he remembered from childhood, written by Dame Mary Gilmour:

I have grown past hate and bitterness
I see the world as one
But, thought I can no longer hate
My son is still my son.
All men at God's round table sit
And all men must be fed
But this loaf in my hand,
This loaf is my son's bread.

The contrasts presented were seen to be a dichotomy between social conscience/ altruism, and self-interest. The dichotomy itself was couched by some in terms of 'hypocrisy'. We feel hypocritical for holding both sides. This is exacerbated due to what was seen to be the cynical manipulation of real anxieties by politicians and the media in particular. One hope was that care about the state of the environment might become an issue that transcended national differences.

2. Politics and Religion.

John Howard, Australia's Prime Minister was seen as a 'mean-spirited' leader and not displaying what was termed as 'loving leadership', (one which is potent and compassionate). His government was seen to play on social anxieties and exploit them (by demonising anyone who criticises the government). Yet, ironically, the rise of social science has helped in providing the tools for such manipulation through marketing, management and political research.

A loss of faith in political leadership has occurred, the disillusion with current political leadership seems unable to contain wider society or hold in mind the welfare of everyone. There was wondering as to why politicians like John Howard are being re-elected. What sort of society produces such political leadership? It was also recognised that the Listening Post membership was a biased sample of political opinion (middle class, tertiary educated, interested in psychodynamics). There was expressed discomfort with the way religion was seen to be entering into politics in both visible and invisible ways. Religious dogma from the great monotheist traditions was seen to overtly intrude on political life. 'Self-righteous religiosity' was seen to be at odds with altruism. It also seemed that the Christian churches had become 'numbed' or 'clamped down' in responding to issues of social conscience. Their role in delivering social welfare services funded by governments were thought perhaps to be the cause of their 'silence'. Participants noted a 'fall back' to religion in response to living in such a diverse society and fears for species survival. Although, for some members an ongoing way of life informed by their religion was still relevant. The foundations of Australia's democracy are becoming undermined, with difference and diversity becoming less tolerated, e.g. technical legal mechanisms have been created to remove us from Australian society, anyone can be deported or imprisoned for 'un-Australian' behaviour. Yet, liberal society is based on the principle that everything is contestable, therefore where ideas and values are contested, the conversations can be heard. There appears to be less opportunity for this. It was observed that the best parliamentary debates in 2006 were the two which were conducted on a 'conscience vote' basis. It was observed that we live in such a diverse society that we seem to seek simplification to deal with that.

3. Citizenship.

The role of citizen was seen to be possibly divided between activist (one who seeks to actively change something) and 'non-activist' (one who is interested in studying and understanding what *is*, even if sometimes terrible viz. role of critical observer). Is there a place for different kinds of citizens? The current political environment provides no chance to experiment with new identities. It was observed that 2006 had been a grim year, but that 'small hopes' existed, expressed as 'from little things, big things grow'. An example was given of small groups of activists across the country agitating for 'justice for David Hicks' and that the issue was now given more media prominence. It was noted that there has been a shift in the citizen role from stakeholder to shareholder. We have become individual owners of the common good. And we seem to have both local and global responsibilities as citizens, eg. 'saving the planet'.

4. Our Humanity.

The public (media) image of Saddam Hussein's execution (obscene) was mentioned as disturbing the moral landscape of our humanity. There was a fear expressed that such images might now normalise 'inhumanity', i.e. not seeing that it is a human being at the end of a rope. A moral debate about 'What is it to be human?' seems to be emerging. A questioning of what is our identity as humans or, what is the moral human? It was suggested that what it means to be human is that you can recognise 'the other'. It seemed that politics and the media made this increasingly more difficult..

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. Four working hypotheses were developed. They each had links to the others.

1. A search for new containers as familiar containers no longer are 'good enough'

Because of the great changes occurring in our societies and natural environment, our sense of humanity is challenged and we seek new containers for both survival and meaning. Past political and Religious truths are no longer holding and are either being shored up through fundamentalism or lost. Because of fundamental threats to sustainability and to diversity itself, from events such as drought and Iraq war, the familiar containers of political leadership are crumbling, and there is a rise of fundamentalism in politics and religion in response to anxieties about survival. If a new kind of identity is emerging for humans, what will be its institutional container?

2. Failure of denial as a defensive mechanism for communities but not for corporations.

Because of the crisis in our environment we can no longer deny the threats from climate change and there has been a reawakening of our sense of mortality. The strong imagery that goes with this (from the media, film, stories, our own bushfires) cannot be kept out of our minds, like in trauma. This is felt keenly at a personal citizen level, while alternatively, our work institutions are experienced as absolutely disconnected from this pre-occupation and are in denial.

3. Stakeholders to Shareholders

Citizens have moved from being stakeholders in our community to shareholders. (Hence the split between individual and corporation seen in hypothesis 2 feels like hypocrisy).

4. Life and Death

In defense against anxieties about sustainable human life, we return to the roots of humanity (our beliefs) for our survival in the face of an unsustainable environment, and because it takes time for humans to evolve there remains (for some) the hope that new life will emerge in the spring of the future. (eg, environmental issues may unite the world rather than divide it).

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