

**"Australia and the World
at the Dawn of 2010"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 13th January in Melbourne**



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.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

This year, the mood of the group was notable for its pessimism about the future and a sense of feeling individually overwhelmed by enormity of the problems facing society in Australia and world-wide. The idealistic hopes at the beginning of 2009 that were projected into Rudd & Obama had been punctured by the reality of there being no 'Messiah' to 'rescue us' from ourselves.

The group collectively identified a huge list of themes – the experience of trying to make sense of this myriad of material (daunting, difficult and almost overwhelming) felt like a mirror of participants' own experiences of feeling overwhelmed by the problems in their world. There is an increasing fragmentation occurring to people's experiences as citizens in a world that is thought of as 'a living system'. Our own small convenors group experienced this in microcosm as we worked on the task of writing the report. Over the few days we allotted to writing it, our communication was broken, and for a time we were disconnected from each other. Feelings of being fragmented were internalised by some of the group, unable to think or communicate, and being cut-off were experienced by members of the convenors group. The sense was of having to regather our individual selves before any collective endeavour became possible.

Paradoxically, the fragmentation identified in the Listening Post, seems to provoke a defensive reaction of disconnecting – whether into individualistic retreats (physical, spiritual, psychological), or by projecting responsibility onto 'them' (children, schools, the media, politicians, foreigners). Both reactions reveal a theme of a perception that the citizen has become powerless, invisible, and without recourse to a containing 'community space'.

The themes emerging from Part 1 covered:

- a strong sense of fear about the world and personal survival – the pace of change is too fast, the focus is all ‘short-termism’ and what if it IS just too late?!;
- increasing fragmentation of community and loss of spaces or the means for thinking together as a community – having robust debates and dialogue;
- re-emergence of tribes;
- reality is a painful experience of disillusionment with the effectiveness of ‘others’;
- unwillingness to give up personal comforts or take responsibility to do something about the real problems;
- feeling shame, guilt and inner contradictions;
- longing for convergence but also disconnected from living systems which are at risk of not surviving;
- looking for someone / something to blame – ‘them’, Copenhagen, the media, schools;
- inability to take on our role and responsibilities as citizens to co-create with others and existing institutions the emerging and new futures
- fantasising that ‘our children’ and a ‘proper education’ for them is the only hope;
- not knowing who is responsible, how learning is manifest,
- desire for ‘the grey’ between polar opposites;
- overwhelmed by complexity and ambiguity (also described as ‘grey’);
- preoccupied with small domestic actions – those things that one can do;
- reality bites – the mood has shifted from false hope to disillusionment and fear in one year.

We elaborate on these below under the headings of:

- Disconnection from living systems
- Unwillingness to do something and to give up anything
- Individuals and the Community
- Narcissism
- Suspicion of who or what is really leading us
- Middle class fear and indulgence

Disconnection from living systems

Participants evinced a longing for connection simultaneously with a worry about foreigners, fellow-workers faking interest in meetings, borders and boundaries, about ‘surprising but inevitable attacks’, needing to be strategic about ‘getting enough’ or

'getting more', or 'keeping what you have'. Discussion frequently expressed desire to put walls around themselves (insulation in gated communities, entitled cohorts, barbarians out there, enclaves) to protect what they have, e.g. lifestyle, superannuation, material possessions etc. Isolation protects but also cuts connection to the life of others, and the living systems that sustain us all. Overall, things are getting worse (families sleeping on city streets, depleting fisheries, unforeseen job losses, anticipated wars over water, surprising but inevitable attacks), only we can't see it all just yet.

Absence of community and connection was mourned, along with lack of knowing what community might be or look like. Even if it might be recognised, there seems little confidence in how to have the discussion safely and productively, or how to have both a career and a place in a more balanced society.

Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness co-exist with a sense of deserving entitlement. Domestic choices over energy-rated electrical appliances allow some control in the face of overwhelming catastrophe, speeding past the point of no-return. Even the conceiving of children (the future) is becoming difficult, the process thwarted by affluent lifestyle perhaps, or maybe environmental pollutions, or bodies shutting down core functions? Extreme discretion and choice-making sits alongside losing control of key functions.

Something has been lost in the individuals connection to a living social system, to a living planet. And with this, community and individual vitality is lost.

Unwillingness to do something and to give up anything

The difficulty of taking meaningful and effective action arose continually. The possibility of seeing effective and positive change resulting from one's own efforts and actions seemed difficult to express or keep in mind.

There was considerable expression of consumerist choice-making within the personal domestic sphere (whitegoods, cars, houses and living arrangements etc). Taking community – regional or national –global actions were felt to be useless, doomed, demoralising and disappointing. Maintaining energy around effective action (any scale) wasn't deemed plausible for larger and complex issues.

There was little expectation or welcoming the prospect of really giving up something or changing lifestyle, reducing my personal spend and carbon footprint, winding back one's standards/expectations/quality of life (viz discretionary international air travel, holiday house, reducing personal consumption). Our compromise-consolation is to spend more on environmentally approved appliances, e.g. 5+star ratings. Maintaining one's consumer choice seems highly valued as a bolster and bastion against an uncontrollable and hostile future, disillusionment and a hopeless, pervasive anxiety ('what about the children...').

Because of feeling caught in an unstoppable and uncontrollable fragmentation – the world as we knew it is in chaos – members of society seek refuge in personal retreats from their societal responsibilities and collective action, resulting in a loss of citizenship as mobilising social force.

Individuals feeling the loss of community spaces

This theme is a constellation of three elements, the Individual, Community and Community Spaces. As a theme it is a source of much frustration as well as one of enormous possibility. Participants expressed the view that the link between the individual and community at many levels was constrained. It was felt that there was an

absence of spaces for individuals to come together, discuss issues and shape or influence social actions. It seemed to be present as a dynamic in the group too – as soon as people had the chance to speak, they did; there was hardly any silence during the evening.

The frustration and sadness applied to the very local and immediate community of the apartment block one lived in, the broader local community of a suburb and its city, to the Australian community and its political leaders, and to the global community.

Whilst an overriding issue being discussed in the listening post was climate change, its consequences and the desire for substantive action, there was the distress expressed about how individuals in a community disregarded the values, rules and expectations of the community and put their own self-interest ahead of the community. An example offered was the way some residents in an apartment block 'community' would put their rubbish in the recycling bins or their recycling in the rubbish bins rather than walk the seven metres between both banks of bins. This behaviour raised the frustration and anger to varying degrees of those who conformed to community expectation. It opened the possibility that no reliable community action may be possible. And if that were to be the case it may have severe implications for the possibility, or not, of addressing climate change and the human species' survival.

Pursuit of self interest and disregard of the expectations of community were seen as central challenges posed to the notion of community and to the durability of groups that many members would describe as communities.

There was a hunger for 'community spaces' robust enough for community dialogue that could be sufficiently inclusive to arrive at action or to influence action that the community would accept and stick to; yet was a robust enough space that divergent and different views could be energetically expressed and collide, and that this is often necessary for the synthesis of a range of views into a good enough community action to be followed over time. In short, a community space in which durable social values and actions could be established and also changed. The capacity to do this was not seen as a strength of Anglo-based communities and societies.

Participants expressed views about the lack of any known process through which to work on community concerns and interests. And where there may be some sense of process there was no trust in it and its capacity to work well enough. Knowledge and trust of others inside or outside a community, knowledge and trust of social processes and tools, and knowledge and trust of self, are seen to be essential ingredients for the convergence of the individual's aspirations towards harmonised community action.

Narcissism

At times participants talked about highly domestic concerns – “What fridge should I buy? The one that is most environmentally friendly but costs 3 times as much?” “Do I want to be the one that leads?” “What tradeoffs will I have / want to make?” Stories were told about worrying about recycling, frustrated by other people who don't use rubbish and recycling bins 'properly'; trading off good deeds of recycling with justification for travelling overseas, choosing to buy local goods, while at the same time there is a concern about the affordability of basic needs (water, housing, transport). “It's costly to have a good value set, and who will be able to afford it?”

Participants felt that they wanted 'to protect what we have', and aware of themselves and others being engaged in 'strategic self-preservation'. Stories about families in a

state of plight, “60% of new presentations at a major Melbourne-based welfare agency are by people who have never sought social welfare before in their lives. They may have jobs and homes, but the cost of living has pushed them over the edge.” “I was travelling in Argentina recently and saw whole families living on the street in Buenos Aires. It’s where they sleep, live, and the children grow up. We don’t have that here.” A comment was made of feeling an urgency ‘to hurry up and get safe’. Yet, “we live in the safest place in the world at this time.”

There were concerns expressed about superannuation – “How do we want to live when we retire? Want to be in my own community, safe and environmentally sound, an invited enclave.” “Will have to do it ourselves; have to look after ourselves.” A participant spoke about the ‘fire shelter we are building in the centre of house’. An image of a bomb shelter comes to mind.

These preoccupations identified deep concerns about personal survival in an environment (economic & physical) that was felt to be hostile. However, responsibility for resolving what are community issues seemed to be placed on others. Hopes and questions about the Copenhagen summit, “Before it started I wondered, Will they save us? When the summit was over I thought, They didn’t.”

Hope is placed on ‘our children’, but “what are they being taught at our schools?” A question was raised of ‘So, who is bringing up the children?’ As if the responsibility for teaching children is in schools alone.

These various pre-occupations of the participants suggest a dynamic of a narcissistic individual citizen who is concerned about personal survival, will do whatever they can to make / retain their own comforts, but projects responsibility onto others as a defense against the hostile environment they feel the world to be.

Suspicion of who or what is really leading us

The hopes that were present early in 2009 for the changes that Barack Obama and Kevin Rudd would bring to the world and Australia were seen to be unrealistic by the end of 2009. Participants felt that they held a more realistic view of these and other leaders. “Feels real now, Obama and Rudd didn’t save us.”

There was a strong feeling of pessimism within the group, a deep fear that we live in an unsustainable society, environmentally and economically, and that perhaps there is no future for the world. “At Copenhagen, no-one talked about the good thing about China’s one child policy; nor does anyone talk about what if we CAN’T fix the problem?” “It is hard to question the unquestioned belief that we can fix the environment. Our politicians are not having that debate.”

The suspicion about who or what is really leading us was expressed as “Where do our thoughts come from? The media influences us profoundly, targeting my emotions. What I read everyday – newspapers, on the internet, what I see on TV, all comes from the media.” The sense is of members of society feeling manipulated and controlled but not led.

Middle class fears, or indulgences?

There was a fear of the possibility of loss expressed by participants, loss perhaps caused by the shifting sands of the global economy with its shadow of growing unemployment and loss caused by global warming with its associated collapse of the environment. The fear was felt as a threat to us, those present at the listening post who also in the course

of the event identified ourselves as being middle class – fear of what we have to lose, fear of the fall (from certainties) itself.

It was felt that with growing unemployment, the social situation may become sufficiently extreme as to result in forms of social unrest across society. The idea of a revolution was playfully thrown around. It was returned to later in a more mature form after some measure was taken of the fear and the social tensions behind. It returned in the form of social activism and the idea some were expressing that perhaps they would need to become activists – that beyond fear, social forces may propel one into such a role.

There was also a sense of the luxury or indulgence of resource in our lives such that we could reflect on the state of the world and our preoccupations with it at this time. Beside this was the perspective that it had been earned, by doing the right things. By being responsible one earned certain rights. And in relation to caring for the environment where other people so clearly did not, the term 'self righteous credits' was coined. Self-righteous credits carried an implied entitlement to undertake environmentally degrading activities with moral immunity. For example, by occasionally sorting some of the rubbish out from the recycling bins in one's apartment building (community), it was more okay for you to travel overseas or run the air-conditioner for days without guilt or criticism. It formed a defence for the individual and the diaspora community of people just like them. A self-righteous credit was a currency through which the hypocrisy of lifestyle indulgences could be continued despite their harmful environmental impacts (such as air travel). The notion of 'a stairway to heaven' was voiced where the 'good' you did compensated for the 'harm' you caused. Not so dissimilar to the middle ages practice by the Roman Catholic Church of the purchase of 'Indulgences'.

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.

The hypotheses point to a zeitgeist in which members of society see themselves as powerless to change the environmental effects of human activity, unable to mobilise themselves as a global community to create change, and consequently are seen to shrink into insular behaviours and short-term actions, resulting in a radical fragmentation of community, society and individuals. The world feels as if it is at a tipping point, or close to it.

Hypothesis 1:

Because of the expanding awareness of increasing fragility of the Earth (environmentally, economically, etc), members of society are afraid, feel overwhelmed and take short term decisions, which result in feeling more vulnerable, retracting into self interest and self protection. This builds ever greater paranoia, fed by a self-reinforcing circle of building barriers to protect one's vulnerabilities that disconnect oneself from reality which then heighten fantasies of insecurity.

Hypothesis 2:

Because of the complexities, ambiguities, and pace of change to living systems, members of society look to Others (politicians, leaders, schools, institutions) to fix our problems for us, which results in disappointments and terrifying anxiety that: a) they may fail us; b) we might have to do something about it ourselves; and c) we will fail the future generations. A sense of powerlessness and overwhelming paralysis is a result of projection of our own power and potency into 'Them'.

Hypothesis 3:

Because of the profound contradiction/inner conflict (resulting from collective but private shame about one's impotence to change or improve complex issues sitting alongside manifest individual material wealth) members of society project out their capacity for leadership and authority (asking 'Who will fix this? Who is responsible?') while simultaneously deeply longing for connection and autonomy. This results in grasping towards quick fixes, redemption, hyper-credulity and easy acceptance of hero-saviours, naive solutions and spin – and a resultant sense of vulnerability to attack-loss, and helplessness. It manifests as an absence of courage and determination to take things on, and to committing to make things work.

Hypothesis 4:

Because of fears about the state of the environment and because of the enormity of the issue, members of society individually retreat from this by doing things that distract them from this awareness and that make them feel good. This results in individual members of society feeling 'private shame' about their behaviour and disengagement from the problem.

Hypothesis 5:

Because of private shame about our individual and collective neglect of the environment, members of society feel internally fractured, and attempt to appease their guilt and alleviate their pain in destructive ways. The result is that we are seeing more individuals acting out their destructive impulses.

Hypothesis 6:

Because of feeling caught in an unstoppable and uncontrollable fragmentation – the world as we knew it is in chaos – members of society seek refuge in personal retreats from their societal responsibilities and collective action, resulting in a loss of citizenship as mobilising social force.

Hypothesis 7:

Because of doing the 'good' things that some people do for the environment (e.g. compressing other peoples' recycling so more recyclable rubbish can fit into the bin), these members of society in some way feel self-righteous and that they have earned the right to pollute (a form of 'self-righteous credits' which can be used for overseas trips for example), resulting in those individuals feeling less guilt, as if 'one good recycling deed' balances out 'one bad polluting deed'. It is as if a psychological devil's pact has been created between split objects.

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