



LISTENING POST

Australia at the Dawn of 2020

Melbourne, Australia, Monday 13 January 2020.

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, 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’: the ‘socio’ or ‘external’ world of participants.

The broader social and political context in which the Australian listening post was held was dominated by an unprecedented series of uncontained bushfires that have burned in Australia since late 2019. Perhaps as a result of this context, Part I was dominated almost entirely by talk of the bushfires. Participants elucidated various themes that were tied back to the bushfires and their impact.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

Theme 1: Humans and their impact on the environment

The impact of humans on the environment was a strong theme. Specifically, the impact of Climate Change on the landscape and wildlife – particularly through the unprecedented scale and ferocity of bushfires in Australia.

- “It’s a sort of species arrogance that the loss of life we count is our own, but not animals”
- “1 billion animals” [estimate of the number of animals lost in the bushfires]
- “There will be whole species that will be wiped out”
- “Nothing stops humans breeding, but the animals won’t breed because they don’t have access to food and water”
- “Scourge of humanity that just keeps consuming until nothing is left”

In addition to exploring the unprecedented impact of the recent bushfires, there also emerged a conversation about the “insidious” nature of electricity derived from non-renewable resources and its long-term and unseen impact on Climate Change. This was juxtaposed with the very immediate and obvious impact of bushfires.

- “How do we stop that insidiousness which we can’t see until it’s already into the consequence stage?”

Theme 2: Leadership Inadequacy and Personal Accountability

There was an ongoing interplay throughout the discussion about the lack of political leadership on the issue of Climate Change and the lack of personal accountability of citizens to agitate for change and make their own sacrifices. Anger, guilt and denial were responses associated to this theme. Some participants lamented the lack of leadership on the issue of Climate Change and elevated the need for leadership at a political / state level, without which action on Climate Change was impossible. Others spoke about an end to the “Messianic” style of leadership which no longer had a place. They instead called for personal action, group dialogue and a new kind of facilitative leadership to be taken up in its place. The group did not resolve this discussion and the interplay between the importance of political Vs. personal action remained throughout the discussion.

On Political Leadership:

- “It’s a complete failure of leadership in this country from politicians of all parties.”
- “It will take political leadership to leave resources in the ground and transition to a renewable economy.”
- “It’s necessary to have a leader. Someone has to take the responsibility.”

And on personal accountability:

- “I haven’t given a lot of thought to my lifestyle...I’m going overseas at the end of the year and that’s unforgivable”
- “I get angry at Scott Morrison [Australia’s Prime Minister] but I don’t think about my lifestyle”
- “What really makes a democracy function is what the individual does... We’ve become a very passive society...I haven’t been to any of the Youth marches – that’s where my personal shame comes from”.
- “Hero leadership is finished. It’s no longer serving us. What I yearn for is being in dialogue – when we’re out of the bubbles of our different tribes”
- [on Facilitative Leadership] “It’s something that brings out the best of all of us, rather than us having the best of them”

Theme 3: Knowing and Denial (and Avoidance)

In the face of the bushfire crisis and other human-made environmental impacts, participants recounted long-known facts about Climate Change and the fact that we are “past the tipping point” -in the sense of ‘we-saw-it-coming-and-did-nothing’. They shared their frustration at the persistence of denial at a socio-political and individual level.

Denial:

- “People are heading on holidays into bushfire zones – it’s mindlessness”
- “I’m very angry about the denial of climate change and our complicity”
- “The choice of ignorance and not thinking about my impact”

Although not strictly related, a sub-theme emerged of ‘avoidance as a coping mechanism’ in the face of Climate Change denial.

Avoidance:

- “When I’m not yelling at the TV, I’m turning it off”
- “I avoid, as much as I can, the news and the political stuff. I don’t find that very useful for me. It disempowers me.”
- “There was a girl at work who went on holidays for two weeks and didn’t know about any of it [bushfires]... When she came back she went into shock.”

The Listening Post highlighted a pattern in which Climate Change is denied by one part of society which in-turn elicits an avoidance of politics and the public sphere by another part of society.

Theme 4: The Elite

The final theme emerged towards the end of the Listening Post. It remains, in the facilitator’s view, a tenuous but important emergent theme. The group began to share a wondering about “who’s really in charge, anyway?” – first in a discussion about the power of Nature, then in relation to powerful political forces and finally in references to the Church on the time boundary.

Elites:

- “I do think we’re wishing to have a better class of puppet...We might think more about who’s pulling the strings”
- “In a lot of democracies, leaders are simply the chosen front for a Bloc. A bloc that’s operating through manipulation and collaboration with powerful groups... but we don’t turn our gaze upon these bloc’s.”
- “The rise of the corporation and the oligarch”
- “We get cross about a failure of leadership but we don’t get cross about who’s pulling the strings”

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

A note on Method: In Part III, the group chose to split into three sub-groups to focus on different themes. Four hypotheses emerged from the groups.

Hypothesis 1:

Because of the catastrophic bushfires, drought etc., we are experiencing a reality-check about our existence and its impact on Earth. The result is that our sense of omnipotence has disappeared, and we are revealed to be shallow Gods.

Hypothesis 2:

Because of the realisation of what we long knew about our role in causing Climate Change, we are experiencing despondency, disillusion and guilt at the share of our own culpability of destroying life on Earth. This results in us projecting our emotions onto political leaders which enables us to avoid bearing the pain of our complicity

and the enablement of our continuing to deny and defer changes to our own behaviours.

Hypothesis 3:

Because of our desire not to be shamed into changing our own behaviour, members of society elected the one person most able to “not think” and to collude with climate change denial. This has resulted in our complete unpreparedness for the fires despite known evidence which pointed to their inevitability. As a result, we are now doubly-shamed and forced to own our contribution to the predicament. In short – we elected the leader we had to have to lead us into the fires we deserve.

Hypothesis 4:

Because of our reliance on exploiting non-renewable resources for our way of life, members of society are afraid to give up the fantasy that things can go on the way they always have. This results in a denial of our inherent interconnectedness with the environment and inertia in the political system – particularly in relation to climate change policy.

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