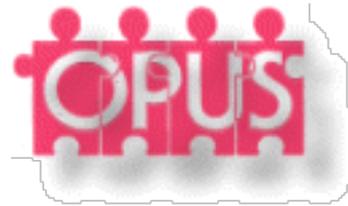


AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Australia and the World at the Dawn of 2014 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



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. Participants were invited to share their preoccupations and experiences as citizens of Australia, and to explore these from their various social roles, be these in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. It was noticeable in the group's preoccupations that citizenship is experienced as being part of a global community.

Participants were noticeably expressive. There were strong feelings of:

- Frustration and anger with not having voice as a citizen, 'can't express my disappointment and sadness at how our government treats asylum seekers.' 'And the aged population.' 'Angry that this government has been violent and destructive [of the fabric of our society]. It feels like anything good has been ripped apart.'
- Dashed hopes and impotence: 'Loss of power on retirement [from the workforce]', 'The government who couldn't govern itself', 'I'm rendered useless'.
- Disgust, shock, fascination and horror at the naked narcissism and aggrandisement on display amongst politicians who seem not to care what the populace thinks about their behaviours.
- An apathy towards changes in society and the 'fickleness of fashion', that generates thoughts of, 'I've turned off and just say this too will pass', Switching off – 'it's too hard. I have no autonomy', 'I don't have to get involved in that, give it twelve months and it will be gone'.

Part 2. Identification of major themes

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. Several themes were identified by participants: A Curated Reality; Power, Authority and Politics; Vulnerable Groups; Scarcity of Resources; Community and Connectedness. As will be seen in the discussion below, there was a strong pre-occupation with the political events in Australia during 2013 – the volatile leadership of the Australian Labor Party and the federal election which was won by an aggressive, conservative Liberal Party. Together with political events in the State of Victoria, these contributed to a continuing loss of faith in institutional authority (noted in previous years' Listening Posts). Little was mentioned this year on experiences of working life, intergenerational relations, or the environment. The vitality of Australia's political leadership was of major concern to the group.

Themes

1. A Curated Reality

A member of the group coined the phrase 'a curated reality' to describe the way that traditional and social media was used by governments and citizens to present an augmented reality to the public. Examples included using Instagram to photograph meals and trivial aspects of our lives and cropping and editing photographs to 'present how you want to be seen'.

The discussion also included references to the rise of the 'body beautiful' and the 'cult of the extravert'. The notion of a 'curated reality' was juxtaposed with the real world in all its complexity and inter-relatedness. The group explored together the notion that a 'curated reality' was a reaction to the real-world in all its harshness and anxiety-provoking reality.

It was noted that the online world was increasingly used as a way to connect people to events in the real world – 'I only got Facebook so that I could enrol in Yoga in the park', 'I use Facebook to connect with my son'.

Discussions also centred on how governments are selective with what and how they present to the public. Examples included the current Federal government in Australia which was labelled as 'secretive' resulting in 'the oxygen being taken out of the discussion', governments 'saying whatever they think they can get away with' and a billionaire turned politician presenting as 'one of the people' but who 'is all about himself and making more money'.

2. Power, Authority and Politics

Much of the discussion centred on the immediate past year in Australian federal politics. By way of background – Julia Gillard, Australia's first woman Prime Minister was replaced as the leader of the Labor Party (and hence as Prime Minister of Australia) in June 2013, by Kevin Rudd. Rudd subsequently led the Labor Party to a federal election defeat in September of the same year and Tony Abbot's right-wing Coalition was swept to power.

The group characterised numerous examples of new policy initiatives (such as a toughening stance on Australia's asylum seeker policy, changes to the National Broadband Network strategy and dismantling the Carbon Tax) as lacking integrity, hypocritical and destructive – 'it feels like anything good has been ripped apart'. Personal reactions to such government policy changes included denial 'I've turned off... I just tell myself 'this too shall pass'', disbelief 'How has this happened? I'm so out of step', disappointment 'It's so different to what we teach our children' and ambivalence 'I don't know whether to mobilise or walk away'.

The group also focused on Julia Gillard's removal from power as an insight into femininity and power – the group posited a hypothesis that Prime Minister Gillard was unfairly treated because she was a female leader 'women can't be ruthlessly ambitious', 'I'm mystified why she wasn't accepted', 'you can't be a woman who shows her ambition', 'if you're a woman politician, people expect you to sort out your issue as a mother might'.

3. Vulnerable Groups

Participants expressed a strong pre-occupation with the plight of those seeking asylum and how this was felt to reflect a society that appeared brutal towards those who are vulnerable. Mention was made of the irony / perversity of the 'unchristian Christians' now in power; that how the vulnerable are treated – refugees, the old, disabled, different racial groups – marked the character of our society. A loss of collective compassion.

While it is a racially diverse society, representation of this diversity is not made visible in our TV programs. Stereotyping is the norm.

'Where are all the black people? I see them on the streets but not on TV!' In contrast to this, the disabled person in the British show *Silent Witness* is portrayed as 'just doing her job'.

In addition, the group thought 'Previous migrants are less empathetic to current migrants. They don't want to be reminded of their *outgroupness* because they are now *In*'.

4. Scarcity of Resources

Australian society is said to be based on values of egalitarianism but there is fear of losing what we have and this sets up a fortress mentality and rivalry. There were comments of: 'We used to be egalitarian – the COMMONWEALTH of Australia. We are now Fortress Australia', 'It's a real competitive world; a free-for-all, dog eat dog, free market', 'You would need 4 or 5 planets for everyone to enjoy the same standard of living'. Stories of 'the disenfranchised idealising the right-wing tea party philosophy, like Obama Care equalling Communism', and the idea that Australia was 'moving by stealth into a libertarian culture' were also linked to these themes.

5. Community and Connectedness

A theme on community and connectedness threaded through the discussion. Participants wondered about Australia and class structures. 'Do we still have classes in Australia?' 'We speak the same, but the classes are still present.' 'Yet one of the defining points of anger towards Julia Gillard was her [working class] accent.' 'We're wanting homogeneity, not differences.'

A story told of returning to the family home 'where my mother used to live', and discovering that childhood friends had 'returned to the street to live – knocking over the old war service homes to build McMansions'. This was thought of as 'A kind of nostalgia for a time that's been lost, and trying to reconnect to then', and '...of reconnections in my little corner of the world – drinks on xmas morning amongst the neighbours'.

Other comments surrounding community and connectedness included 'We have farmers markets on Sundays in the middle of the city – they've replaced churches', 'I keep thinking of all these 'runs' – community events where people get on a train together to go somewhere and run for 5 km'. 'The *No Lights, No Lycra* dancing events that are now around the world – it's about physical bodies and connecting to physicality... Exercise as a connecting activity rather than image'.

There was an ambivalence expressed about social media and its nature of connectedness... 'social media is a disembodied connection. I feel overwhelmed by accessibility to all the information but it doesn't connect me', versus 'Online communities suit me as an introvert; I can connect without having to constantly perform'. These comments included a longing for community and fear of being alone; while at same time a craving to be alone [from the overwhelming accessibility of social media].

Part 3. Analysis and hypothesis formation

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 and 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.

Hypotheses

1. Perverse political leadership

Because of a political leadership pre-occupied with in-fighting, seeking to win elections at any cost, kowtowing to those who hold the 'balance of power' no matter their questionable ethics, and the relentless manipulation of public communications, Members of society feel bewildered, angry, despairing, powerless, and anxious about survival, Resulting in a polarization of society along the lines of those in power and the powerless, such that vulnerability is split off into powerless groups such as asylum seekers, the aged, disabled, and racial minority groups.

2. Loss of faith in establishment authority

Because of the turbulent past 12 months in federal politics, in which leadership and positive visions for the future were eroded and/or destroyed, and complex realities reduced to slogans and curated presentations, Members of society have lost faith in government and social institutions and feel uncertain and angry about who or what can be trusted. This results in members of society fleeing into a 'curated life' in which reality can be cropped, changed and selectively captured in order to deny our fears that a privation of leadership will lead to our premature demise.

3. Curated reality displacing relatedness

Because real-time communication of events such as asylum seekers turning up on Australia's seaboard is withheld for reasons that do not make sense to the populace, and the ubiquitous use of social media for communicating 'curated realities', Members of society feel lied to, treated with contempt by their political leaders, and also use social media to present a curated reality of themselves and to 'connect' with others,

Resulting in amplification of the 'false self', and a loss of relatedness with the 'true self'.

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