AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

**Australia and the World at the Dawn of 2015
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 are invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. This part is concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that relates to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants. Participants are 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.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES:

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

We identify themes of: A Divided Society; Negative Politics; Systems are out of Whack; and the Ramping up of Emotions in Relations between Peoples.

It was noticeable this year that participants were preoccupied with their roles as citizens and very concerned about political governance and leadership. There was less direct comment on the subjects of the environment, climate change, technology, youth, or the role of the media. Instead, these subjects were mentioned indirectly through an expressed sense of failure in the prevailing political leadership. Participants spoke of a sense that 'something was stirring' in society – as if a tipping point has been reached. Hypotheses in previous years' Listening Posts have been tracking a major theme of change to 'the way of life as we know it' and its accompanying dynamics of helplessness, hopes for a saviour, and despair at the failure of authority and leadership in public spheres of Australian and global society. The so-named 'stirring' suggests a realisation that the changes previously feared or anticipated, have happened and now require people to exercise their authority and to adapt.

1. **A Divided Society**

Society is described in terms of those who are privileged – holding citizenship – and on the other side are asylum seekers denied entry to Australia, coined 'Illegal' by our federal government. There are multiple divisions in our society that are deepening: between the haves and have nots; the rich and employed and the poor who are dependent on welfare; those who get heard and the missing voices from public discourse.

"Will witness the end of the world in my lifetime. But life is also great. We have affluence and freedom at the expense of terrible suffering elsewhere. We are among the most privileged. Refugees have little hope of employment and turn to terrorism."

"Distance between the rich and poor. It is actually happening. A lot of the gains made in the 60s have been lost. Spending time in hospitals. It is a completely split system. It's getting impossible. It's important to merge that. It's not going to be the end of the days. Many things seem to be improving but now it's going the other way. Asylum seekers, how can we be doing it?"

2. **Negative Politics**

At recent elections, Australian voters kicked out the sitting party at both federal and a state government level after only one term. This is unusual in the history of Australian politics, and it is highly possible that the same will happen again to the current federal government. While the opposition parties play a 'game of negativity', the party in power has no positive vision for Australian society, there is no engagement, policies are incoherent and contradictory, and the prime minister stirs irrationality – "he is laughable, despicable", "makes my skin crawl", "looks more and more like a lizard".

There is contempt, rage and hatred for politicians: "are we making ourselves ungovernable?"

"Some of my rage is frustration of incoherence of policies. Where's the vision? Where's the discussion in society of what we want and to be what?"

3. **Systems are out of Whack**

Several examples of bizarre political decisions and actions suggest that social and political systems are not functioning:

*   as the job market contracts, benefits are taken away from

the unemployed and vulnerable
- foreign aid is cut at the same time as punitive laws to 'stop the boats' are enacted
- the manufacturing sector is in decline, but the one industry that is growing and increasing employment (renewable energy) is gutted by budget cuts to climate change institutions
- the education system is in turmoil from radical reforms being wound back, cuts to promised funding, and a conservative reform agenda being imposed, 'causing internal hysteria'.
- the economic logic of government is incoherent and has no strategy, 'give more to the rich and less to the poor to encourage each to work harder'. 'Economics is not taking account of the really important things'.
- "Food stamps in US [for welfare recipients] – they can't buy greens but can buy soda!"

The consequences of systems being out of whack are seen in the hidden violence in our society, 'one woman a week is killed because of domestic violence', '(there are) many more youth suicides than are publicly reported', 'statistically, the poorer you are, the more depressed you are likely to be'. There is concern expressed that short-term care is not what's needed for ongoing depression. People seem to have normalised much higher stress levels than what would have been acceptable in the past: 'thinking they can be superhuman on little sleep', people are 'not stopping to think'. There are suggestions that more mindfulness is needed.

4. **Relations between Peoples and the Ramping Up of Emotions**

Underlying nearly every preoccupation shared in the group was a statement (explicit or implied) about the relations between people. These ranged from examples of positive, visible acts of kindness between strangers on the street in large cities, to a story of witnessing a disabled man being pushed around and bullied.

There is an overwhelming awareness of horrors in other countries and that some people seem to matter more than others – the differing attention given to events in Paris and Sydney compared with atrocities in Nigeria and the Middle East. We are given an image of our Prime Minister dressed in his 'budgie smugglers' 'shirtfronting' Vladimir Putin – two 'trolls' interacting.

"… proud to become an Australian citizen – but aware too of the legal injustices towards indigenous and Torres Straits Island peoples".

"It is hard for organisations to publicly acknowledge their 'wrongdoings'."

"Feel rage and hatred. The intensity is amazing. Scott Morrison, unemployment benefits removed, number of jobs going down and we penalise them. Hate towards [Prime Minister] Abbott and [Education Minister] Pyne. I've not felt hatred like this since a child."

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. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following working hypothesis:

Because of the chaos and contradictions in our political systems, members of society feel disillusioned with political leaders, and enraged by the negativity and incoherence of public policies. Political governance is becoming an impossible task for which politicians are blamed. Members of society are stirred to 'unity against terrorists' in public demonstrations of 'oneness'. The unity is delusional and offers a false oceanic oneness to counter individual fears and hatred of not being in control, and of denying our own destructiveness, 'un-governability' and 'terrorist self.

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