

**"Australia and the World  
at the Dawn of 2006"**  
Report of a Listening Post  
held on 11th January



**Encouraging The Reflective Citizen**

**Synopsis**

A major (presenting) theme was the effects of modern communication technologies on affiliation and the building of community. While there are fears that these technologies may play a large role locally in community breakdown, especially amongst young people, we simply don't know. Is there a new trend toward small virtual groupings, and is this socially healthy or not?

This theme became persistent at times and was a centrepiece for an examination of differences between the generations. But behind it seemed to be a more anxiety provoking recognition that large-scale community, as evidenced in the large institutions is not trusted. Government and media give us a world where we cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy; boundaries between public and private are fragmenting so that our privacy is invaded, while at the same time a philosophy of individualism and consumerism exists and works against an authentic community idea of 'public good' (even while the idea of public good is invoked in the war against terror and hence the drift into fragmentation of private/public boundaries). In times of increased uncertainty about the future, an apparent technological distancing of 'self' from 'other' may parallel the (desired?) distancing and fear we feel from an enemy other and from the hatred in the world. More positively, new communication technologies do open up new ways of contacting others; young people may be creating new ways of developing affiliation.

**THEMES**

**1. Different generational paradigms around politics, community, communication, roles and belonging.**

This theme was first raised at the beginning of the listening post and it returned at various points in the process. It was initially raised by members in the role of parent with respect to their own teenage or young adult children (especially in the area of communication and affiliation), but in the process of the listening post it seemed also to become attached (in the here and now) as a difference between the older generation (50+) and the younger generation (30's) present.

Although the generation difference was seen with respect to politics, community and attitudes to work roles, the major discussion seemed to become fixed on affiliation via communication styles. In particular, the use of technology for communicating (particularly text messaging on mobile phones) became a focus. Young people were seen

to be breaking down old boundaries - using the technologies provided by the older generation. Although some members pointed out that the older generation also used e-mails, phones, text messaging and other non face-o-face communication regularly, there was a persistent sense of the 'younger generation' being more adept at such 'virtual' connections. In fact, they were seen as more reliant on such communication technologies and there was an attendant anxiety in the LP that the possible domination of communication by such technologies (dominant over face-to-face communication) is problematic. Different members had different positions on this issue but agreed that as a society we just don't know the outcomes of the increased effects of communication technologies on affiliation. At one stage, members pointed out the 'here and now' process was becoming as if members were 'texting' each other in the group. The dialogue was 'quick fire' with little time for reflection between inputs.

In exploring differences between the generations within the group, a scenario was brought forward of younger people relying on their own small peer group for support, discussion and sharing of confidences, rather than relying on traditional institutions such as schools, churches and other community gatherings, that were seen as untrustworthy or unable to provide the containment needed for anxieties. Notably, this scenario was for those in their thirties, not just for teenagers or twenties.

Linked to this, the idea of changing roles was brought forward. One member told of how she felt she was very different from her mother's generation insofar as she had multiple, complex roles in the family and at work. Work roles, in particular, seem nowadays to be multiple and complex. It was felt that the last generation was not able to provide role models for current roles because of the rapidity of change. However, another member stated that he wished to model characteristics such as courage and honesty for his children and that this could be done despite rapid change in work roles.

## **2. Private vs. Public, personal boundaries and Global links to this theme.**

The theme of shifting boundaries between public and private was raised. For example, the information held on individuals by government and companies invades our privacy. The idea of being 'taken off the street' referred to the arrest and detention of terror suspects made on the basis of information gathered by the authorities. This is one side of the picture, but the other side is the extent to which the 'private made public' is part of the fabric of voluntary communication. Voluntary individual websites make public personal details. In this vein, the 'Latham Diaries' were raised. (This was a publication authored by Mark Latham, previously leader of the Labour Opposition, who discussed in detail many private and personal issues within the Australian Labour Party. Many in the party felt Latham had broken the boundaries of what was private, and had betrayed the party).

There was a discussion of websites such as Google - Earth that can visually pinpoint domiciles. A member said she was on the other side of the world and was able to show a friend where she lived. The upside was being able to do this for the friend. The downside was the invasion of privacy, where for example, anyone could see at any time whether her car was parked there or not; whether she was home or not. 'It felt like Big Brother'. The other side of the broad issue is that some of what used to be public is now made private in the sense of ownership and knowledge, through, for example, commercial-in-confidence regulations.

Much of the discussion around this theme had a 'paranoid tinge' with feelings of anxiety and fear. This was particularly in relation to the accessibility of private information and

to the powers held by the 'authorities' in regard to detaining people. It was linked to the question of 'who can we trust?'

### **3. Distancing of self from the 'other'.**

This theme was raised in different forms. First, there was the link to politics. There was a belief that our government is using 'fear of the other' to control the population. References were made to refugees and terror suspects. Linked in here was the idea that our identity as Australians was implicated. 'The world is awash with hatred' one member said. 'Fear of the other underlies all the political stuff'. Reference was made here to the film 'Joyeux Noel' which depicts the time in WW1 when soldiers stopped fighting over Christmas and made contact across the trenches: the tragedy being when the officers forced the re-commencement of hostilities. The message seemed to be that hatred must continue. Later, the hatred theme was raised more directly at home where a member described her direct experiences of anti-semitism. But it was noted that when the issue of hatred was raised, fears became discussed. It was as if we felt the fear of hatred and were unable to see any hatred in ourselves.

Second, the theme came in the form of the discussion around affiliation and the distancing of people through 'virtual' rather than direct engagement. Here, the distancing was not seen as due to fear but in the pursuit of faster communication. Members were not agreed as to whether this was or was not a 'real' distancing process.

### **4. Feelings of pessimism and fear about what is 'real' and what is fantasy.**

There was discussion around what is 'real' and what is fantasy, especially as generated by eg, the media and the government. This was again linked to the 'who can we trust?' idea. The manufacture and use of hatred was linked in here. What is the personal impact of this? When is hatred our own and when created for us?

Linked to this (and to theme 6 below) was the question of why did we (Australians) give so much to the Tsunami appeal but are giving much less to (ignoring?) the crisis in Kashmir? What do we identify with? Or is the question: what does the media identify with? Do we become immune to some messages of disaster?

### **5. Uncertainty and lack of optimism for the future.**

This was linked primarily to the global political scene. An idea was put forward that Australians in the post WW2 era became 'comfortable' and unused to the feelings of anxiety about the future that they now had to face. The future may not hold what we thought it would. Another point raised was the uncertainty about aged care in the future. What will we need in the future and will it be there? Also mentioned was a kind of feeling of 'impending doom'. Included were the hatred in the world, terrorism, climate change and bird flu.

### **6. Identity, Self, Role and cross-cultural issues.**

A few themes came together that were centred on personal identity.

First were the demands of consumerism and its effects on the realisation of personal vision and goals. For example, a preoccupation with younger people in getting their own home, or their own space to think and develop the role they might wish to have in society.

Second, with Australia being a country of migrants, how do the newcomers find their identity? A member from Africa spoke of the difficulty of finding how she might make a contribution here where rituals and meanings were so different.

Third, how might one be effective in one's work role, especially how might one aid in the development of sustainability and protecting the future for the future generations?

Fourth, there was a discussion of cross-cultural issues surrounding intercultural marriages. Members spoke of instances where family members had married across Christian Muslim cultures and how this had led to challenges for all family members.

**7. Emotions: concern for safety; fears; hatred (hard to hold on to and explore in the group), lack of trust, apathy and lack of empathy even to 'shocking things'.** This theme appeared in different forms. As mentioned earlier, one member spoke of being the target of strong anti-Semitic attacks. It was hard for the group to stay with the discussion of feelings of hatred. Feelings of fear and anxiety (perhaps in response to hatred) became the focus. Some members felt that the discussion was overly intellectualised and that this may have been a defence against feeling. It was noted that apathy and a lack of empathy were 'creeping in' as responses to media depictions of pain in the world.

## **HYPOTHESES**

There were many hypotheses put forward. Although for most of these there was general agreement, there was no mutual development of one or two major hypotheses. It was as if members were each putting forward their own hypothesis. This in itself seemed to evidence an individualistic way of working which might reflect an increasing individualism in society. It might also reflect on method, with perhaps the LP becoming a kind of 'focus group' rather than a community effort in itself. (This is an idea from the report writer arising while writing the report, rather than coming from the membership.)

### **1. Hypotheses around communication, affiliation and reflective space.**

- The new ways of communicating may (ironically) be distancing people from each other. Questions were raised such as, 'Are the younger generation really connecting?' Worse, 'will the new communication technologies lead to the wrong kind of connections?' to 'mish mash' babies?
- Faster ways of communicating leave no time for 'emotional digestion' between messages.
- There is a lessening of reflective space in society.
- In the face-to-face situation, individuals seem to be heard when they speak loudly and confidently. (Where is the place for the softer, less experienced, more hesitant? Can we hear the younger generation?)

### **2. Hypotheses around our emotions and their containment**

- We each have our individual ways of containing anxiety. There seems to be no community container. A sense of the common good is lost. How do we grow, change and still contain our anxieties?
- New technologies and consumerism may be serving individuals. Are they serving the common good?
- The gloom and despair we feel may be recognition of the damage and destruction we have done. (A hopeful depressive position).
- As citizens we have become alienated from our feeling selves. We intellectualise to protect ourselves from our fears.

### **3. Hypotheses around boundaries**

- Boundaries between private and public are being eroded and making us anxious.
- Manufactured boundaries between self and other are being created and used by government and media for control of population.
- The fragmentation of boundaries is felt as a threat, not the promise (freedom?) it initially was thought to be.
- Life is more meaningful in small groups and families than in large institutions.

This listening Post was sponsored by Group Relations Australia with support from the COS Group at RMIT University

Convener Hosts: Anne Hartican; Susan Long; and Tania Nahum