"Australia and the World at the Dawn of 2011"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 12th 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.

An interesting phenomenon at this year's Listening Post is that few participants identified themselves by name, work role, demographic attributes or where they lived. Those who did reveal personal details made links to significant life events, e.g. living through the 1974 floods in Queensland, arriving in Australia as a refugee, children leaving home, death of a parent.

The atmosphere of the group was quiet and felt sombre to the convenors. There was a sense that 2010 had brought people back to a more realistic view of the world — less idealism, a struggle with integrating the 'both / and' aspects of citizenship, power, civic leadership and capitalism. Idealism is tempered by cynicism and disillusionment with those in public leadership roles, especially politicians and those identified as the power elite. We sensed people were deeply affected by the floods in Queensland and other parts of the world, and themselves 'flooded' with feelings. This was manifest in the silences between people speaking and generally quietly spoken voices overall, with no one voice especially dominating.

Julian Assange and WikiLeaks were frequently mentioned. A couple of years ago the newly elected Barack Obama had been a major preoccupation as the 'world's saviour'. He is not figural now. Of particular interest this year is the preoccupation with female public figures: Anna Bligh, the Queensland Premier (referred to as presenting her 'whole self'), Julia Gillard, Australia's 1st female Prime Minister ('wooden and scripted'), and Christine Nixon, a past Police Commissioner (whose reputation has become tarnished from a Royal Commission report). We surmise that there is still a yearning for a 'saviour', but perhaps now it is for one whose public persona allows citizens to engage in a fantasy of knowing the whole person.

Broadly, participants were preoccupied with eight main topics:

- The Natural Environment
- Institutional Systems, Government and Politicians
- Individuals' Sense of Agency

- Racism
- Personal and Domestic Issues
- Community
- Knowledge and Not Knowing
- The World Outside of Australia

The Natural Environment

- Floods in Qld; fires in WA; but so small in scale compared with Pakistan — 'thousands vs. millions'.

- First there are fires, now there are floods (afterword: we are also in the midst of a locust plague).

- We are not in control [of Nature].

- But, is it real or media hype? This question is rebutted by a personal story of living through 1974 Queensland floods as a child.

- I'm preoccupied by the Black Saturday fires, now this.

- Floods – trapped individuals; locked in & locked out.

- I feel overwhelmed by the enormity of it and powerless, 'How to deal with it?'

- Upsets our assumptions of being in control — then we try to blame someone; have a Royal Commission!

Institutional Systems, Government and Politicians

- Feeling nannied but not supported.

- WikiLeaks — Julian Assange — delight, joy, affronted, hope for democracy, ambivalence.

- What do political parties really stand for?

- Underwhelmed by female prime minister (scripted) vs Qld female premier (spontaneous, available and present — leading with whole self).

- Anna Bligh's re-election will be greatly aided by this crisis and her 'real-time responsiveness', BUT will we find someone to blame [again] — Christine Nixon mentioned; Anna Bligh's 'unwashed hair' (a reference to a concern that if she went to the hairdresser she would suffer the critique brought forth by Christine Nixon's actions when the bushfire disaster was unfolding).

- My insurance company claimed Australia Post lost my insurance papers — they were completely unhelpful.

- Processes of government and private business are designed to gip you as a citizen, wear you down, leave you powerless.

- Disappointment in Rudd [previous Prime Minister].

- Comparing kids and parents to citizens and politicians.

- Cynical about politicians. It's a career for them. We project [moral] values onto them. I'd hate to have parents like that.

- Insurance company told a friend "you are covered for flood in our policy, but only if you leave your belongings inside the house; don't try to save them by moving them out. We won't cover you then."

- We [as a society] are more comfortable with little handouts than big investments, e.g. 'the broadband we don't need'.

- The immense power of the [four] independents who got Labor Party into office.

- Can't bear the thought that we [western capitalists] will get killed off.

- Will we be heroic deaths?

Individuals' Sense of Agency

- Local council lost a court case to an individual's challenge — the planning decision thereby overturned.

- Contested a decision through VCAT — huge investment of time, energy & personal dignity. Won the case but at great personal cost.

- Feel impotent, frightened, despondent, powerless and cynical as never before in the face of political power; 'the system seems full of contradictions'.

- A property developer skips the country and leaves construction of property unfinished. An eyesore for the neighbours now. Nothing can be done about it now.

- Julian Assange — he was by himself and then the world joined him.

- On TV news: 2 people helping 2 other people. When asked why, they said, "It doesn't matter who you don't know."

- Got a call from a friend of a friend to help her daughter who is travelling in Australia and suddenly alone. I could easily respond "Yes, I'll help". Phoned the daughter, got her on a plane and now staying with us. A 'random act of kindness is still possible'.

- When moving house recently I noticed large weeds in the garden of the old house and realised that during the year I must have pulled out small weeds as I passed by each day, but without noticing I did so. It's the little things we do everyday that we don't notice, but at the end of the year they've made a big difference.

- We make a hero out of Assange. We want heroes not victims.

- Want to believe Assange is a hero, but maybe he is also a rapist. Maybe he is both.

- Thinking about the arrival of heroes. Link between hero and leader. What's impossible or improbable.

- The hero cannot be tolerated; we want a hero, but in reality the heroes we create are just people.

- Adam and Eve, should they have eaten the apple? They ate it.

- I've begun picking up rubbish on the beach and people have started joining into help.

Racism

- We have heartless, dehumanising processing of refugees.

- Surprised by how uneducated we are about refugees: Why do we listen to some and not others? Why don't we choose to seek out truth?

- Is it about connecting? If we can't connect can we support?

- Do we look for the worst in people sometimes?

- News article about people helping others they didn't know — they weren't looters [as might be immediately assumed] but helpers. Random acts of kindness.

- Europeans and indigenous Australians have completely different stories about the same violent events in our history; only now are the indigenous stories being given visibility on a plaque displayed in a Perth (WA) park.

- 'The stories in our society favour tall, blonde people' [aka Europeans, Julian Assange]

- A son is told by his father about the brutality towards indigenous children brought up in an orphanage.

- Australian history is full of negative attitudes towards displaced people; deeply racist society, people are quite happy to display their racist views.

- I've been on a holiday in a coastal town — big houses, big cars, obsession with people's 'success' — but, the floods ground me in what's really significant, i.e. back to basics.

- Working with indigenous communities increases my awareness of racism and need for racist awareness training. We don't live in a just society.

Personal and Domestic Issues

- Concerned about the cost of university, and my daughter moving away from home.

- Furious at a neighbour for leaving her car outside my house — when I discovered it was because the battery was flat I felt compassion and realised the fury was in me.

- Anger at people littering — it's an act of aggression against others. Sometimes it's an expression about need to survive.

- Arsonists — deliberately burning down houses in Mandurah, WA. 'How could someone keep such a traumatic secret to themselves?'

- Wondering about the feeling of hopelessness. Last year my mother dies and after the service an intractable family dynamic was reconciled, out of the blue.

- I think about my grandchildren and the things we teach them and how we build resilience in children.

- I'm fatigued by shopping.

- Our houses are filled with clutter.

- My brother is affected by the floods.

- Waste: what's to happen to the old TVs once the digital ones have replaced them all. Where do the old ones go? There's no plan to recycle 3 year old batteries from Prius (electric hybrid) cars. City of Camberwell offers to recycle such things but residents don't use it because it's 'too far to drive'.

- Daughter starts school this year — got a letter saying we get a $300 starting bonus. Seems like a wasteful handout. What we could do if we collectively pooled the money!

- Random acts of kindness — what will you do if the girl to whom you offer hospitality turns out to be a brat?

Community

- Before the floods I was preoccupied with mental illness in our community.

- The definition of community is changing: Assange is associated to 'a coagulation of people online'; Twitter used by people to ask for help with floods and they get the help, from all over the world. That's a another kind of flood. Social networking creating a new definition of community.

- Reading an online discussion about Solomon Lew and Gerry Harvey [immensely wealthy and powerful retail barons] — reveals a denial that perhaps we are a society that's got retail fatigue; there's no discussion that not shopping is a problem.

- In Indonesia cars are dented, people hoot to let you in; many people on the roads. Here, only cars on the roads & people hoot to show their anger.

- Why do you have to have citizen nationality to live anywhere?

Knowledge and Not Knowing

- Is it global warming?

- How do I know when I'm being manipulated, lied to? or told the truth?

- Who to believe, and when?

- We're learning what it means to live in this country; we've not built our cities or cotton industries to suit it well.

- What about the rape allegations about Julian Assange? Who are the good guys? Who do we cheer for?

- Maybe a primitive human developmental thing — e.g. with the refugees, if I don't know, then they can be behind a fence [out of sight, out of mind].

- WikiLeaks — like a child peering into parents' bedroom. Do we really want to know what Australian soldiers do in Afghanistan? Yes! Just ask the Jews in Auschwitz. It is better to know.

- Denial of global warming is a wish to get back to basics — keep it simple, complexity overwhelms and confounds, who knows what is science, truth, reality.

The World Outside of Australia

- Recent violence towards politician in the USA.

- Role of shock jocks.

- Feeling overwhelmed.

- WikiLeaks

- Fear and resistance in USA towards death of capitalism, and is linked to increasing inequity of wealth distribution.

- Christmas Island — the boat people are making a perilous trek across ocean

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part Two, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part One. The group formed three smaller groups to work on identifying themes in Part 1 of the Listening Post. We discovered in the reporting back that one group had created a 'flood' of themes and hypotheses. The actual way this occurred was that each member in that small group had contributed to a large set of themes and then created their own hypothesis. This feels to us to be an unconscious enactment of one of the main pre-occupations of the Listening Post participants — that individual acts of agency feel more potent than relying on institutions or their leaders.

The major themes emerging from Part 1 are:

- **Feelings of hopelessness** in the face of the enormity of environmental forces, the power of political elites and the political machinery.

- **Anger** in society is acted out in little ways, e.g. littering, fury with neighbour's car.

- **Individuals feeling alienated and lied to** by 'big entities', feeling anger and powerlessness, and feeling this to be a deliberate strategy of institutions to keep citizens small, ignorant, uninformed. Truth and fiction cannot be distinguished and lead to individuals feeling powerless in relation to institutional power structures. Reality is highly personal, because knowledge of and in the larger system cannot be trusted.

- **Cynicism** about who or what to believe or trust. Feel that citizens are given mis-information or are missing information. Also, we are not sure what to do with our disillusionment with 'fallen heroes'.

- **Individual and personal connections and acts**, are seen as empowering and to have a subversive element to them, such as 'it doesn't matter who you don't know' (when helping strangers affected by the floods), the personal responses to littering, or of acts of kindness by taking in strangers. These acts are seen also as a way of connecting with others and, in some way, as a way of accessing power and defense against uncertain, unreliable leadership. 'Doing little things' makes individuals feel powerful. It gives individuals a sense of potency in the face of powerful forces.

- **Fears that humans won't survive the forces of nature** such as global warming, floods and fires. The destructive force of mother nature is linked in some way to the focus on female political leaders in the preoccupations of participants. Nature is seen as extremely powerful (and destructive of human endeavours), and we are powerless to control it.

- **Wastefulness:** Participants referred to wastefulness of all kinds but in particular, wasteful attitudes about consumer goods and acts of littering. Another slant to this is of being fed up with the waste of resources that come with capitalism.

- **Being more disconnected and being grounded,** which the group struggled to hold together, finally separating them into two themes. This is datum about the split participants were grappling with when things which did not seem to fit nonetheless were coexisting before their eyes. There was a sense of disbelief about this, even as there was a felt experience of it. 'Disconnected' refers to a sense of Australians being disconnected from experiences of other countries where natural disasters are also occurring.

- **Admiration for 'real people' in public leadership roles.** A real person is seen to be someone who presents their 'whole person'. The 'whole person' is an unscripted and emotionally expressive politician (Anna Bligh); or a hero for democracy who may also be a flawed person (Julian Assange).

We discern from these themes, three major ones:

- Power and powerlessness
- Disillusionment with our leaders
- Retaining a sense of individual agency

Power and Powerlessness

Participants felt themselves largely powerless to effect any change at a societal level. References to the power elite in politics, industry and the world stage, were notable for their cynicism and pessimism. It suggests a relationship of 'failed dependency' between citizens and societal leaders, which leaves members of society feeling disengaged, intensely frustrated, and angry.

There is a recognition that humans cannot control the environment in which we live, and this is profoundly frightening. Anxiety about not being in control of Nature is projected onto those 'in control', who are then blamed for natural disasters occurring, or the deaths and damage that ensue. The extremes of climate (floods, drought, storms and bushfires), and the locusts which currently infest parts of Australia, invoke an image of plagues of biblical proportion. Nature is powerful and out of our control; humans have a tenuous hold on their place here.

When participants did feel in control, was when they described taking personal actions in direct relationship with others such as, understanding one's own irrational fury towards a neighbour, picking up litter on the beach, helping the daughter of a friend's friend, or challenging the authority of institutions through legal channels. There was great admiration for (and pleasure taken in) someone like Julian Assange who was seen to be an individual challenging the power elites.

Thus, hope is linked to subversive actions by individuals, rather than communities.

Disillusionment with our leaders

Members shared feelings of disillusionment and cynicism with different leaders in society. Those leaders were variously identified as high profile individuals or politicians, most notably the Australian Julian Assange (WikiLeaks) but they also included the Queensland state premier Anna Bligh and the Australian prime minister Julia Gillard.

The group seemed to grapple with an emerging clarity that leaders might be, or *are* 'both-and' in respect to good and bad. This was observed as a contrast to alternate 'either-or', the lack thereof which was expressed with a level of nostalgia, as if at some point this might have been true.

Group members freely discussed current examples of leadership, including Julian Assange, whom they cast as a hero. They noted that his heroic status was also tempered with the possibility that the man could be convicted as a rapist but expressed admiration for the subversive dimension of WikiLeaks' work.

Members reflected that one reason for disillusionment was that vehicles like WikiLeaks were revealing more about the mechanics of leadership than had been previously apparent and that these mechanics were unpleasant. So information about the 'good' and 'bad' is more available and more openly analysed around the world and in many different parts of society.

There were several non-specific references to political leaders as sources of disillusionment; this was a crossover point between WikiLeaks and the identification of politicians as leaders who were most distinctly both-and, and not to be trusted. After some exposition about WikiLeaks' revelations about processes of diplomacy and government decision-making as well as a challenge about the behaviour of Australian army personnel in Afghanistan, an allegory was drawn to children being privy to the goings-on in their parents' bedroom. This was used as a way of questioning how much members of society want to know and should know. Politicians and citizens were likened to parents and kids, noting that we would not want parents who were like politicians. A biblical reference to Adam and Eve deciding to eat the apple in the Garden of Eden hinted at the kinds of feelings which stirred when something as tempting and compelling as WikiLeaks offered revelation, but with a whole lot of baggage. *Knowing* brings a requirement to discern, to take a position and locate the self in a complex and moral realm.

Thematically the participants shared feelings of 'both-and' in reference to many topics (not only leadership), suggesting an increasing capacity and or willingness to deal with duality. It is suggested that the both-and that is now so available in society's leaders is impacting on how citizens perceive a range of other topics. There is an increasing capacity to hold duality, a realization that many familiar notions might come to be understood as having both-and kinds of dimensions. Leadership is among the more disturbing of them.

In addition to disillusionment, discussion among participants also evidenced some feelings of hatred about the failure of high profile people to live up to the role of hero. Other themes around wastefulness and associated guilt, and outrage plus an identification of heroes as 'people like us' suggested that participants may have been processing their own experience of both-and via projection onto the leaders in our society, and taking it back for integration into their own ways of thinking and acting.

Retaining a sense of individual agency
Chaotic external events approach us in increasingly direct and more intimate ways — most recently as flooding (pictured as social, ecological, and natural disaster). Although some of these events are of our making (financial crisis, global warming and climate change events), much of this feels impersonal — an angry, frightening 'Mother Nature', whereas the traditional male-hero figure is symbolising the waning credibility and energy of capitalism, its positive or pro-social potency unable to be accessed. Both ways we feel flooded by these uncontrollable experiences, inclining us to madness and fury at our impotence. Subsequently this is given an unacceptable face in excesses of withdrawal and 'closed-ness', or a pro-social 'openness'.

Social institutions respond to the growing anxiety by wanting to placate and reassure through elaborate and frequent media representations. These, in turn, catalyse citizen's responses of:

1. reassurance, also numbness, confusion and confounding;
2. increased uncertainty and suspicion of anyone claiming to be in-control;
3. compounded pessimism, confirming a belief of societal incompetence, and leaders' duplicity, amorality, inability to inspire-or-deserve followership.

Participants described their behaviour in response to this 'secondary flooding and overwhelm' according to three patterns: as 'narrow denial'; 'helplessness and fury'; or, 'assertion of a social heroic'.

Narrow denial — sinks ourselves into selfish preoccupation symbolised in our addiction to 'retail therapy'; endless consideration and interest in our escalating house values, investment properties and new homes, self-justifying the large beach houses, imported cars, and renovations. This ambivalence is projected-out as the 'other' who develops townhouses that can be left incomplete, a great eyesore, if the money gets tight or situation difficult (e.g. the developer shoots through). There is minimal social consideration of the effects of our consumerism e.g. littering, or seemingly-thoughtless, asocial acts, wasteful use of limited resources (e.g. the insurer recommending to leave things where the flood water would damage, otherwise they would not pay).

Helplessness and fury — a hostile paralysis-impotence in response to collapsing economies, natural disasters, institutional indifference, and violent acts of individuals and media manipulation. In the face of natural disasters, vacuous corporate and government leadership, manipulative and tightly-managed party politics, institutionalised bureaucratic indifference, and rapacious individualists who operate without censure, citizens are increasingly frustrated and angry. Sunk into an environment where their liberty and rights are limited or not-respected, people start to see themselves as the 'mad woman, wanting to do damage' ". . .feeling impotent and frightened, despondent, powerlessness. I feel cynical now (and never felt this way before)".

Assertion of a social heroic — personal potency/agency through individual and 'random acts of kindness'. In the face of powerful forces, individuals join together in philanthropic ventures, community minded activity, small acts of sometimes subversive social benevolence. There is an overt affirmation of the values of individual empathy, optimism, imagination, conviction, and courage. Viz. the contribution of strangers to assist others in the Qld floods — ". . .it doesn't matter who you don't know". Also, personal responses to littering, acts of kindness by taking-in strangers, taking pleasure in WikiLeaks releases.

These acts are understood as a way of accessing power and as a defence against uncertain, dubious unreliable hero-leaders and institutions. In the face of leaders-heroes-institutions who are both good-and-bad, the conversation reverts to 'what I can do', as I can't rely on them-as-they-are, nor is there an open dialogue to foster a viable democracy taking root.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, 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 interrelated hypotheses followed from a lively and stimulating discussion.

Hypothesis 1:
Members of society feel overwhelmed by the enormity of extremes of forces in the larger social and natural environments. They are disappointed with institutions, power elites and political machinery, and the failure of the heroes to live up to their expectations of good leadership. As a consequence, members of society have become angry and cynical of misuse of power for self-interest rather than social good.

Individuals feel powerless and caught in a dilemma of 'We won't survive with the capitalists while at the same time we need them for our survival'. However, individuals are finding within themselves the capacity to do 'small things' that feel powerful. Beneath all these feelings is a profound fear that the human race is facing destruction.

Hypothesis 2:
Because of global phenomena like WikiLeaks and human responses to natural and other disasters that reveal the character of society's leaders and heroes in more detail than previously available, members of society are more regularly confronted with the stark coexistence of good and bad openly embodied in single leaders. When this happens they are challenged with what this might reflect of themselves. In this environment, citizens experience feelings of disillusionment and cynicism toward those leaders, as well as a yearning to cast and re-cast the same people as heroes, splitting off and minimizing 'bad' for the sake of 'good'. Other less directed feelings include hostility, individual desire to subvert 'the system' and a sense of disturbance. This results in complex defensive behaviours at a societal level with people consciously coming to grips with the fallibility of their leaders and of themselves — and having no clear alternatives but to mobilize their own agency and start to look at the world around them through the lens of both-and.

Hypothesis 3:
Members of society are experiencing their social systems as in a state of deterioration, arising from huge power imbalances, turbulence in nature, the world, and natural disasters. The world feels out of control. They are flooded with images of disasters and feel manipulated by public relations and media spin. To relieve feelings of anxiety and insecurity, anger and blame is projected onto others — neighbours, refugees, politicians — and in order to regain a sense of control, individuals either perform random acts of kindness or withdraw from responsible action.

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