

**"Australia and the World
at the Dawn of 2012"
Report of a Listening Post
held on 11th 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.

The convenors experienced the group as energetic and forceful. Everyone spoke, there was little to no spaces of silence, and the processing in Part 3 of the Listening Post had a manic feel to it. There was a sense that global events during 2011 had disturbed people's sense of confidence in the future and their faith that our present-day institutions are equipped to deal with tumultuous changes occurring around the world.

An interesting phenomenon occurred this year – several participants commented on the 'strict time boundaries' of the structure of the event, and that they felt rushed to arrive at hypotheses after what had felt to be a reflective space for sharing pre-occupations. While this experience of feeling pushed to analyse and hypothesise is not unusual per se, what was unusual was an invitation by one member to continue the Listening Post in a 2-3 day workshop so that people could reflect on their experiences of the Listening Post and have more time to create hypotheses.

What it brought to mind for the convenors is of an expression of resistance to 'establishment structures', much like the 'Occupy' movement that has swept the developed world in 2011. It seems to represent a wish to be engaged on different terms, to create space for more reflective thinking, and perhaps signals an emerging resistance to a society that values speed of communication so very much, exemplified by 'twitter' technologies.

Worry and fear were strongly present in the expressed experience of participants and expressed on a number of issues. However, the group hardly noted or discussed experiences or perceptions of 'praiseworthy' events or developments – other than one member who spoke of a positive unexpected meeting she'd had with a relative; and another who said she did not feel or perceive things in the same 'concerned' way that many people in the group did – she said she felt more positive and that perhaps that was because she was from the country and had different experiences to people in towns; another said that Facebook was not all bad.

A theme around polarities, or the boundaries that divide people, wove through the discussion. They were noted in aspects such as: between individuals and institutions and organizations; between sets of values; between the public service and government; between countries and geography; between the values that leaders espouse and the behaviour shown in the positional power of their roles; between individuals and others (social connectedness, emotional intimacy); between the generations; between class; between inner city homes – shrinking space due to city planning controls; between the 'identity' and 'privacy' dimensions to the Facebook technology; between truth, justice, and legal jurisprudence (i.e. the men who got off the rape charge cos judge said 'she wanted it'); between the knowledge/experience that people choose to hold/keep tight or share.

Australia's relationship and relatedness to the outside world was again raised in various ways:

- We're healthier than other countries.
- The PIGS [Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain] infected Europe and is coming our way!
- Australia's island status infects us.
- I'm worried about China [it's one child policy], and Europe.
- Border security is a big issue – how you enter things is as important as why you enter.
- A media panel discusses the 'problem' of migrants having body odour.
- Concerned that there is little generosity amongst talkback radio listeners for getting the 3 activists off the Japanese whaling ship. Yet we don't hesitate to rescue sailors.
- Impact on Australia of economic rationalism (influence of the US).

Children and inter-generational relations were alluded to also:

- What and how are we teaching our children about what to value and how to think about this? Why don't we introduce critical thinking into primary education?
- How do boys learn to be men?
- Children learn faster than adults.
- I'm concerned about the sexualisation of children.
- The aged need the advocacy of the middle generation to facilitate dignified choices for health care and end of life care.
- For the young – Facebook is about identity; privacy is an issue for older generations.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part Two, the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part One. Underlying the discussion, we discerned four major themes in the collective mentality of the group:

The major themes emerging from Part 1 are:

- Power and powerlessness
- The faceless system
- Resistance and compliance
- Greed

Power and Powerlessness

Participants noted power and powerlessness, and helplessness as major causes for concern. This was alluded to in the 2011 Listening Post in Australia and was again identified as a major theme. Participants named power and powerlessness as polar opposites, along with several other themes including judging and being judged, and violence and apathy.

- The future of global power concerns me.
- Power thrives when thinking is discouraged.
- I have anxiety about whether or not there will be 'enough' in the future to enjoy the lifestyle I have today.
- Our future is being stolen by those who already have enough.
- I feel a sense of helplessness and despondency with humanity's capacity to resolve things and it's reaffirmed by the media.
- I engage in magical thinking; I won't talk to someone who's lost their job because I might lose mine.
- It's a paradox. Having more choice seems to mean we have less because we feel overwhelmed!
- Globalisation means less choice as things are homogenized – sameness is promoted.
- Distortion of values – we are in a world that is anti-thinking. It feels too located in power; power fills the space that thinking vacates.
- I am concerned about having control about when I die; a health system that supports the aged to make choices. Doctors and patients talk in euphemisms. Who will advocate for us? I have no children; I advocate for my mother, I hate to think what would happen if I hadn't.

- We create systems that render us powerless and this is responded to with apathy.
- With the recent nurses' discussion I sent a very strong email to person who looks after health to say for all our values why are we mucking around with health. Ref back to the mention of Inside Job and how Barack Obama hired back the same people (had been mentioned at start too).
- Sense of apathy re: who cares? Re this power thing.
- The occupy group are wanting to do something about it but they don't know how – but they want to.
- I don't think Facebook is all bad. I admire how those things have been used to give people access to more power.

More than a passing reference was made to the 'Occupy' protests that have occurred around the Western world in 2011, with an associated reflection that the movement did not appear to be articulate and had trouble getting its message across. It felt like there were traces of envy and admiration that a group of citizens would protest, but also frustration that its message wasn't compelling enough to change the status quo.

As was observed in 2011, participants associated hope with subversion, but this year they also expressed disappointment in the failure of subversive occupiers to restore a balance of power in society.

The Faceless System

The theme of a faceless system is identified from the many allusions to 'the system', to technologies that control us, and to references to 'power' in its many dimensions. The faceless system relates to the idea that we can no longer see real humans behind the system/s that drive or support society and organisations. As mentioned earlier, there was a noticeable lack of differentiation when speaking about leaders or those in power. Instead, leadership or leaders in a general sense were referred to, and those in extremely high positions of power were mentioned fleetingly only. The convenors were reminded of [David Armstrong's paper on Names, Thoughts and Lies](#). It is as if leaders are not named because they cannot provide us with 'the answers'. On the other hand, things and events were named as if they were unquestionable truths: 'the GFC', 'global power', 'Arab Spring' for example. Some of the discussion commentary follows.

- The future of global power concerns me.
- That whole Arab Spring thing really concerns me.
- That security thing really concerns me – when we hit the seven billion mark. I can remember hearing David Attenborough talk about when we hit 2 billion and so that has been in my lifetime. China has one child but we have one for mum dad and country.
- Leaders have a position and they get voted in and then they stop thinking. How do you lead in a way that embraces what's happening? It's not simple at all.
- I've been thinking about leadership too. I was doing something last week with the Grubb Institute. I found that I didn't know what the task was. It was about

establishing the guild. There was something in there about the leader having to hold the vision for everyone.

- Did you say establishing guild because I got the association of establishing guilt.
- It's all the same and this has led to a new 'slacktivism' – people clicking on online polls. Think about Arab Spring and things changing in western world, do people think that the only thing they can do is click on a mouse?
- State government – nothing much has happened for last twelve months and now there's a freeze on recruitment.
- Feels like public service has lost the boundary it had with government; it is not being independent.
- *[systems mentioned include]:* Public transport is better than we think, especially if you are male & white Australian; Aged care; Health system; Child care; Workplace design.
- We moved into a new building – clean, white, office of the future. When we swipe cards it notes which lift you're to go on and tells you. I came back from lunch with a colleague and because we work on different floors we could not go up in one lift together. Forced to stand at different lift wells. The lights are automatically set also and we're not allowed to do this ourselves. Recently the system failed and we sat in the dark until 11 am! The fire alarm went off 3 times but we can't do anything until the fire brigade comes. Everyone is disciplined as a consequence.
- This hyper-modern building is a metaphor for 'we have no power, feel so powerless' [*a 'Big Brother building'*].
- *[in contrast to this pre-dominance of concerns about powerlessness]:* But there are many opportunities for people to get out and do something. I live in a small country town and can do things. Not everything is about concerns.
- I'm preoccupied with fear of connection, guilt and accountability and own values. I want to save whales but have never done anything about it, due to fear. Huge fear of connecting and feeling of belonging.
- We start from a system that people can't be trusted and design around that.
- The whole system of learning with each other by protecting what's important needs a cross-generational space.
- How challenged I am by the changes in technology.
- What amazes me more than anything else is my reaction to Facebook. I find out info about my stepson overseas from Facebook because he allowed me to be a Facebook friend.

- In the UK six footballers raped a twelve year old girl and they got off because judge said she wanted it. Horrifies me and feels absolutely sick.
- I felt protected from it having a sixteen year old son and then he brought his girlfriend home and it was in my face – all the see through clothing and so on.
- It makes me think that I abhor these values.
- Is privacy a matter of generation or a matter of age?
- Is it because we're older now and we have more stuff to keep private?
- I don't think Facebook is all bad.
- I admire how those things have been used to give people access to more power.
- It's about creation of identity not of privacy.
- I went to a funeral where there were lots of people cousins etc. the young one I just met was trying to get people on Facebook. I wondered what he wanted to do that for – we only see each other on Facebook. My sons will only have two cousins ever. I could walk past any of my many cousins in the street and not know who they are.
- I want to have control about when I die; a health system that supports the aged to make choices. Doctors and patients talk in euphemisms. Who will advocate for us? I have no children; I advocated for my mother; hate to think what would have happened if I hadn't.
- Health system is not all bad; it's a journey through a system. By the time you're 88, no longer savvy to make choices. Just because can – keep people alive, or automatically take us to 'our floor' – doesn't mean we should!
- What about euthanasia, as a democratic right, rather than as 'coercive' experience of having to stay alive by law?
- Having more choice seems to mean we have less; globalisation means less choice as things become homogenised; sameness is promoted; we are becoming a monoculture; we're saturated by choice, but then can't think about what to choose. Having more choice limits our thinking.
- Living in the inner city, my sense of space is under pressure: I am aware of the planning controls and loss of space.
- We create the systems that render us powerless; and we respond with apathy to that.

Resistance and Compliance

Participants reported a sense that their ability to resist things they found unjust was being systematically eliminated through technocratic processes, stripping them of choice and power. They also shared some comments and anecdotes about compliance – and apathy / inaction.

The previously cited example about the new building in the city was prominent. Its access procedure prevented friends who'd had lunch together from returning to work in the same lift if they worked in different parts of the company's building. Their access cards restricted them to certain floors. *"Everyone is disciplined as a consequence. The alarm went off three times . . . but we can't do anything until the Fire Brigade arrives."*

Resistance and compliance was also remarked upon from the perspective of border security, the Occupy movement and the Western Australian sailors who boarded the Japanese whaling vessel.

The following, which occurred as a conversation involving many participants, explored how people were thinking about border security and the whaling protester issue:

- Well border security is a big issue, how you enter things is as important as why you enter.
- I have been thinking about the three West Australian men who boarded the Japanese ship. I have had concern about how little concern/ generosity and interest there has been about how to get them off. On talkback radio this morning someone asked, Why should we rescue them off the ship? Why should we pay to get them off the ship? Why should we? I was hearing a lack of generosity in the discussion.
- That's interesting to me because when someone is out on a sailing boat we don't hesitate to go and rescue them. Because we see them as victims and we don't see yet we don't see the whaling protectors as victims.
- It makes me think of a comment I heard that when we send the defence force out to rescue asylum seekers and others, it's good because it gives them something to do.
- I think all of these issues touch on my own preoccupations, and it's about values. It stirs violence in me.
- It makes me very, very angry to see the contradictions in values playing out in public.

Other comments related to Resistance and Compliance:

- PIGS countries infected the EU and it's coming our way. Australia's response "Close off the borders!"
- The 1% is on my mind, and the occupation of the city square.
- I had a conversation with someone in the city square during the occupation but when I was talking to him I thought what the fuck are you talking about?
- Just because it's a good idea doesn't mean you should do it.

- I know that I can influence my own childcare by ringing a group of women and discussing how we will collectively do childcare for free. Eventually I won't want to pay for it.
- The occupy group are wanting to do something about it but they don't know how but they want to.
- I have to work to get a company's good customer service, not like in the eighties. Now I feel like customers are treated with disdain.

Finally, there was some evidence of resistance to technocratic boundaries within the Listening Post, such as time boundaries, and a willingness to openly resist them. One view of this might be that the Listening Post afforded an opportunity to exercise authority and power differently to what happens in everyday life. In the last part of the Listening Post it seemed that people now felt it was right to challenge those in authority who held boundaries.

Greed

The theme of greed is discernible in the preoccupations with social values becoming distorted, questions about 'Will there be enough?', anger with the perpetrators of the GFC, who have not been held accountable for their actions – on the contrary it seems – and the wish to blame those in power for our feeling helpless and powerless to stop what is happening.

Discussion commentary related to this theme is noted below. The preoccupations give a sense of an underlying resentment that 'Our future being stolen by those who already have enough'.

- From our newspapers I get a sense of violence in society & organisations; people being horrible to each other, deliberate, planned, strategic nastiness.
- In Australia we live longer and healthier lives but people also feel anxious.
- The GFC makes people anxious.
- Sometimes I get really anxious that the mining boom is going to end, that growth will end.
- I'm anxious about not having in the future what I have now. The fact is you will have less. I am really worried about that.
- I see a real class divide. There is almost a facade around the image around how we look and what we have but there are whole lot of people out there really struggling.
- In Europe where I have family and friends there are people struggling; they are working in the black and trying to survive.
- Well border security is a big issue, how you enter things is as important as why you enter.

- I see people trying to hide all this stuff, trying to hide wrong doings.
- At a global national and local level there is a preoccupation that we blame rather than take accountability.
- *[the term infection was used in relation to the effects of the GFC/Eurozone problems]*. The PIGS countries infected the EU and it's coming our way!
- Australia's response is to close off the borders. Australia's island status infects us.
- I won't talk to someone who's lost their job because I might lose mine *[a kind of magical thinking alluded to here?]*
- The one percent is on my mind and the occupation.
- We don't know if we actually shared resources across the 1 and 99% whether we would have enough. It is so much a perception, and I don't know if it's a reality.
- I get pissed off about the shifting of resources to the people who already have enough.
- When you do you get over the boundary where you believe that other people should be paying your tax?
- There is a feeling that there is a lack of resources in a world of economic rationalism.
- Every organisation is now a business.
- That saturation is really hard to shake yourself free from.
- Everything is about how much things cost, there is a price tag on everything.

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 hypotheses created by the group were finessed and added to in the writing up of the Listening Post.

Hypothesis 1:

Because the value base on which Australian and western society exists feels fractured, distorted and corrupted, members of society have lost faith and trust in their leaders and those in power, plus hope in today's generation of children has weakened. Members are in denial of their part in co-creating 'the [faceless] system' that seems to control economic, political and organisational aspects of everyday life. As a result, people

phantasise about society fracturing unalterably and the personal sacrifices this may entail – these phantasies arouse fears of not surviving other people's greed.

Hypothesis 2:

Because of a growing awareness that American capitalism is coming to its end, members of society worry about their own survival and whether they will find sufficient resources (both materially and in collective values) to survive the deepening fractures in society, which results in a rising persecutory anxiety that 'the system' is in control and we are victims of it.

Hypothesis 3:

Because of overriding worries about the economic future of Australia and the western world, and feelings of powerlessness and helplessness to alter what seems inevitable, members of society focus on protecting themselves (e.g. by tightening border controls) while also abdicating decision-making to others (politicians and industry leaders in particular), which results in projecting helplessness into leaders and diminishes capacity for unsaturated thinking.

Hypothesis 4:

Because of an increasing exposure to polarities evident in the global system (via both media-enabled technology and interaction with organisations), members of society find it hard to question/ resolve issues around judging and judgement, values, access to resources and defence of boundaries. Individually they feel isolated and angry about this, rendering them unable to think together as a group and resulting in self-perpetuating, opposing behaviours of violence and apathy being played out in society.

Conveners: Jinette de Gooijer & Heidi Vestergaard

[*]Armstrong, D. (2005). Names, thoughts and lies: the relevance of Bion's later writing for understanding experiences in groups. *Organization in the Mind: Psychoanalysis, Group Relations, and Organizational Consultancy*. London: Karnac Books, pp 10-28.