AUSTRALIA AT THE DAWN OF 2018

REPORT OF A LISTENING POST HELD IN MELBOURNE, 10 JANUARY 2018

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, 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': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

16 participants attended this year's Listening Post, including the two hosts and two scribes. Of these, there were 11 women and 5 men. We experimented with an online Facebook page and event to attract participation from those who could not physically attend, but were unable to attract many postings or a discussion. As hosts we did not facilitate this actively, which no doubt contributed to low interest. The Christmas-New Year period in Australia falls at the start of summer holidays and it can be difficult to muster energy for professional events at this time.

The evening's discussion began with a comment on a participant's adult children (aged 30 & 33) and their friends, of whom it was said '*many haven't found anywhere to be their professional selves*'. Discussion in Part 1 ended with a comment on the ambivalence felt towards social media – overwhelming for the individual, but caught also in its glamour.

In between these comments, the flow of participants' contributions moved through:

- issues to do with gender and behaviour coming to the fore in 2017, as waves of immigrants across Europe have faded from mind. '*To me there is a bucket about gender and behaviour and less about immigrants*'

- the recent allegations of sexual harassment /abuse in the film industry, provoking ambivalence *'As artists they do really good work but then as people I don't like the behaviour.'*

- the need for more of '*the feminine'* in the world, the tussle between masculine and feminine, '*less god the father and more mother earth*', Donald Trump as a last-ditch effort of god the father, countered by the rise of right wing governments in central Europe, leading to the role of social media…

  'I would not know about Harvey Weinstein if it was not for social media. Social media doesn't just open up the possibility of complaint, it REQUIRES it. I think this is part of why we become more aware of what has been going on for years.'

  'I wonder about the 'father's presence. Is there a 'no' anymore? I work in gender and I see a lot of trans clients and (so on). I read about things like uterus transplant and can trans women get pregnant?'

- climate change is a preoccupation, along with the easy manipulation of fear by politicians. Appalled at the relations between corporations and government.

  'That's been a thing for me – silencing and suppression. Silencing. There is an abuse of power. Corporates strong arm the government and the government does nothing.'

  'For me there is the degradation of the employee conditions (systematic) gagging and a divide with the profit of the corporations.'

- the behaviour of government towards citizens. *'Also the Same Sex Marriage issue – the way it was dealt with in this country was appalling.'* *'I am the mother of 2 young men in adulthood. It has been lovely to see them taking up values of what they see as right, to be really clear that this is something they want to stand behind (Same Sex Marriage).'*

- social media again –

  'I have found a name for it – social depression. Not personal depression, social. I have been obsessed with what is happening in America. It drives me crazy. I have to read everything in social media. I have been really disturbed by the rent in society giving rein to primitive aggression.'

  'There are people walking around on the street filled with hate. Social media gives it a voice. It has been important to stay off it (Social Media) to prevent being depressed.'

  'Being the mother of two teenage daughters, I have exercised my parental right and removed access to iPhone from the 13 year old. A few weeks passed and my sweet, nice, questioning girl came back. There's research that these things are like pokie machines, people can't feel anymore.'

- comments on the absence of leadership in organisations and reference to Donald Trump express both despair and hope.

  'I moved jobs in the past year. Leadership is just absent. The more progressive organisations are starting to explore agile working teams and tribes. How do you replace that dearth? I think there might be a connection to leadership.'

  'What I have seen is the grassroots taking it up. Trump pulled out of the Paris Accord. The mayors of various states said that they will work towards the targets anyway. California are already on track to exceed their target, or at least meet it earlier.'

  'Yeah leadership is failing but people are saying we're just going to do it without you. A lot of it has been on social media. And the same for Same Sex Marriage. The government would not pick it up. 83% of people in Melbourne voted yes. They are doing it in spite of leadership or what is alleged to be leadership.'

  'There is a general consensus of what to do even when the government is not doing anything. The cowardice of government. And the mass says this is something that worries us and it should happen.'

  'And the cruelty and indifference of some religious to the child abuse revelations.'

- the news cycle and social media are commented on again. *'I am obsessed with the news too. There is something addictive about the news cycle. But I don't get satisfaction with it. I find myself looking at the Guardian four or five times to find out what happens next but nothing happens.'*

  'Driven by externalities. How do I find my own agency? I feel quite ambivalent. I get weighed down by negativity. By social media, which I have decided to shut off from. I find it hard to find my own mind, to think, I've got to shut off things.'

  'I seem to have somebody I love to hate every year. In 2017 it was Mark Zuckerberg, who I think has done a terrible disservice in maintaining that Facebook is not a publisher but a platform and their failure to moderate. We are moving from the age of narcissism to the age of id.'

  'I too have been obsessive and fascinated with news media and I read lots of it every day. I realise as I listen, the notion of fake news. I have been hacked and misled in the past year more than ever before. At times I have lost being able to know what is true and what is right. How do I discover what is true and what is right so I can decide how to act. So I talk to others, I look to other people to see am I still connected, am I sane?'

'At Christmas at Yarrawonga, my mother in law said Melbourne is becoming a terrible place. I didn't think that was true. I got back and there had been the terrible incident at Flinders Street and riots. It was true. But I don't know how much is inflated or if it is real. I find it quite confusing to think about.'

'I have come to recognise that there is a generational difference in how social media is treated. It gives me hope and reminds me I am aware of my own gullibility – too much to read.'

'Picking up on the generational. They never have to wonder about anything for more than a second. They just get their device out.'

- concerns about rampant income disparity 'that is just getting worse and worse'.

'The notion of the Precariat – a term coined in the last year. Low income, multiple jobs, social injustice – what will it lead to? I think it is profoundly disabling.'

'a really big preoccupation for me too – the starkly widening inequality. And the incredible privilege. Somewhere in there is gratitude and recognition of my privilege. What do I do about it? Social media that allows voice for naming right and wrong. But not really a space to think, to find ways of being that have realities.'

- following the comment on the 'precariat' a series of associations ensued to authority, money, homelessness, refugees, sexual harassment, concerns with the past (of behaviours), anger with politicians behaviours, no future being created by them, corruption and self-interest. These associations are linked by concerns about the dynamics of political power being experienced.

'I think that authority is becoming money. We might not think it is okay to get your leg amputated, But if you have the money you can have it done and someone will do it for you.'

'There will be plenty of people who will blame the homeless for their own homelessness. That group you describe – the Precariat – governments believe they can safely ignore those people – (they are too busy staying alive) – and if they cause trouble you demonise them with a few articles in the paper.'

'Just like the refugees. As far as government is concerned, it goes away.'

'But something that has not gone away is paedophilia and the church. It is still very prevalent. The RC church is saying it is not going to do anything about it.'

'Like sexual harassment, same sex marriage – continually coming up'

'Power of looking back. We are prosecuting bad behaviour from 30 or 40 years ago. We are fixing up cold cases as a result of new technological advancements. But there is not much collective looking forward. Socially we are more concerned with the present and the past. Think the government is so cowardly in not acting and looking forward and creating the future for us. There is something terrifying about the future. Now they warn everyone that stuff you did 50 or 60 years ago is not forgotten.'

'The number of Royal Commissions – particularly the recent ones such as the banks – the manner in which the government has tried to deflect attention. Why leaders have not been able to deal with such egregious issues.'

'I have sat with a huge amount of anger re: politicians. The corruption and self-interest. It all feels driven by pandering to interests. Lobbying and money from sectors such as energy, mining, while at the same time, trying to legislate to gag charities from advocating for their clients, to try to stop grassroots organisations like Get Up. The fact that they [MPs] can be in Parliament illegally and claiming a salary for that, which they don't have to pay back, yet Centrelink gives people bills they should not get and have to pay upfront even if challenging it.'

'The corruption and self interest is getting to me.'

'The shutting down of industries. Christopher Pyne lobbying with Turnbull to get ship building to South Australia and the impact in Victoria - it has shut down ship building. The same with shutting down Holden – there has been no thought to the impacts on communities. Politically this is lobbying for power.'

'It is not new.'

'No it isn't but it is playing out more for me over the last year.'

- preoccupation with failure of authorities to look after natural and social environments. *'I have seen a huge deterioration living and working in the city in relation to infrastructure. Roads. Sidewalks [sic], Parks not looked after properly. The infrastructure that supports the people. That looks after the homeless.'* So individuals do what cannot be done in time by authorities. *'There was a hole in the road in my street in my neighbourhood. I was able to ring and report it but the timeframe to fix it would have been time for someone to break their ankle. I took it into my own hands and put a piece of plywood down.'*

- feelings of anger, disgust, outrage, fear, and a sense of injustice are some of the emotions related by partiicpants. *'Reminds me that I am constantly angry. Not just socially depressed but socially angry.I am not so much angry as disgusted. With a lot that happens.'*

'It is like the manipulation of fear that was mentioned. It seems to be so easily done.'

'I am as outraged as anyone here. But I am worried about the idea that this is a phenomenon that has just sprung up. It is not about Turnbull or Dutton. Those people have been with us forever. I has been going on for centuries. What is THAT about?'

'For me there is something about the 'otheringness'. There is something that feels quite nice about being able to say it is somebody else. Positioning that evil in something outside. It is quite frightening to look at my own evil, privilege, disregard etc. and how I balance that sitting in the chair of a therapist. How do I deal with my own sense of injustice?'

'That helps me understand a bit about social media and how it makes that easier.'

'Social media amplifies judgement.' 'Makes it instantaneous.' 'And without responsibility.'
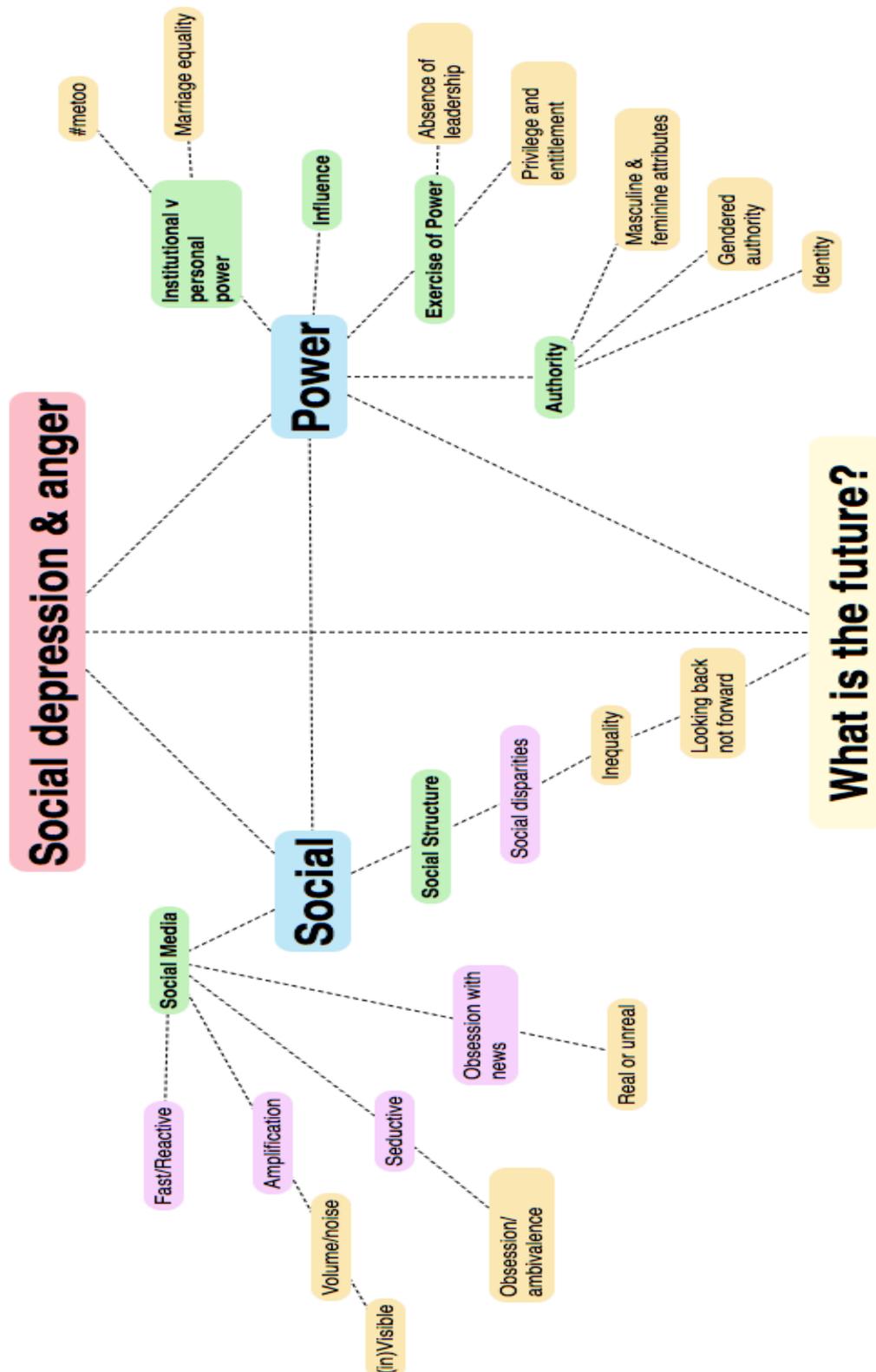
'The question that has been on my mind is "what is it that is happening". Our new experience. I think it is something about the increasing visibility of what is going on in the world.' 'A massive flow of information.'

'At an individual level it is impossible to cope with. The glamour of it. The fascination.'

GROUP RELATIONS
AUSTRALIA

OPUS
An Organisation for Promoting
Understanding of Society

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

The group identified two overarching themes of 'social' and 'power', linking these within a broad sense of people feeling 'social depression and anger' and uncertain about 'What is the future?' The diagram below captures the thematic links discernible in Part 1 of the Listening Post.

Theme 1: Social

The terms 'social depression' and 'social anger' were offered in part 1 of the listening post as social phenomena linked to societal dynamics, not to be confused with personal depression or anger. These dynamics are perceived to be linked with: social disparity and inequality; seduction by and/or ambivalence towards social media; an obsession with news and information, amplified by social media and digital technology; and a propensity to look back to redress past injustices rather than forward. 'Social depression' could be both an output of the current climate as well as an input to the next, as yet unknown, dynamic.

We note that social media and news have a dominant influence upon feelings and thinking. Participants used such words and phrases as:

- Addictive, seductive, fascinating

- Primitive – hate, aggression

- Amplification

- Huge volume of information is overwhelming

- Unprecedented visibility of world events

- Social depression

- Social anger

- Young people don't know how to think anymore – it is all at their fingertips

- People walk with their faces in their devices – don't notice the real people around them

- iPhone embargo – change in personality

- Young people are more discerning and less gullible about what they read in the media – consider sources, credibility

The theme of "Social" also encompassed preoccupations with identity, social relations and the next generation as noted in the following comments.

Gender

- Same sex marriage

- Masculine and feminine ways of being – the world needs more 'feminine'

- Abuse of women

- Transgender

Intergenerational

- Next generation don't have career paths

- Next generation staunchly standing up for what is right (e.g. same sex marriage)

- Young people don't know how to think anymore – it is all at their fingertips

- Young people are more discerning and less gullible about what they read in the media – consider sources, credibility

Theme 2: Power

Under the theme of power we note preoccupations with use and abuse of power, the desire for personal agency in the face of feeling socially and politically powerless, frustrations and anger with political and corporate leaders. In the face of increasing global complexity, those in power are experienced as retreating to primitive processes of simplification, splitting / "othering", and shutting out thinkers and thinking.

Abuse of power

- Abuse of women by powerful men

- Australian government Implementing a damaging process (same sex marriage opinion poll) which traumatised LGBTI people

- Manipulation of the public with fear through the media

- Demonisation of certain groups of people so that they become 'irrelevant'

- Corporates strong-arming the government

- Corporates gagging their employees, and their being strong repercussions for expressing a view

- Child abuse and the Roman Catholic church and their unwillingness to change their practices

- Govt attempting to gag charity groups/Getup from advocacy while accepting lobbying and money from industries and making decisions that favour them

- Not having to pay back salaries from sitting illegally as an MP, while forcing poorest people to pay debts they often don't owe even before they are allowed to challenge it.

- Money = Power

Use of power/personal agency

- People putting in solar panels on their own houses

- People choosing products that are less damaging to the environment

- People putting plywood over a hole in the road to prevent injury

- Telling friends to stay off social media because they will only find it hurtful/depressing

- US mayors pursuing Paris targets in spite of US Federal govt withdrawal

- South Australia and Victoria pursuing renewable energy in spite of Australian Federal govt. policy for dependence on coal

Failure of leadership

- Govt being 'cowardly' and out of step with public re same sex marriage, climate, energy

- Rome Catholic church leadership unwillingness to act differently in response to child abuse

- Facebook abrogating responsibility for its content

- Comments about punitive ways corporates treating employees

- Comments about leadership in organisations not being what it used to be

- Lack of looking forward and creating a vision for the future

- Govt not taking action on issues but escalating to another body (Royal Commissions)

- Decision making about closing local industries without considering impact on communities and planning for that.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants 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, participants 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.

Analysis 1:

The use of technology increases the speed of our reactions and we lose the pause for reflection between feeling, thought and action. There is a sense that the continuous bombardment of news and information might be diverting our attention away from 'real' hidden and/or more pressing issues.

'I would not know about Harvey Weinstein if it was not for social media. Social media doesn't just open up the possibility of complaint, it requires it.'

'I exercised my parental right and removed access to iPhone for my 13 year old daughter. A few weeks passed and my sweet, nice, questioning girl came back. There's research that these things are like pokie machines, people can't feel anymore.'

The speed at which the future is coming may be amplifying anxieties, creating an avoidance of thinking about it. Instead, we seem to be fighting history. We considered the Kubler Ross grief cycle related to death with the phases: shock and denial; anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. The difficulty in admitting/acknowledging where we've been misguided or wrong could be viewed as the 'denial' phase. Our current propensity to look back to past wrongs, eg the multiple Royal Commissions and other inquiries, could be viewed as the 'anger' phase. We are not at the 'acceptance' phase yet.

We wondered, where is agency located in groups? There may be an oscillation of group dynamics between basic assumption me-ness and basic assumption one-ness? In Me-ness, we pretend we're working together when we're not, instead busy with diversionary tactics to avoid responsibility. In One-ness, we're all the same, an undifferentiated mass. Social media offers both a 'home' group that you can identify with and an opportunity for divergence. 'If you look for it, you can find it.' By affirming and amplifying our views, social media enables splitting at both a personal and social level. Social media influences what gets seen and not seen, what is news or not news, it's both social and anti-social.

Corporates, governments and institutions are closely connected, and powerful allies. There is corruption of power, as evidenced by the multiple charges of child and sexual abuse across industries and institutions. And despite this public knowledge, some systems still allow this abuse to continue. Systemic effects are being internalised on a more personal level. It feels perverse, the systemic denial of reality and the simultaneous individual fantasy that you can change reality.

Hypothesis 1:

Social media create masses that mirror leaders' behaviours, amplifying or 'fanning the flames' of anger and distrust towards established authorities and institutions. This allows people to be visible and invisible at the same time. As part of a mass, we can act without reflection and be aggressive without accountability, resulting in social depression. Social media is a sophisticated vehicle for hatred of thinking.

Analysis 2:

There is a sense there has been a coming together of the political and the personal such that the political is very present for all of us and we are making decisions about the personal minutiae in the context of it, e.g. choosing which products to buy to have less impact on the environment, switching off social media to disconnect from incessant, addictive newsfeeds that amplify fears about society and 'others'. '*I find it hard to find my own mind, to think, I've got to shut off things.*'

The 'discovery' of complexity in our natural and social environments, amplified by the constant stream of information about everything from everywhere, is frightening. Authority and leadership in institutions is breaking down and individual agency is being mobilised. This enables the primitive and threatens establishment power. Rather than engaging and thinking with reality, political leaders and individuals are retreating to simplification and binary constructs, 'me – not me', climate change a yes/no question, build a wall to keep others out, struggles to accept gender as not only male-female but as many ways of being.

Privilege, entitlement and power are dominant forces, expressed in bestowing rights on others, e.g. marriage equality laws, '*thought Australia very progressive, but we are not. We are 25th country [to enact marriage equality]*. Participants told few personal stories, as if sense of self has become subsumed by media, become hidden. The personal became political in 2017. In the absence of leadership, the exercise of power was more visible.

Participants acknowledged that '*I am privileged, yet feel powerles*s.' But, '*Yeah, leadership is failing but people are saying we're going to do it without you.*' '*There is a general consensus of what to do even when the government is not doing anything.*' '*the starkly widening inequality and the incredible privilege. Somewhere in there is gratitude and recognition of my privilege. What do I do about it?. There is both powerfulness and powerlessness.*'

Gender, identity, feminine-masculine power relations, came to the foreground in 2017, as concerns about European immigrants faded to background [no-one mentioned Manus Island detainees]. '*There is a tussle going on between masculine and feminine*'. '*The way the same sex marriage issue was dealt with in this country was appalling*'. '*The manipulation of fear… seems to be so easily done.*'

'*Power of looking back. We are prosecuting bad behaviour from 30 or 40 years ago. We are fixing up cases as a result of new technological advancements. But there is not much collective looking forward.. 'I have sat with a huge amount of anger re: politicians, the corruption and self-interest. It feels driven by pandering to interests.*'

'*Reminds me that I am constantly angry. Not just socially depressed but socially angry.*'

Hypothesis 2:

Members of society feel frustration and anger with those in power who are seen as cowardly, fear-mongering, and not engaging with complex realities in our social and natural environments. Institutions that represent thinking and being in touch with reality, have become disengaged or corrupted, and are actively being destroyed by governments. A hatred of thinking is manifest. Individuals respond by taking up their own agency, which leads to chaos and fragmentation and an authoritarian reaction by those in power and privilege. We are in a struggle to find more creative ways to exercise authority which requires us to confront our hatred of thinking.

Conveners:

Jinette de Gooijer & Nuala Dent (Hosts), with assistance of Heidi Vestergaard & Michelle Wells (Scribes & co-analysts)