

The Sixth Manning Clark Lecture

Social Disengagement - breeding ground for fundamentalism

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It seems to be a law of nature that when any society goes through a period of upheaval and transformation, simplistic world-views increase their appeal.

Right now, Australia is looking like a classic case of point. For the past thirty years, we've been living through a cultural revolution that has radically redefined the kind of society we are becoming and now, right on cue, the fundamentalists are here to tell us how to make sense of it all. And what a revolution it has been! Manning Clark himself described it when he wrote in the Epilogue to Volume VI of his monumental *History of Australia*:

In the second half of the twentieth century, Australians lived in a country where neither the historians, the prophets, the poets nor the priests had drawn the maps. ...There was no final court of appeal on the human questions.

How prescient he was, especially regarding the past thirty years - a period of revolution characterised by four main themes: Gender, Economy, Technology and Identity.

The **gender revolution**, beginning in the early 1970s, has redefined the role and status of women in our society and, in the process, sent shockwaves into almost every aspect of the Australian way of life. The gender revolution has transformed the institution of marriage, rewritten our divorce and birthrate statistics, changed the character of the Australian family, revolutionised the workplace, redrawn the political landscape... and even changed the attitudes and values of the male of the species (though, for many men, that is still a work-in-progress).

As a direct result of the gender revolution, we have reached the stage where about 45 percent of contemporary marriages will end in divorce - with consequences not only for the divorcing couples but for the 1,000,000 dependent children who now live with just one of their natural parents, the 500,000 children who are regularly migrating from the home of the custodial parent to the non-custodial parent, and the 25 percent of families who are sole parent families.

Partly as a reaction to the sustained high divorce rate, the marriage rate has fallen to its lowest level for 100 years. Thirty years ago, three quarters of Australians were married by the time they were 30; today, only about one-third are married by that age. (On the other hand, those who do marry seem increasingly inclined to do it two or three times.)

One reason for the falling marriage rate is that the rising generation of young Australians are characterised by a tendency to postpone commitments. Having grown up in a turbulent, unstable and unpredictable world, the pace of change has taught them to anticipate change and, indeed, to embrace change. They are the 'keep-your-options-open' generation; the generation who are prepared to wait and see; the 'hang loose' generation. Whether they are talking about a sexual partner, a course of study, a job, a set of religious beliefs, a political philosophy, a musical genre or a commercial brand, members of the Options generation will typically say 'this is great, but what else is there?' Such an attitude is not conducive to early marriage or, indeed, early parenthood – which is why the median age of the mother at the birth of the first child has gone up from early-twenties to early-thirties in the past 25 years. In the same period, the birthrate has plummeted. Our official birthrate now stands at 1.7 births per woman (men never being mentioned in birthrate statistics) which means that, relative to our total population, we are currently producing the smallest generation of children Australia has ever seen.

The biggest factor driving the birthrate down, apart from the ethos of the Options generation, is the rising educational level of women: all around the Western world, more highly educated women tend to have fewer children. Right here in Canberra we have the most highly-educated female population in Australia and, correspondingly, the lowest birthrate in the nation. (For politicians who are determined to drive the birthrate up, the solution is simple: ban women from attending university.)

The falling birthrate means that we are producing a generation of children who will almost certainly be over-parented, over-indulged and over-protected. They are likely to become a highly rebellious generation of teenagers when the time comes to assert their independence from parents who have been trying too hard.

The falling birthrate is also radically affecting the age distribution of the population. By the time these children reach their middle years, 25 percent of the population will be over the age of 65 (compared with 13 percent today).

As a consequence of these and other factors, Australian households are shrinking. That's been a long, drawn-out process: in the past 100 years, the Australian population has increased five-fold while the number of households has increased ten-fold. But that process has accelerated in the past 30 years. Today, more than 50 percent of all Australian households contain just one or two people and the single-person household is now both the most common household type and the fastest-growing household type. While this may appear likely to increase problems of isolation, fragmentation and depression in the community, it may also turn out to be good news for communities.

The human herd instinct will not be frustrated: if it can't be satisfied by a domestic herd, we are likely to look elsewhere for herds to connect with – the office, the book club, the adult education course, the cooking class, or even the local coffee shop or restaurant where we can 'graze with the herd'.

While all these changes in the social fabric have been occurring, we have also been living through the **restructure of the Australian economy**. This has resulted in a cultural shift in which we have gradually learned to live with a widespread sense of job insecurity. We have witnessed a significant shift from full-time to part-time work, and from permanent to casual employment. We have seen the problem of under-employment emerge as more significant

issue than the problem of absolute unemployment. The redistribution of work has resulted in a redistribution of wealth. We have widened the gap between rich and poor: the average annual household income of the top 20 percent of Australian households is about \$180,000; the average annual household income of the bottom 20 percent of households is about \$12,000. We are also living with our highest-ever levels of personal debt and household debt. Such shifts throw out a challenge to our traditional ideal of egalitarianism and raise serious questions about whether we are prepared to allow Australia to become a three-class society, stratified by the dollar.

The **information technology revolution** is also transforming us in ways not yet fully understood, but likely to be at least as significant as the impact of the Industrial revolution, 200 years ago. The IT Revolution is changing the way we live and work, the way we communicate with each other and the way we inform and entertain ourselves. One immediate effect is that we have begun to confuse 'data transfer' with 'communication'.

We have been through another period of reappraisal of our **sense of national identity** as we come to terms with the whole idea of multi-culturalism and the significance of the proposition that we are defined by our diversity. We are also coming to think of ourselves as a country closely tied to the Asian region, with all that that entails for our traditional trading and cultural relationships.

Given all that, it is perhaps not surprising that so many Australians report feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity. Nor is it surprising that our consumption of anti-depressants has tripled in the past 10 years. (Indeed, some cynical social analysts are suggesting that if by now you are not on anti-depressants, that's because you haven't really understood what has been happening to you.)

Many respondents in my own research program report that life feels out of control to them – almost as if they are on a runaway train speeding towards an unknown destination. They are too frightened to jump off because they know they will be left behind, so they hang on but have no real sense of where they are going.

Australians seemed to reach a point, around the turn of the century, where we sought refuge in a kind of social disengagement. We knew there was a 'big picture' demanding our attention, but we were wearied by too many changes and too many issues: globalisation, Aboriginal reconciliation, the republic, foreign investment, youth unemployment, population policy and then, on top of everything else, the threat posed by international terrorism.

In response, we have turned the focus inward, and concentrated on things that seemed to be within our control: backyards, home renovations, our children's schools, our next holiday. This shift has been reflected in a corresponding shift in our TV program preferences: we have gradually lost interest in current affairs, and developed a voracious appetite for so-called 'lifestyle' programs.

When a society enters a period of self-absorption, it is almost inevitable that there will be a rise of intolerance and prejudice, and a decline in compassion. The Australian response to the Boxing Day tsunami disaster notwithstanding, those signs are emerging in contemporary Australia.

It's a strange moment for us – a dangerous moment - a time when we seem to have almost been encouraged to disengage; to indulge our darker impulses of xenophobia and intolerance; to think of ourselves as consumers and of our lives as being devoted to the expression of material values. (Perhaps that's what the Prime Minister meant when, in 1996, he dreamed of an Australia where we would all be 'relaxed and comfortable'.)

Again, Manning Clark foresaw this when he wrote: 'All that seemed to survive was the idea of Australia as a place of uncommonly large profit.' Back in 1997, he also detected the doubt – the angst – that would creep in to fill the spiritual vacuum created by such rampant materialism: 'an age that saw a man walk on the moon... was, paradoxically, characterised by doubt about everything.'

The anxiety created by living through such a period of transformation, instability and uncertainty promotes a tendency to retreat and disengage from the social and political agenda. Such a period is also a rich breeding ground for fundamentalism of all kinds. It is a time when extreme and simplistic voices are likely to be given more attention than they normally are, almost as if our insecurities create a vacuum we yearn to fill with simple certainty. That's one reason why Hitler's voice attracted so much attention in Germany between the two world wars; he offered simple answers to the confusion of the time.

Senator Joe McCarthy's voice attracted undue attention in the highly-charged, unstable atmosphere of the Cold War.

US religious fundamentalists attracted huge attention, during the social and cultural upheavals of the Prohibition Era.

And now, in the throes of our very own Cultural Revolution, the fundamentalists are on the march here, too. I'm not suggesting for a moment that Australia in 2005 is like Germany between the wars, or like the US during the Cold War or Prohibition, but we are experiencing our own period of uncertainty and instability, so we shouldn't be surprised that the voices that offer 'simple certainty' have peculiar appeal.

I mentioned the religious fundamentalists of the US and, in fact, that's where the term 'fundamentalism' sprang from. A group of US Southern Baptists published a series of booklets called *The Fundamentals*, which called on America to return to a hardline, literal interpretation of scripture. They were sceptical about the idea of America regarding itself as a Christian society, and their fundamentalism should properly be regarded as part of the social protest movement against increasing permissiveness – social, cultural and religious – characteristic of America in the 1920s.

When it comes to religion, that same brand of hardline scriptural literalism is currently on the rise here, as well. The Pentecostalist churches (variously known as Assemblies of God, Christian City Church, Hillsong, etc) are experiencing an extraordinary surge in church attendance. Indeed, Pentecostal churches of all kinds have become the second most popular denomination in terms of church attendance, after the Roman Catholics and ahead of the Anglicans. The strongest growth among Anglican churches is in the Diocese of Sydney, where fundamentalism is the dominant theological position.

The appeal is clear. Religious fundamentalism offers us the security of grasping the meaning of life here and now, and the promise of eternal life in the hereafter.

By the way, the current brand of popular fundamentalism also chimes with two of our current national preoccupations arising directly from the mood of social disengagement: the obsession with ‘me’ and rampant materialism. Fundamentalism is essentially concerned with personal salvation (often being scathingly dismissive of the so-called ‘social gospel’), and material prosperity is regarded by fundamentalists not as a barrier to faith but as a sign of God’s blessing on their lives.

Fundamentalism is a kind of reductionism that appears, at times like this, in many more places than religion, and in many other guises.

Economic rationalists, are a variety of fundamentalist, because they claim to have the one, true answer – the free market!

(By the way, I think many of the current disciples of Adam Smith have seriously misinterpreted his concept of the ‘invisible hand’. My reading of Smith suggests that the ‘invisible hand’ was not merely the blind interaction of self-interested buyers and sellers, but the inherent morality of the market, based on mutual respect, goodwill, benevolence and trust.)

Similarly, those scientists who are searching for the one big explanation – the uncaused cause – the Theory of Everything - are in danger of embracing a zealous reductionism that amounts to scientific fundamentalism.

The medical researchers who want to tell post-menopausal women that testosterone is *the* answer to the flagging libido are fundamentalists of another kind. Flagging libido in post-menopausal women, where it occurs, is likely to be a multi-factorial phenomenon – where the quality of an intimate relationship must be presumed also to be a significant factor. But no: as with the hormone-replacement therapy fashion of a few years ago, testosterone will now be touted as the one, true answer.

The social scientists who want to tell us that media violence is the cause of increasing violence in society are fundamentalists (who face, incidentally, the problem of reconciling their theory with the reality that violent crime is actually declining).

One answer! One explanation! One cause! That’s what we yearn for, and that’s what the fundamentalists offer.

But what if the human condition isn’t like that? What if some of the questions we face actually are complex? What if most events that occur in human systems are the result of many factors? What if mystery and ambiguity are things we simply have to live with? I’m inclined to agree with the Indian mystic, Krishnamurti: ‘Freedom from the desire for an answer is essential to the understanding of a problem.’

Mind you, I don’t want the engineer who designs a bridge or plane to think like that, but the nature, the purpose, the meaning of our lives are not amenable to the kind of formulae that make planes and bridges safe.

Manning Clark wrote of the straiteners and the enlargers of life, and he thought the present time would be a period when the enlargers – the visionaries, the inspirers, the prophets, the dreamers – would come into their own. But I fear his predictions may have been too

optimistic. I fear the enlargers' time may not yet have come. Perhaps the current surge of fundamentalism is the last gasp (at least for a while) of the straiteners, the limiters, the reducers – those who think that, whatever the question, the answers can be made simple. Waiting in the wings, surely, are a new breed of enlargers with new energy and new vision. Where will they come from? Will they be the new republicans? The academics? Will they come from a revitalised labour movement? Will they be women? Will they be young people (whose early experience of life has certainly taught them to live with uncertainty, and has encouraged a more communitarian spirit in them)? Will they be religious leaders? Artists? Writers?

Leadership, from whatever quarter it may come, is obviously important in inspiring us and enlarging our vision. But if the present era – all around the Western world – teaches us anything, it is that we had better not wait for leadership to inspire us. Those of us who dream of a better world re-engage; we must each enlarge our *own* vision, set our own course and give our own meanings to our own lives. The alternative is acquiescence. Rather than waiting for someone to inspire us, perhaps it is time to begin inspiring those around us.