

What kind of society are we becoming?

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Thank you very much Phil for that extremely generous introduction and good evening everyone. It's nice to be back at CEDA and among so many friends.

On the theme of renovations, I was at a dinner, quite a formal dinner, in Sydney, two or three years ago, and I found myself seated beside a very pleasant, very stimulating, articulate, professional woman and, although I normally hate formal dinners, I thought, well, this is promising, this'll be an interesting evening, but in fact that woman spent the entire evening describing to me her just completed bathroom renovations and spared me no details at all. I won't, I won't lay it all on you now, but I can tell you that there had previously just been a little window to the south, so it was quite a dingy space, but the introduction of a skylight had bathed the whole thing in sunshine and that bathroom tiles they'd chosen to top off the renovation were a spectacular success, except that they'd shown up the rest of the house so, of course, they were now involved in a rolling renovation – I'm not ringing my own bell – in a rolling renovation to try and bring the rest of the place up to the standard of the bathroom.

Well, it was an incredibly tedious evening, I'm sure you've been subjected to that kind of thing, even worse you've perhaps subjected other people to your own renovations stories. It is amazing how people engaged in renovations assume that everyone else would want to hear about them. Well, it reminded me that what used to be the dominant topic in Sydney dinner party conversations, namely the exchange of cholesterol readings, had passed and we were now heavily into renovations. Well, of course, as a nation, not just in the metaphorical sense that Phil mentioned, but in the literal sense, as a nation, we've been engaged these last seven or eight years in a frenzy of home renovations, an epidemic of home renovations. And not just doing it, but watching television programmes about it. Contemplate a nation like ours in which year after year, millions of Australians were glued to their television sets watching programmes about painting the children's bedroom and renovating the back yard. What must this say, news and current affairs slipping out of the top ten, in ratings terms, to be replaced for several years by the so called lifestyle programmes. Now what was this all about?

I think as always with things like this, it's highly symbolic behaviour. By the way another piece of symbolism that helps us to understand this is the tearaway best-selling book of a couple of years ago. I'm sure you're aware of what was our number one bestseller over the last couple of years, a book called 'Spotless'. We're great readers in Australia and 'Spotless' was our number one pick. A book about home cleaning hints. It was as though we'd reached the point in our social evolution where we were saying, 'Look, aboriginal reconciliation is too hard for us, but we can get the spot out of the carpet.' And that I think was the period that we'd entered into; we'd reached a point where renovations, and various other forms of distraction and escape, gave us a break from something that had

become too much for us. And the question, of course, is what had become too much and it led us into this curious phase of our social development. And the answer, of course, is that we have been a society in renovation and that became too much for us.

The story of Australia over the last twenty-five to thirty years is the story of a society that's been in a state of constant upheaval. It's been a revolutionary period for us, such that we've reached the point, I think, around the end of the nineteen nineties, just at the turn of the century, where you could see in Australia, what we've seen in many other societies around the world had been through this kind of process. This phenomenon called Reform Fatigue. People going to the doctor and saying, 'I don't really know what's wrong with me, I just feel vaguely crook. I, you know, I feel a bit anxious. I don't know what I'm anxious about.' Classic symptoms of reform fatigue. Everything a bit too much, too much change.

I remember a respondent in one of my surveys at around about that time saying she felt as though her life was like a runaway train. She had no idea where it was going, it was speeding out of control. She of course, was hanging on. She was too scared to jump off, because she knew she'd be left behind, but she really had no idea where this was taking her. This was the time when our consumption of anti-depressants tripled. It was the time when we took refuge en mass in tranquilisers and other forms of medication designed to mask the problem of the fatigue that had overtaken us.

Now, what did this? Well, if I give you just a few quick snapshots of how Australian life had changed in that twenty-five or thirty year period, perhaps you'll easily see why so many Australians had so much trouble dealing with it. Thirty years ago, for example, almost everyone got married. Ninety percent of Australians were married by the age of thirty. Today, fewer than fifty percent are married by the age of thirty, and if you look at the behaviour of the rising generation of young Australians, who are avoiding or postponing marriage in record numbers, you're inclined to think that the institution of marriage has gone out of fashion. Until you look at the re-marriage statistics and then you realise there's a hard core of people in the community who love getting married so much they just keep doing it and in fact, the marriage market is rapidly shaping up, like so many consumer markets, with about a third non-users, about a third of the rising generation who will never marry, about a third light users, those who just marry once, and about a third heavy users who marry two or more times.

That's associated, of course, with a record high divorce rate. The divorce rate rocketed up in the late seventies and has remained high ever since. Thirty years ago, most couples who married had kids and most of them were having three or four kids and they were almost all born while the mother was in her twenties. Today, we know what's happened to the birth rate, it's gone through the floor and in the last twelve months, for the first time in our history, the median, sorry, the mean age, the average age of the mother, at the birth of the first child is now over thirty. Now, why did the birth rate go through the floor? And why are women postponing the birth of the first child? The birth rate, by the way, has picked up a bit in the last twelve months and you'll notice Peter Costello was attempting to take personal credit for that, just give them enough money and they'll breed was the philosophy behind the baby bonus. And, of course, it's true that a five thousand dollar bonus is a major incentive for people in the lower socio-economic strata of our society, which is why the birth rate is currently significantly higher among poorer Australia, than among more affluent and better educated Australians.

But there are two things that have driven the birth rate through the floor. One is the rising education levels of women and this is not just an Australian phenomenon, this is a western phenomenon. The more highly educated the female population, the lower the birth rate goes. In Australia, the most highly educated female population is in Canberra and Canberra also has our lowest birth rate and that's not just a coincidence. So, if you really wanted to get the birth rate up, you'd know what you had to do, but we won't explore that.

The other thing that drives the birth rate down is the attitudes, the values, the aspirations, the ethos of the rising generation of young Australians and if you're interested in where Australia is heading, just spend a bit of time with this remarkable generation, and I'm speaking of the under thirties. The generation who have been shaped by this revolutionary period of social and cultural and economic and technological change. They are a remarkably different generation, from any who've gone before them, because they've been shaped by a couple of three remarkable decades of revolutionary change. Now, what has that done to them? Of course, it's made them a bit more flexible, it's made them a bit more adaptable, but it's taught them a powerful, central lesson. And it's that lesson, which I think defines the ethos of this rising generation. And the lesson is, keep your options open. A generation that's grown up in the midst of what is almost like a kaleidoscope that keeps turning, the patterns form, dissolve and reform. Growing up knowing that everything is changing. Growing up in a society with a high divorce rate. Growing up in a society with the mass phenomenon of dislocated families. A society, growing up in a society where if you get a new bit of technology in your hand, you know it must be obsolete, that's why you've got it, because the next one and the next one are already in development. Kids who've grown up in this kind of world have learned that things are going to keep changing. So, hang loose, wait and see, keep your options open. As employees now coming into your organisations, as customers for your organisations, but as citizens in this community, they are shaped by their commitment to postponing commitment. They are shaped by the idea that they should keep their options open and they should wait and see. And they are saying that whether they are talking about a sexual partner.

I heard a twenty-three year old, just a few weeks ago, explaining to his father, who had asked him how things were going with the young woman in his life and he said in what was a classic piece of generational attitude, 'I'm totally committed, for the time being.' Now that's how this generation thinks. Whether it's a sexual partner, or a course of study, or a job, or a fashion label, or a brand of motor car, or a political philosophy, or a set of religious beliefs. 'This is fine, this is great, but there are all these other options and I'm going to explore them.' Almost as if it's their duty to explore the options. Now, a generation who thinks like that are not going to rush into marriage and that's why I think we can confidently predict that the birth rate is headed for significantly lower levels than it's yet reached. We're probably looking at one point four or one point five babies per woman, which would match what's going on in many of the societies that we typically compare ourselves with.

Well, it's an interesting question, of course, looking to the future as to what these kids will be like. The thing we mainly say about the falling birth rate is that it's changing the age distribution of the population. Now, that we all know that by the middle of this century twenty-five percent of Australians will be over the age of sixty-five, that's true – very different kind of society. But I think there's a much more interesting question to ask ourselves about the falling birth rate. What will it be like to be a member of what is now, relative to total population, the smallest generation of children Australia has ever produced? What will it be like for the kids? And what will that do to them, as they move through adolescence and into adulthood? I think they are going to have quite a tough time. We can already see it. Being members of the smallest generation we've ever produced, they are going to be the victims of over-zealous parenting for a start. This whole phenomenon called parenting has come into our thinking, into our vocabulary. A generation ago, we didn't do anything called parenting, we just got on with our lives and hoped the kids would notice what was happening. Now you can buy any number of books on the subject. It's become an art or a science for some parenting. And the kids, of course, are the victims of that, they are the victims of this phenomenon we now call Helicopter Parenting. The parents who are hovering over the kids at home and at school, down at the school all the time. 'How is he, has he fallen behind in his reading? You know he's only five, has he, how come my son got dropped to the B team, you know I've only got one son, he's got to have a perfect life.'

A parent recently suggested, in my new book I quote a primary school teacher who said a parent had recently complained about her son being dropped to the B team and had proposed, seriously that all the teams should be called 'A' so that no child would be disadvantaged just because he lacked ball skills.

Well, over-zealous parents aren't necessarily good for kids. We've seen what happened in China, with the one child policy – the little emperor syndrome. And I think we're starting to see a comparable phenomenon in Australia.

The other thing, the other burden that these kids will carry of course is that if you are growing up in a low birth rate society, that society tends to become less child friendly. It's a bit of a paradox. The parents become over-zealous, but the non-parents, and we'll have a record number, perhaps as many as somewhere between twenty-five and thirty percent of young couples now approaching the age of parenthood, just won't have kids. There'll be more non-parents in our society, than we've ever known before. One of the things we know, we've seen it in our research recently. One of the things we know about non-parents is that they find the subject of other people's kids, about the most tedious topic. And so you see a culture split starting to open up. The non-parents saying 'Well, we don't much enjoy visiting our friends who've had kids, because the kids are always there.' Perhaps that's not surprising and if they're not there, they've got photos or they want to tell you about it. And, of course, the parents are saying, 'We don't much enjoy visiting our friends who haven't had kids because they lead such self-indulgent lives.'

So, now we can see how this shapes up in a society. You start hearing people already saying things like 'We went out for dinner on Saturday night, you wouldn't believe happened. The people at the next table had brought their kids.' You know, like this was a social gaffe, as though they were smokers. There's demand for the child-free restaurant, there's demand for the child-free resort, the child-free apartment block. Already, you can drive down the highway and see motels with signs out the front saying 'Children and Pets Welcome', as though this is an exception that we'll make. If you've got the cat, that's fine and I suppose you can bring the kids as well.

In South East Queensland recently, the first development application for a child-free housing estate - not accepted, but you can assume that that's going to be in our future. That's going to be tough for these kids. So, we can make another prediction. I think we can safely say that the generation of children currently being born will become the most obnoxious generation of adolescents we've ever seen, because they'll be rebelling against their overprotective parents and they'll be shouting in a very loud voice to be heard in a society which has not been quite as child-friendly as we've traditionally been.

Well, now, those are just some of the things that have been reshaping us. They are, of course, consequences of the thing we now recognise as the gender revolution and it would be a mistake to think that the gender revolution is over. Just listen to young women and you hear a totally different take on feminism, from the view of their mothers or grandmothers. I don't have time to go into this in depth, but in a word, today's young women say, 'We've discovered what liberation means. 'Our mother's said that they were liberated, they had a marriage, they had kids, they had a full time job, they were permanently exhausted, they were operating on a short fuse, they'd lost their sense of humour, and they said look how liberated I am'' And their daughters are saying, 'That's not liberation, that's enslavement. Liberation is we're free to choose and we'll be lots of different women on our journey through the lifecycle and we won't fall for the mistake of thinking of you've got to have it all at once.'

Men, of course, are also gradually evolving in response to the unfolding and continuing gender revolution. I won't again spend much time going through this. We are all only too intimately familiar with the stages of the male response, beginning with total denial, of course. Just close your eyes and block your eyes and it will go away, and she'll come to her senses. Well, of course, she never did and it didn't go away and there was an early male response, which you'll recall – the snag – the Sensitive New Age Guy. This was the bloke who initially rather pleased women because he was saying things like he wanted to bring out his feminine side and women thought that was quite encouraging until it started to look as though what he really wanted, was to be a woman. These were the blokes who were

saying, 'You know, I wish I could be pregnant too, so I'd know what it really felt like. And I'm a feminist.' And women quickly backed off the SNAG, he became an object of derision among women. He'd always been an object of derision among men, but he became an object of derision among women as well. They said, 'We didn't want men to put up the white flat, we didn't want capitulation, we wanted robust engagement with gender issues.'

Well, the SNAG fizzled out, but there are still some rather pathetic examples. You can see bewildered males wondering where it all went wrong. We then had the brief flurry of activity called the metro-sexual. You may remember the metro-sexual. I bet you never met one. I think there were only five or six confirmed sightings of metro-sexuals. I won't waste any more time on them, but there is now an emerging response which I call the New Bloke. And the New Bloke is emerging in serious numbers in the under thirty age group and this is the genuine male fruit of the gender revolution. The young bloke who's completely comfortable with his own masculinity and equally comfortable of genuine equality between men and women. He knows that her agenda is just as important as her agenda.

Well, all these things have a long way to run, but of course, they've shaken us. These have been social revolutions which have caused an enormous amount of pain, particularly to pioneering feminists, but also to a lot of men who did need to have it more carefully explained to them, what was really going on.

A couple of other quick snapshots and then I want to say a few things about what this has done to us and what might happen next. I think another, of at least as significant as the falling birth rate, is the phenomenon of the shrinking household. It's been happening for a hundred years. In the last hundred years, the Australian population has increased five-fold, the number of households has increased ten-fold. We've reached the point where today, just over fifty percent of all Australian households contain just one or two people. So if you live alone or with just one other person, now you're, in terms of household demographics, that's mainstream. If you happen to live with your spouse, you're actually married and it's the only person you've ever been married to, and you're currently living with three or more of your very own children and no-one else's, then in household terms, you're now part of the eccentric fringe. That's the way, that's the way Australian society has changed.

The Bureau of Statistics is telling us in just twenty years from now, thirty four percent of all Australian households will be single person households. Now, that's a very different kind of society from the one that all of us grew up in. And what does it say about us? Well, of course, what it does not say is that we've become a nation of hermits and isolates. What it says is that there've been so many changes to the Australian way of life that more people than ever before are moving into and out of the experience of living alone. That doesn't mean in thirty-four percent of households, there are people who have said, 'I'm going to live alone forever.' What it means is that people, due to the high divorce rate and many other factors, more Australians are experiencing living alone. And of course, that does something to us.

What it doesn't do is quell the herd instinct. But one of the things that I think is a very promising sign of the way Australian society is going is that the shrinking household means that the herd instinct is starting to look beyond the domestic herd for somewhere to be satisfied. We use to satisfy the herd instinct by living in herd-sized households. A hundred years ago, that's how we lived. But gradually for a hundred years, you can't have a herd of one, you can't have a herd of two, or even three. That's not what a herd is. So the human herd animal looks elsewhere.

We join book clubs, in extraordinary numbers. I was in Albany in Western Australia, just a couple of weeks ago, population thirty thousand – fifty nine book clubs in Albany. Now, that might be an exceptional case, but that's a phenomenon. Investment clubs, drinking clubs, bush walking clubs, choirs, photography classes, adult education. All of these things, which are providing herds for us to head. People go to book clubs because they love reading, they love talking to their friends about the books they read, but when you hear people describing the meeting of their book club, you almost

invariably hear them say that at some point in the evening someone usually says, 'Don't you think we should say something about the book?' In other words, we've been herding and the book is a nice excuse. And if we haven't got any other kind of herd to connect with, well, we can just graze with the herd. The coffee shop, the cafe, the food court, don't you love food court, a euphemism for the public trough. The restaurant phenomenon, this is, the explosion of these things coincides precisely with the shrinkage of the Australian household, because we can go out and find a convenient paddock and plonk ourselves down, chomp along with the other cattle, feel as though we are connected, even if you don't feel like moo-ing you still feel as though you are part of the herd. Well, these are some of the changes.

We've also seen of course, seen fundamental changes in the nature of the work place. We've learned to live en-mass with job insecurity. We've seen the changes that have been wrought in our society as a result of the information technology revolution. Don't have to say that, anything about that to an audience like this. We've even seen changes in our view of ourselves and what it means to be an Australian, the whole concept of the multicultural society and whether we like it or not, we're still debating that, all these years after having produced such a brilliant example of it.

Well, is it a wonder when you put all that together, and many more things that I don't have time to mention, that people are starting to feel a bit worn out. Added to which, of course, there were major challenges still coming at them by the end of the nineties. I mentioned Aboriginal reconciliation, the threat of international terrorism, environmental problems looming, all of these things on our agenda, it all seemed too much. And so an extraordinary thing happened at the turn of the century. It seemed as though we went into a kind of societal retreat. I describe it in the new book as the dreamy period. A period when we shut down, a period when we disengaged from politics, from social issues. It was a time in which incumbent governments had a dream run, federal, state and territory. We just kept on re-electing them, mostly with increased majorities. And not because we loved them, but because we were disengaged from politics, that wasn't on our agenda. What we were doing was saying 'Here is a big picture which is beyond our control, too daunting, too dark. So let's take a break from that. Let's narrow the focus, let's turn it inwards and focus on the things we can control.'

And while we were in that mood, of course home renovations top of the list, that's something you can control. You know, what'll we do to the bathroom. But there are lots of other things we can control. Our bodies. There's a dreamy period of where we've seen the absolute epidemic of tattoos, body piercing, cosmetic surgery, the health and fitness craze. Can't control all that other stuff, can control my own body. This was the period in which we became almost obsessed with ourselves, our back yards, our homes.

And while we were in that mood, that narrow and inward-focussed mood, all sorts of things passed us by. We didn't get upset too much about the invasion of Iraq. We did for a few weeks and then it just passed. We didn't get upset about some of the civil liberties aspects of the anti-terror laws, we didn't worry too much about the Pacific solution, we didn't get too agitated when we heard psychiatrists saying that the treatment of asylum seekers in our detention centres amounted to State sponsored torture and child abuse. We didn't get too upset about the AWB kick-backs. We just said, 'Oh yeah, of course they knew what was going on, what's for dinner.' We let all those things pass.

And then something else happened. Over the last twelve months or so, the signs have suggested that we have begun to emerge from this dreamy period. It's hard to say why. Certainly climate change has become a wake-up call. The water crisis has made it into a wake-up call. Certainly, we got very interested in the work choices legislation a year after it had been enacted, but I don't think either of those things are the complete explanation and I don't know what the complete explanation is. But certainly in my own research over the last twelve months, the evidence kept appearing of the turning of the tide. We'd been in the dreamy period a bit more prejudiced, a bit less compassionate, a bit less

tolerant than we'd been. We'd adopted a tougher outlook. We wanted more mandatory sentencing, we wanted more regulations, we embraced fundamentalism in religion, politics, economics and so-on.

But we also, I think, in that period, like most people in a retreat, went into some kind of introspection. We started thinking more about values, we got all this debate going about the work-life work-family balance, about the meaning of our lives, about the yearning to connect with local communities. It was as though something turned, something tipped and we went from being disengaged and inward to beginning to be re-engaged and to start focussing again on the big picture and a whole lot of stuff that we let slip passed us in that period seemed to come back into focus for us. Which is why I think it was very easy to say, has been easy to say, for more than six months, there was bound to be a change in the federal government, because the mood had changed so fundamentally during this last twelve months and there are bound to be changes in State governments as soon as oppositions can get their acts together. There are bound to be changes in State governments all around the country as a reflection of this same changing mood. No government will be as secure and no government could afford to be as complacent as governments perhaps have during this dreamy period.

We are also going to see, as we emerge from this more social activism, more community involvement. We're going to see prejudice on the wane, more compassion, going to be good news for charities and perhaps we're all going to see, we're also going to see a greater willingness in the community for people to accept more personal responsibility. One of the characteristics of the dreamy period was that people, switching off being rather disengaged, didn't feel as though it was up to them. That whatever was going on in society was someone else's problem. I see signs already as we emerge from this period of people starting to say. 'Well, actually, what happens in our street, what happens in our suburb, really is up to us.' When you hear about people who die in their homes undetected for days, you think, 'Could that happen to us?' Well, it could. We actually don't know the people in our street. Ivan wants us to get to know the people at our table, perhaps we ought to be also making sure we get to know the people in our street.

We want a peaceful world, we've got to start with our own families, with our own colleagues, with our own neighbours. We think society is too busy, we think there's too little eye contact, we think loyalty is a thing of the past, that people are not as courteous as they used to be it's outrageous that people that don't know their neighbours names. Well, as I conclude the book by saying;

There is no magic wand, you exist in a circle, join the dots.

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