

tomorrow's society

In his address to CEDA's annual dinner, social researcher Hugh Mackay provides an explanation for social anxiety in the 21st century.

The story of Australia over the last 25 to 30 years is the story of a society that has been in a state of constant upheaval. It has been a revolutionary period for us, such that we have reached the point, at the turn of the century, where you could see in Australia what we have seen in many other societies around the world – the phenomenon called “reform fatigue”. This is about 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.” Everything's a bit too much.

Now, what did this? Well, if I give you just a few quick snapshots of how Australian life has changed in this 25- to 30-year period, perhaps you will easily see why so many Australians have so much trouble dealing with it. Thirty years ago, for example, almost everyone got married. Ninety per cent of Australians were married by the age of 30. Today, fewer than 50 per cent are married by the age of 30, 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 will realise that there's a hard core of people in the community who love getting married so much they just keep doing it.



Hugh Mackay

Hugh Mackay is a psychologist, social researcher and writer. In 2007 he published his latest work, *Advance Australia...Where?*

Adapted from Hugh Mackay's address to CEDA's annual dinner in Sydney, 3 December 2007

This is associated, of course, with a record high divorce rate. The rate rocketed up in the late 1970s and has remained high ever since. Thirty years ago, most couples who married had kids, most of them were having three or four, and they were almost all born while the mother was in her twenties. Today, we know what's happened to the birth rate – it has gone through the floor. In the last 12 months, the average age of the mother at the birth of her first child is now over 30.

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. 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.

The other thing that drives the birth rate down is the attitudes, values, aspirations and ethos of the rising generation of young Australians. If you are interested in where Australia is heading, just spend a bit of time with this remarkable generation. I'm speaking of the under 30s – the generation that has been shaped by this period of social, cultural, economic and technological change. Now, what has this change 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 that lesson is – keep your options open.

Kids who have grown up in this kind of world have learned that things are going to keep changing. So, hang loose, wait and see. As employees now coming into your organisations, as customers for your organisations, and as citizens in this community, they are shaped by their commitment to postponing commitment.

I heard a 23-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. He replied 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, a study course, a job, a fashion label, a brand of motor car, a political philosophy or a set of religious beliefs. Now, a generation who thinks like that is 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 1.4 or 1.5 babies per woman.

What will it be like to be a member of, 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.

In my new book I quote a primary school teacher who said that 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. I think we're starting to see a comparable phenomenon in Australia.

The other burden that these kids will carry is that if you are growing up in a low birth rate society, society tends to become less child friendly. It's a bit of a paradox. So you see a culture split starting to open up between parents and non-parents. You start hearing people saying things like, "We went out for dinner on Saturday night, you wouldn't believe what happened! The people at the next table had brought their kids!" This was a social gaffe, as though the parents were smokers. There's demand for child-free restaurants; demand for child-free resorts; for child-free apartment blocks. 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 will make. If you've got the cat, that's fine, and I suppose you can bring the kids as well.

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 have ever seen, because they will be rebelling against their overprotective parents and they will be shouting in a very loud voice to be heard in a society that has not been quite as child-friendly as we have traditionally been.

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 mothers said that they were liberated, that they had a marriage and kids, that they had a full-time job and were permanently exhausted, that they were operating on a short fuse, that they'd lost their sense of humour, and that 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 life-cycle, and we won't fall for the mistake of thinking 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. We are all only too intimately familiar with the stages of the male response, beginning



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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. 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!" Women quickly backed off the SNAG, he became an object of derision among them. He had 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 flag, we didn't want capitulation, we wanted robust engagement with gender issues".

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 metrosexual. You may remember the metrosexual. I bet you never met one. I think there were only five or six confirmed sightings. There is now an emerging response that I call the New Bloke. And the New Bloke is emerging in serious numbers in the under 30 age group. This is the genuine male fruit of the gender revolution – the young bloke who's completely comfortable with his own masculinity and equally comfortable with genuine equality



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between men and women. He knows that her agenda is just as important as his agenda.

Well, all these things have a long way to run, but of course, they've shaken us. These have been social revolutions that 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.

At least as significant as the falling birth rate is the phenomenon of the shrinking household. It's been happening for 100 years. In this period, the Australian population has increased five-fold and the number of households has increased ten-fold. We've reached the point where today, just over 50 per cent of all Australian households contain just one or two people. So if you live alone or with just one other person, 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, or you're currently living with three or more of your very own children and no one else's, then in household terms, you are now part of the eccentric fringe. That's the way Australian society has changed.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is telling us that in just 20 years from now, 34 per cent 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 have 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. 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 is that the shrinking household means that the herd instinct is starting to look beyond the domestic herd for somewhere to be satisfied.

We join book clubs in extraordinary numbers ... investment clubs, drinking clubs, bushwalking clubs, choirs, photography classes, adult education ... All of these things are providing herds for us to head to. 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 asks, "Don't you think we should say something about the book?" We have 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 explosion of the restaurant phenomena coincides precisely with the shrinkage of the Australian household. 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 mooing, you still feel as though you are part of the herd.

We have also seen fundamental changes to the nature of the workplace. We have learned to live en-mass with job insecurity. We have seen the changes that have been wrought in our society as a result of the information technology revolution. We have 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 are still debating that after having produced such a brilliant example of it.

Well, is it any wonder when you put all that

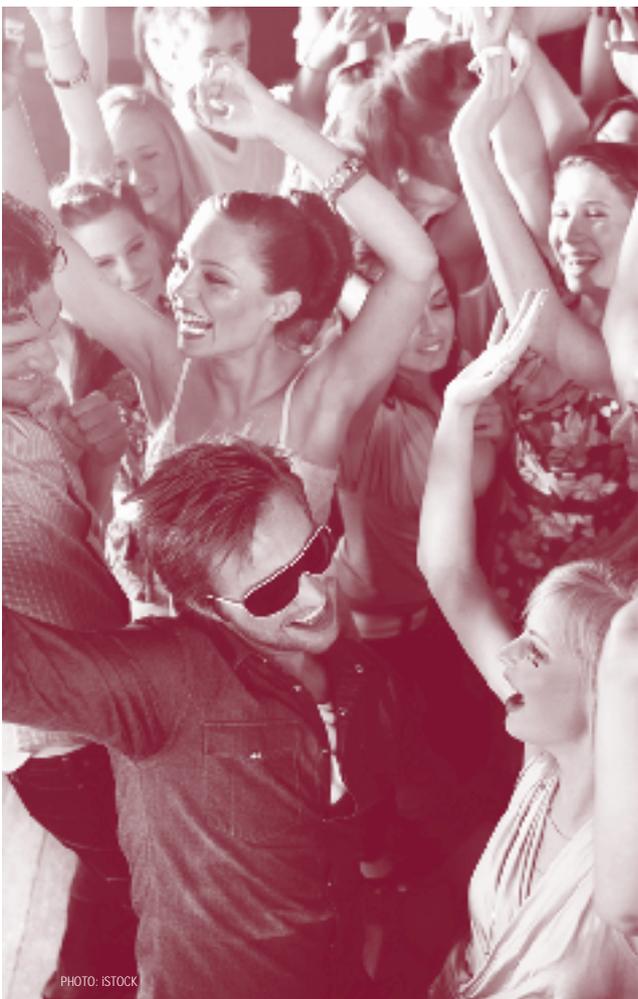


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together that people were starting to feel a bit worn out. It seemed as though we went into a kind of societal retreat – a period when we shut down, a period when we disengaged from politics and social issues. It was a time in which incumbent governments had a dream run, federal, state and territory. We just kept re-electing them, mostly with increased majorities, and not because we loved them, but because we were disengaged from politics. 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, all sorts of things passed us by. We did not get too upset 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 Australian Wheat Board 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.

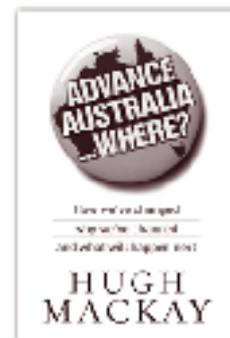
Yet something else happened. Over the last 12 months or so, the signs have suggested that we have begun to emerge from this dreamy period. It’s hard to say why. Certainly climate change has become a wake-up call. The water crisis has made it into a wake-up call. Certainly we got very interested in the WorkChoices legislation a year after it had been enacted. But certainly, in my own research over the last 12 months, the evidence kept appearing of the turning of the tide. We had been a bit more prejudiced, a bit less compassionate, and a bit less tolerant than we had been. We had 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 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, and 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 focusing again on the big picture. I think it was very easy to say that there was bound to be a change in the federal government, because the mood had changed so fundamentally during these last 12 months. There are bound to be changes in state governments as soon as oppositions can get their acts together. No government will be as secure and no government can afford to be as complacent as governments have been during this dreamy period.

We are also going to see more social activism, more community involvement. We’re going to see prejudice on the wane and more compassion. Perhaps 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 didn’t feel as though it was up to them. I see signs 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 want a peaceful world. We have got to start with our own families, with our own colleagues, with our own neighbours. We think society is too busy, that there’s too little eye contact, that loyalty is a thing of the past, that people are not as courteous as they used to be, and that it’s outrageous for people not to know their neighbours’ names. Well, I conclude my book by saying, “There is no magic wand, you exist in a circle, join the dots”.



Hugh Mackay's latest book, *Advance Australia...Where?*

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