

HUGH MACKAY PUBLIC LECTURE
AUSTRALIA REIMAGINED Towards a more compassionate, less anxious society

Thursday, 10 May 2018
Co-hosted by the Centre for 21st Century Humanities

Have any of you travelled overseas in the past couple of years? Can you remember what you said when you got home? “Why would anyone want to live anywhere but here? This is the best country in the world.” We all say that. But we don’t always acknowledge that this is exactly what Belgians say, and Nicaraguans and Swedes, and Spaniards and Canadians. Even New Zealanders. The pull of home is very powerful.

Where you were born, where you spend most of your life – home – is somewhere that you are almost always proud of and almost always want to return to. Even now there are millions of Syrians who would like to get back to Syria, despite the appalling pictures we’ve seen on television, which remind us that many of them will be facing a pile of rubble if they ever make it back home.

The difference with us is that we can actually tell you *why* Australia is the best country in the world. I have a short list of things that we are inclined to brag about.

We like to talk about our robust parliamentary democracy, and yet, since 2007, no Prime Minister has survived a full term of government. We have to wait and see whether the present incumbent will do so. We have been changing PMs at an unsustainable rate. In fact, I’m told that paramedics can no longer use the question, ‘who is the prime minister?’ if they are trying to check your cognitive capacity.

We like to say that we are the land of the fair go, don’t we? Many of us would say we *have* had a fair go here. But not if you are an asylum seeker, especially one who came by boat. Not if you are an Indigenous Australian, not if you are a woman hoping for true equality in the workplace, not if you are one of the millions of Australians who now find themselves on the wrong side of the widening income inequality gap.

We like to brag about our education system, don’t we? We like to say we are a well-educated population. And we are. More young Australians than ever in our history are attending university. Many of those universities, such as your own University of Newcastle, are unquestionably world class in at least some of their disciplines. However, our school education is less brag-worthy than it used to be. UNICEF did a ranking of the primary and secondary education systems of the 41 richest countries in the world with middle and high incomes. Australia was ranked 39th out of the 41 for its school education system. I do not think anyone here is going to argue if I say that the performance gap between our best resourced and

worst resourced secondary schools, in particular, is now a national scandal. It is that gap that is causing our overall secondary education performance to decline.

Ken Boston is a former New South Wales Director of School Education and a member of the two Gonski committees on education funding. He is on record as saying: “the present quasi-market system of school has comprehensively failed. We are on a path to nowhere”. Ken Boston’s words are not to be taken lightly. I think it is fair to say that, at the moment, school education has become one of our great social dividers. Our public education system is no longer the proud symbol of our egalitarianism that it once was.

What else are we proud of? We are proud of our low level of unemployment by comparison with many other Western societies. We don’t like to talk so much about under-employment. We don’t like to recognise that our unemployment figures are based on a statistic which says that if you have at least one hour of paid work per fortnight you count as employed. Most people with one hour of paid work per fortnight would like to have much more than that. If you put the unemployed and the under-employed together, you are talking about two million Australians currently who want either more work than they have got or at least some work.

When I was writing these notes several weeks ago, the next thing I put down on the list of things we like to brag about is our sound and stable financial system, supported by the four pillars of the big banks. Now we are having a Royal Commission into those banks and we are shocked almost daily by revelations that are emerging from that. We are still struggling with record levels of government debt, household debt and a steadily falling rate of home ownership.

Surely we can brag about our natural resources and our liveable cities? Most of the league tables of the world’s most liveable cities usually include one or two Australian cities in their list. Natural resources? Well, you wouldn’t want to mention the Great Barrier Reef. You wouldn’t want to mention the Murray-Darling Basin. You wouldn’t want to mention the rate at which our native forests are being stripped or the rate of species extinction in Australia. I dare not mention road works in Newcastle but if you care to visit Sydney or Brisbane and experience the chaos and congestion, you would have to say that those cities are a lot less liveable than they might have been 10 or 15 years ago.

I should pause at this moment to say that I am a staunch patriot. It is very easy to laugh at all the things we brag about but I love the place. I am sure that most of you are patriots. However, it would be a very feeble, blind kind of patriotism that could not withstand a bit of confrontation with some rather challenging facts about contemporary Australian society. For example, sixty per cent of us are overweight. Thirty per cent of us are obese. We think that America is the unchallenged fat champion of the world but we are about to overtake America as the fattest nation on earth. That is rather an unkind way of putting it. I am not

prejudiced against people of any shape. However, you don't need a degree in psychology to conclude that when we have a national epidemic of obesity that is telling us something about our emotional and mental states. Over-eating, like over-drinking, is one of our favourite forms of self-medication.

Apart from that, we are over-medicated, in terms of the drugs we are consuming. According to the South Australian Institute of Sleep Research we are seriously sleep deprived. That is often because we are up half the night staring at a device. I was talking to some Year 11 students in the Blue Mountains late last year about life in general and social media in particular. One of them mentioned that she always has her smartphone under her pillow at night, just in case there is a call. When I asked how many others have their smart phones under the pillow, all the hands went up. They sleep with their smartphones. No wonder they are sleep deprived.

According to the CSIRO we are also deficient in our consumption of fruit and vegetables. While I am talking about diet, were you aware that sixteen per cent of dependent children in Australia do not have reliable, regular access to sufficient nutritious food? Sixteen per cent. Almost one million dependent children in Australia, are currently living in poverty. We need to occasionally just remind ourselves that that is part of who we are.

We have the highest rate of sexual assault in the world, according to the only known global survey of sexual assault. These statistics are hard to be sure about but the conclusion of that published survey is that Australia has the highest rate of sexual assault in the world, not by some small margin but by a mile.

Our housing market is strangely distorted by factors like negative gearing, which encourage investment in housing and make life much more difficult for young families wanting to break into the housing market. At the same time, at the last Census, there were one million empty dwellings in Australia. There are 100,000 Australians homeless. There are lots of peculiar things going on in the housing market.

Australia also has the highest per capita rate of gambling losses in the world. In that respect at least, we are distinctly the unlucky country.

We are also suffering a dramatic loss of faith in institutions. I mentioned the banking Royal Commission. That is a symptom of something that has been happening for the last few years in Australia. Our financial systems no longer enjoy the trust or the respect that they once did. Neither do our political institutions, neither do our trade unions, neither do the churches, neither does the media, neither does professional sport.

What are institutions? Every society has its institutions. We create them to express and preserve our values to create a framework for an orderly way of life

and to do, co-operatively and collectively, what we can't do individually. In other words, those institutions are given permission by us to come into being to serve us. When we get a sense that perhaps they are serving themselves, when we feel that, like individuals, institutions are being corrupted by their own power, then of course our faith in them wanes.

We heard at the end of last year, long before the Royal Commission into the banks, a Federal Court judge saying of ANZ and NAB that “the public should be shocked, and indeed disgusted” by those two banks’ manipulation of the bank-bill swap rate. The Commonwealth has also been implicated in that in the last 48 hours. All of these things naturally dent our faith in institutions. The Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse had a huge impact on public perceptions of the churches. It is not only that: there are matters to do with money and other forms of self-protection, other varieties of corruption, that contribute to that decline in our faith and trust.

That all sounds a bit grim, doesn't it? But there is lots of good news about us, as well - things we can express great pride in. Unquestionably our greatest achievement is that, by world standards, we are the champion nation at creating an extraordinarily harmonious society out of extraordinary cultural and ethnic diversity. Any outbreak of racist or ethnic tension makes the news, because it is such an unusual thing to happen in our society. I think we can pause and smile about that.

There is also our famous inventiveness. Everything from the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme to our world-class Census. Don't laugh, I know what happened last time, but it is a world-class Census. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is unquestionably a national treasure. It certainly is if you are in the social research business. Our Census sets the standard for census activity around the world.

And what about our national network of public libraries? Or the invention of zinc cream and the rotary lawnmower? Our welfare system is not as good as some but better than most. There is our support for marriage equality. There is what I still think of as the glorious concept of federation. It wavers occasionally but is still a glorious concept that six sovereign states and two territories have managed to meld into the Commonwealth of Australia and it is still going strong.

Then there are our many achievers on the world stage, in everything from medicine to astronomy, to literature and film-making. We win our fair share of Nobel Prizes, Oscars and Olympic medals. That is all good.

But to come to the central theme of the book that I have just written, I want to share with you what I think are the two most significant facts about contemporary Australia. They are not things we have to brag about or to be ashamed about.

They are just things that we need to confront. The first is that we are in the grip of a mental health crisis. In particular, an epidemic of anxiety.

Beyond Blue tells us that, in any given year in the recent past, including last year, two million Australians are suffering from a diagnosed anxiety disorder. In round figures, another two million are suffering either from depression or some other form of mental illness. That is four million in any given year. Cumulatively, about one in three of us is likely to suffer a diagnosable mental illness in our lifetime.

The darkest shadow that is cast by that epidemic is suicide. The good news is that the rate of youth suicide is falling. The bad news is that our overall rate of suicide is still rising. To put a number on it, between 65,000 and 70,000 Australians are attempting to end their lives every year. Fortunately, not all of those attempts succeed.

If I was talking about an illness that had a physical manifestation, we would be shocked at the number of Australians suffering from it. Mental illness is both silent and invisible in most cases.

So that's the first fact – our epidemic of anxiety.

The second fact is that we are a more socially-fragmented society than at any previous time in our history. I need both to justify and explain that statement. I will quickly explain it by referring to things that you are all very familiar with. It is useful to occasionally step back from daily life, as we are doing right now, and think about some of the ways in which our way of life in Australia is being transformed by a series of social changes which we have willingly brought into being.

Let me remind you of half a dozen of these social changes. Our households are shrinking. They have been shrinking for 100 years but the rate of shrinkage has accelerated in the last 30 years. We have reached the point now where the ABS is telling us that in the last Census, one household in four contains only one person. The rate of shrinkage is such that, within the next 15 years or so one household in three will contain only one person.

Think of an Australia in which every third household contains just one person. That does not mean that every third household contains a lonely person. Not everyone who lives alone feels lonely. Lots of people who live alone celebrate the freedom and independence that goes with living alone. They say, 'you can whistle out of tune, you can watch daytime television, no one is going to criticise you'. However, not everyone loves it. Many people who are living alone do experience loneliness. Loneliness is now in the top five, some would say in the top two or three, of the social challenges that Australia is now facing. I will say more about loneliness in a moment.

About 35 to 40 per cent of marriages in contemporary Australia are ending in divorce. This is a huge social disruption, not just for the couples or their immediate and extended families, but also for the friendship circles and the communities that they are moving in and out of as a result of separation and divorce. One consequence is that we now have one million dependent children who are living with just one of their natural parents. Half a million of them are involved in a mass migration once a week, or once a fortnight, from the home of the custodial parent to the home of the non-custodial parent for the so-called access visit. That is a huge source of disruption and fragmentation.

While I am talking about children, I would include on this list our record low birth rate. The birth rate at the moment stands at about 1.7 babies per woman. The replacement rate is about 2.1 babies per woman.

Why do I mention a low birth rate in the context of social fragmentation? Any of you who are parents know that it is generally the kids who make the first contact, when you move into a new neighbourhood or a new town. They act like a social lubricant. They get connected at school, on the bus, playing in the street or somewhere, and the families get to know each other through the kids. At a time in our history when, relative to total population, we are producing the smallest generation of children that Australia has ever produced, that social lubricant is in short supply.

We are compensating for this through pet ownership. So many dogs and cats are unquestionably child substitutes. You know that they are child substitutes because of the names that people are giving them. (I recently met a dog called Ian. I thought that was quite a strange name for a dog. But on the other hand I know a Harry and a Fiona and they both have four legs, so there is no reason why Ian should strike me as strange.)

Let me suggest a couple of other things that are contributing to that fragmentation. We have become more mobile. Australians move on average once every six years, exactly the same as the Americans. We are also more mobile in the sense that we have virtually universal car ownership, coming and going in our little capsules. You see your neighbour's car leaving or arriving and you wave at your neighbour's car. You assume your neighbour is driving but it is not the same as stopping and having a chat on the footpath or over the fence.

We are all busy, of course. That is another thing that is a cause of social isolation and fragmentation. We do not seem to have the time or the energy to devote to maintaining connections in our local neighbourhood. It has even changed the way we greet each other. Do you notice these days people say, 'how are you going, busy?', as though if you are not busy you must be dead. Even if you are now retired, you are expected to say, 'look, I'm so busy I don't know how I ever had time to go to work'. Busyness has become a virtue in Australia today.

The last item on this list, which you probably thought should have been the first item, is the information technology revolution. It is a huge and paradoxical phenomenon that is changing the way we all live. It is even changing the way we are going to have question time tonight. Much of it is fantastic, brilliant, convenient and clever, yet it is a paradox. On the one hand, it makes us feel more connected than ever before. On the other hand it makes it easier than ever for us to stay apart from each other and to settle for a text or a tweet, rather than a phone call, let alone a cup of coffee. We are getting used to the idea that you can communicate without human presence. That is potentially a dangerous idea for us and it is certainly a factor that is contributing to our social fragmentation.

If you look at the cumulative effect of those changes that I just mentioned, it is pretty obvious where they push us. The total effect of all those, along with a list of others that you have probably thought of, is that they put enormous pressure on the stability and the cohesiveness of our local neighbourhoods and communities. They also have an impact on our level of trust, not just in our institutions but in our local neighbourhood and communities as well. Edith Cowan University, a few years ago, reported a national study in which they found that only 35 per cent of Australians say that they trust their neighbours. I hope you don't feel like that and I hope your neighbours don't feel like that about you.

Increased social fragmentation does produce an inevitable rise in the sense of individualism. The so-called 'me culture' emerges. This is reinforced by consumer mass marketing and by the happiness industry. Both of those sources are telling us that it is all about me, all about how well I am doing, how prosperous I am, how comfortable I am, what sort of car I drive, and how happy I am. As though my *personal* happiness – rather than the well-being of our society - is the main thing.

I said that I was talking about two seminal facts about contemporary Australia. However, I am sure that you have worked out that I am really only talking about one fact. This is a case of two sides of the same coin. Heads, we are more socially fragmented, tails we are more anxious. It works like that. Make a community more socially fragmented and you will produce an epidemic of anxiety and other forms of mental and emotional disease.

I fully accept that there are many particular causes of anxiety in individual cases. People can say, 'I am anxious because I feel that my job is insecure' or 'I am anxious because of rental stress' or 'I am anxious because of a relationship breakdown' or a loss of faith, or an addiction to our IT devices. There is plenty of research to show that addiction to the smart phone does indeed produce feelings of anxiety and, curiously enough, particularly in the young, feelings of social isolation. All that online connectedness actually contributes to loneliness.

However, when you are looking at an epidemic of anxiety, at something that is society-wide, you have to look beyond those specific causes of anxiety in

individual cases and look at *societal* factors that might be driving this. It seems to me that social fragmentation is the villain. Why? Simply because we are, by nature, social beings. Like most of the species on the planet, humans are only comfortable, we only feel secure, are only sure of who we are, when we belong somewhere.

There is a lot of mad talk about personal identity as though this is something you can get by looking in a mirror or gazing at your navel or going away for a weekend of self-discovery. Save your money! If you want to know who you are, look into the faces of the people who love you. Look into the faces of your family, your work colleagues, the people who need you. That is who you are. Our social identity is a social construct. That is the kind of species we are. We can only make sense of ourselves by our social connections. So obviously, if we are cut off from the herd, if we feel that we are not integral in a functioning neighbourhood or community, at least some of the time, our anxiety is bound to go up.

What is the worst punishment we can inflict on a prisoner in our criminal justice system? Solitary confinement, because cutting us off from the herd is the worst punishment we can inflict.

This epidemic of anxiety is perhaps more than just a symptom. It may be a clanging alarm bell warning us of the dangers of social fragmentation, which has the potential to lead to greater social isolation and loneliness, which in turn morphs into feelings of social exclusion or even social alienation. In fact, there are mental health professionals from both sides of the Pacific, and indeed in Western Europe as well, who are now saying that social isolation is a greater threat to public health than obesity.

The tragedy of contemporary Australia is that we are not living as though our own health depends on the health of the communities that we belong to, although it obviously does. Another tragic aspect of our present situation is that we are looking in all the wrong places for a solution to our anxiety problems. We yearn for certainty, which often leads to fundamentalism, not just in religion but also in various other aspects of life. It is as though we want some black and white certainty to compensate for our feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and depression.

The obsession with security and control is symbolised by our current political obsession with border control. But also by the boom in the number of people putting bars on their windows, multiple locks on their front doors and electric security gates. The effect of all that is to make us feel less secure and more anxious because these things are constant reminders of our feelings of insecurity.

We also retreat into self-absorption. It is as though we feel while we can't control all those things out there, we can control some things. 'I think if we could just get an outdoor sink installed in the barbecue area that would transform our lives.'

That seems to be the latest fashion to have taken over from bathroom renovations as our symbol of control.

All of those are natural enough responses but the real answer to the problem of social fragmentation, and resultant anxiety, can be captured in one very old-fashioned word: compassion. This is why the subtitle to my new book is ‘towards a more compassionate, less anxious society’. Compassion has a double effect. Personally, it is the great antidote to anxiety because it shifts the focus away from us and onto others. Away from our concerns, our anxieties, our insecurities and uncertainties, towards the needs of other people who are relying on us to give them some kind of emotional or other kinds of support. These are people in the family, the workforce, strangers we meet. Nothing steadies the emotions like the knowledge that someone else needs us.

That is the personal impact of compassion. But there’s a social impact as well: compassion is like high octane fuel that runs the machinery of social capital. It is a crucial ingredient in the life of any healthy, functioning community, especially the local neighbourhood. I believe that if you are trying to assess the health of a nation or society, you should look at the health of its local neighbourhoods. That is the place where we test whether we are compassionate people or not. That is the place where we must learn to get on with people that we did not choose to live with but who turn out to be our neighbours. They might be very different from us, they might challenge our capacity for compassion, but we are each other’s neighbours, after all.

What do I mean by compassion? When I talk about compassion, I am not talking about something that is the province of bleeding hearts or do-gooders or people of a particular religious faith. I am not talking about an emotional state at all. I am talking about a cool mental discipline, which any of us can acquire. It has nothing to do with our emotional state. It is the discipline of developing a disposition towards kindness and respect towards anyone we meet. It is not about our affection for the people we meet. It is compassion that makes sense of the idea that you can love someone that you don’t like. In other words, if you feel compassionate towards someone, you can treat them kindly and respectfully, even if you don’t agree with them and don’t like them.

Once compassion becomes your modus operandi, you soon realise that if a person is poor, or homeless, or bewildered, or marginalised, or lost, or whatever state they might be in that needs your response, your compassion gives you the capacity to respond. You don’t ask why they are homeless, or poor or in need. Their need becomes the trigger for compassion. It is this that can transform your apartment block, your street, your neighbourhood. It can transform entire cities.

The town of Frome, in Somerset in the UK, has just completed a three-year study of the ‘Compassionate Frome’ project. It was an initiative begun by a local GP, who realised that many of the health issues in Frome – especially the mental

health issues – were linked to social isolation in Frome. She, with others, set about encouraging the townsfolk to start looking after each other, making sure they were in touch with their neighbours, making sure that the person living alone at the end of the street is being brought in to the life of the street. So if she or he has not appeared for a few days, we should be looking into it.

They encouraged people to participate in community activities, to smile and say hello when they passed total strangers in the street. Not to stand at a bus stop with people as if they belonged to a different species but to acknowledge each other. It is a complicated story and the outcome is quite complex. However, in essence, many health indicators across Frome improved over that three-year period. The most dramatic of them was that the rate of emergency hospital admissions in Frome fell by 17 per cent in that three-year period, while the rate across Somerset rose by 28 per cent. They did it in Frome, we can do it right here.

If you think that people are not as friendly as they used to be, make sure that you are the kind of person who does smile and say hello. I hope it is not true that you do not know your neighbours as so many in our larger cities do not. If you don't know your neighbours, how about knocking on the door? Suddenly you will know your neighbours. Start being the kind of person who engages with the community to build the health of the community. If you want to be selfish about it, you can do it because you know that our health depends on the health of your local community.

What kind of Australia am I reimagining? There are certainly many chapters in the book about things beyond those that I have talked about. I am imagining a place where we do politics differently, where we do employment differently, gender differently, religion differently, education differently. But above all, I am imagining a place where compassion becomes our defining characteristic. Where kindness and respect are taken for granted as the best way to treat each other, especially those we disagree with. If enough of us start living as if this is the kind of society we want it to be, then pretty soon that is the kind of society it will become. Thank you.