

IN SEARCH OF AN ALIENATED GENERATION

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Towards the close of the 11th Biennial Conference of this Council held in Canberra in 1981, I can remember two distinct feelings of unease. The first related to the deciding upon the theme of a conference two years before it was to take place, and the second to the actual title of this particular conference on which we are now engaged. It may be for my sins that I am standing before you at the moment, because I cannot remember a paper throughout my career which has caused me so much trouble. I assure you I am the victim of a high respect for the President of the Queensland branch of this Council with whom I worked closely for many years when he was Chairman of the Queensland Parole Board and I was the Chief of the Probation and Parole Service in this State. I find it difficult also to refuse requests from ACPC's executive director, for whom I also have a high regard and a distinct fellow-feeling.

I assume the word 'Alienated' has a connotation familiar to us all in this gathering, and that most of us would agree it means — 'made unfriendly, hostile or indifferent'. The verb, 'to alienate' is described in Webster's Third New International Dictionary (unabridged 1971) as 'to cause to be estranged: make unfriendly, hostile or indifferent where attachment formerly existed'. What bothers me most is how we are going to determine whether some generation (presumably the present younger generation) is unfriendly, hostile or indifferent and feeling estranged, if so to or from whom or what. It may be easy for those who closely follow the political scene to conclude that for whatever reason the younger generation should be alienated, and it may be difficult to avoid the commonplace pitfalls of psychological projection.

I am sufficiently advanced in years to have learnt how unproductive are arguments and discussions involving politics and religion. I finally came to the conclusion therefore that I should search out likely social indicators that should have shown some movement positively or negatively if we have large groups of people within our community who are unfriendly, hostile, estranged or indifferent. I also decided to consult with as many organisations as I could conveniently contact whose very existence is predicated upon there being people who need their assistance in significant numbers. I also consulted with as many university academics, government personnel and private individuals as I could discover who were either involved in or had been involved in research and surveys into such social indicators as homelessness, drug addiction, alcoholism, illiteracy, internal migrations and unemployment. I do not claim that the list of indicators or persons contacted is even remotely exhaustive, and, although I believe it to be true that the busiest people have the most spare time, time is still a finite commodity.

One might have thought that an increase in feelings of alienation in society would result in an increase in crime, violence, and rates of suicide. To begin with, it is extremely difficult to authoritatively ascertain rates of crime. Dr Satyanshu Mukherjee, of our Australian Institute of Criminology, has completed a major work first published in 1981 entitled, 'Crime Trends in 20th Century Australia'. He set out to examine changes in the level of criminal activity in Australia between the years 1900 and 1976. His book thus analyses changes over eight decades. Data from the police,

the courts, the prisons and a host of demographic, social and economic variables are analysed to reveal trends in crime and punishment and the relationships between these trends and other aspects of Australian society. Some of the most interesting findings for the entire period were — 'the inverse relationship between various types of crime and unemployment; weak but positive relationships between offences against the person and population and urbanisation, and strong positive association between these offences and the size of the police force, very strong positive association between all offence types (except good order) and cars on the road, and weak relationships between offence types and proportion of population in various age groups'.¹ These associations for the entire 77 years are extremely interesting and tend to dispel some long-standing myths. The findings also do little to encourage us to look to crime rates for an indication of widespread alienation in today's youth or indeed any other generation or group.

Some of these findings may seem difficult to accept in the light of other evidence which is continually before us. A recent report released by the South Australian Office of Statistics found that more than one-third of defendants appearing on minor criminal charges in the lower courts were unemployed adults. In the last half of 1981 almost 40% of 1,300 defendants were unemployed although the unemployment rate among the adult population at the time was only 6%. This continued the trend of the previous two years.

The South Australian office had set out with a hypothesis that there would be an increase in crime as unemployment increased. It found, however, that there was not a simple correlation, and that people of mature age who lose their jobs tend to be more disciplined and thus not likely to turn to crime. It was further argued by some that many of those unemployed adults who passed through courts may have committed offences even if employed. The Director of the Office, however, Adam Sutton, is now compiling statistics to enable an analysis of young unemployed defendants. Because of their findings that 70% of the people charged with break-and-enter are unemployed, and that break-and-enter seems to be mainly an offence committed by young people who have been excluded from the work force, and thus do not really see themselves as having a lot to lose, he expects to see problems with the generation which has not been employed. Juvenile unemployment in some pockets of Adelaide, similar to the rates reported throughout Australia, now stands at thirty per cent.

We all seem to take for granted a logical nexus between unemployment and rates of crime. This is nourished by a similar tendency on the part of the media.

In the *'Australian'* of Friday, March 4, it was reported by the N.S.W. Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research that there were 33,387 incidents of breaking and entering homes in N.S.W. alone in 1981. This was a big leap on 1980, when 23,410 cases were reported. The writer of the article then proceeded to say:

'This alarming trend has certainly not been helped by the recession and growing unemployment. Children under the age of 16 years are responsible for 80% of burglaries

throughout N.S.W. Hardened criminals at 15 are far from unknown'.

In the *'Australian'* of the same date an article on the booming security industry in Australia, reported to be growing at an annual rate of 20%, saw this tendency as a sad reflection of the growth of crime. The next paragraph followed the usual pattern:

'The selfishness engendered in the young by an increasingly selfish society, the desperation of the poor and the envious, the increasing use of drugs and the need to find money quickly to pay for them, all have boosted the crime rate'.

Criminologists envy the certainty with which journalists pronounce upon criminological phenomena. We wish we could be so sure of the relation between some of these social indicators and rates of criminal offences.

From the newspapers one could also be forgiven for believing that there is a new wave of violence wash in at least the cities of this country. I am not sure if March was a particularly bad month, or whether it was in that month that I began 'psyching' myself up to write today's paper. On Thursday, March 3, I read in *'The Age'* of a wild racial brawl involving about 100 people at high-rise Housing Commission flats in Flemington (on the previous Saturday) between a group of Vietnamese youths and Turkish and Lebanese men. Meat cleavers, clubs, saws, knives and hammers were used. On March 10 in the same newspaper we read of a gang of violent youths known as 'The Carlton Boys' terrorising another Housing Commission estate. A woman witness declared the gang to comprise 14-19 year olds who lived at the flats. 'Having nothing to do,' she said, 'they just cause absolute havoc.' On April 8, we learn from *'The Canberra Times'* that the Australian Federal Police have had to increase the strength of its 'Anti-hoodlum Squad' from 3 to 7 members because of increasing reports of street offences in that city.

Also, in April we learn of the Easter battle-grounds involving police and bottle- and rock-throwing gangs of young people at Bathurst and Mildura, all of it tending to lead us to believe that violence is increasing at a great rate and becoming almost a social norm. On the other hand, in a paper delivered to the annual national workshop of the Australian National Association for Mental Health in Adelaide on February 25 this year, Dr Peter Grabosky, then Research and Projects Officer with the Law Foundation of N.S.W., expressed the opinion that the level of violence today is so low that a significant reduction would be extremely difficult to achieve. His paper, however, features strongly critical remarks about our general life-style in this country, claiming that a great deal of violence arises from the stresses and frustrations induced by poverty and inequality. He asserts that a great deal of violent behaviour is learnt — from parents, from peers and from other role models on the playing fields and from the media. To begin with, he suggests, we might follow the example of Sweden which denounces the use of physical punishment by parents and has renounced the use of corporal punishment in schools.

It has often been claimed that suicide rates constitute a societal barometer of anomie and alienation. Large headlines in a free newspaper circulated in the A.C.T. and known as *'The Canberra Standard'*, on March 23 read — 'Suicide Problems a Major Worry for Life-Line'. In the article it was reported that Life-Line officials advised there had been a significant increase in the number of suicide-related calls coming into the Canberra Crisis Centre in the last two years, accounting for more than 5% of all crisis calls. It was claimed that the latest increases in calls probably indicated increasing financial and social pressures with fewer choices for personal problem solving. Through a consequent personal interview with A.C.T. Life-Line top officials, I was provided with actual statistics based on two sample months, (October and January), in each of the financial years 1977-78 and 1982-83. I learnt that there had indeed been

a jump in suicide-related calls over the five years — from 47 to 106, but for the under 21 group the corresponding figures were 7 to 17. As I was more especially interested in numbers of crisis calls emanating from the under 21-year-olds, those figures were separately extracted for my benefit. They indicated very little change over the five years in total calls or in any of the call categories. In fact there were actual decreases in calls relating to drug-abuse, marital and family difficulties, loneliness, extra-marital pregnancies and economic problems. There was a significant decrease in hoax calls, whatever that might mean. Sex problems seem to weather the storms of time, all in all, the hard data did not substantiate the alarm-bells in the local news.

It may be that the scene in our large cities is very different. Financial and social pressures are causing officials of other helping organisations, such as the Way-Side Chapel and the Sydney City Mission, some concern. The latter has made statistics available to the writer indicating significant percentage increases in people seeking their help over 1982-83, the reasons being overwhelmingly, homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, some psychiatric problems, permutations and combinations of these, and, the largest group of all, those seeking assistance from financial hardship. Such accounts of increasing numbers of people seeking support of whatever kind leads us to look for accompanying indicators such as increasing rates of suicide. According to Peter Grabosky, Australian suicide rates are relatively high by international standards, but they have fluctuated around a fairly consistent level of about 12 per 100,000 of the population throughout the 20th century. This is supported by an April 1983 publication by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on suicides in Australia from 1961 to 1981 (Catalogue No. 309.0). This publication includes a table of suicides in Australia for the 100 years from 1881 to 1981. Except for the 1960s the male to female ratio of suicides maintained a fairly steady rate of 3 and 4 to 1. Overall however, the rate per 100,000 of persons committing suicide in Australia over the 100 years ranged steadily and smoothly from a high of 14.6 in 1930 to a low of 7.1 in 1943. The reasons for the increase in the rate of female suicides during the 1960s might be worth discovering.

This paper cannot hope to address the enormous question of feelings of alienation among Aborigines. Accumulating evidence suggests that it is very dangerous to be an Aborigine. They constitute a much greater proportion of homicide victims than might be expected from their numbers in the general population. Peter Grabosky reported a recent study of homicide victims done by the S.A. Office of Crime Statistics. It was found that Aborigines, who constitute approximately 1% of the S.A. population, comprised at least 10% of that State's homicide victims (S.A. Attorney-General's Department, 1981:49). Other well known studies, such as that by W. Clifford, Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, reveal the gross over-representation of Aborigines in our prisons. I hesitate to do more than make this brief reference to Aborigines, especially in relation to their inter-relationships with the criminal justice system, because in September of this year I will be conducting, in my capacity as Assistant Director in charge of the Training Division at the Australian Institute of Criminology, our fourth seminar in eight years on the question of Aborigines and the Law.

While it has proved to be quite difficult to find convincing scientific, concrete evidence of the existence of an alienated generation in our time, even a cursory glance at a number of phenomena leads us to claim that, if there is not such a generation that can be so identified, there should be. There is enough in our midst to arouse anger, indignation and even horror. Professor Gordon Hawkins, Director of the University of Sydney's Institute of Criminology, in opening a recent seminar in Sydney claimed that white collar crime in this country is now costing us more than all conventional crime put together. 'It is

perhaps,' he said, 'the most threatening and socially harmful crime of all, and yet the criminal justice system still knows very little about it. Crime in the streets is no longer the real threat; it is now crime in the suites.' There have been so many Royal Commissions erected to examine organised crime and corruption in recent times that the present Federal Government feels constrained to proceed with plans put forward by the previous Government to establish a special body to deal with it. Also inflation is still a serious problem, and the Smith Family in Sydney is numbering among its applicants for assistance home buyers and wage earners for the first time — people with young families who cannot cope with the too high rents and the high living costs.

As if all this were not enough, we also should be alarmed at the growing dissatisfaction with our educational systems. I realise I am now about to enter a very volatile field of discussion and one which arouses strong feelings, especially, naturally, among teachers and educationists.

It does seem, however, that the teaching profession has abandoned the use of teaching skills and practices which at one time ensured that most children, even those of no particularly strong intellectual ability, were provided with at least the basic educational tools which they could then use throughout their lives according to their abilities. The instilling of these basic reading, writing and computing skills in the not-so-fast learners should be made as pleasant and interesting as possible, but, in the final analysis, teachers are letting children down if they do not guarantee it. I know that teachers will retort indignantly and quote surveys comparing the literacy and numeracy of Australian children, State with State, and with English-speaking children overseas and with Australian children of previous generations. I am aware of much of this research, but remain unimpressed by the findings. To quote one example, a lecturer in secondary English at the University of New England researched chief examiner's reports of Leaving Certificate English back to the 1930s. He maintained that the comparison between recent Higher School Certificate reports and Leaving Certificate reports for 1944-51 reveals clearly that illiteracy was a far greater problem over 30 years ago. I remain unimpressed because those reports were written by Professors of English at the University of Sydney (never noted for their tolerance of young people's writing standards) and in 1944-51 those students at the Leaving Certificate level represented a very exclusive 8 to 10% 'cream' still remaining from the first year high school intake 5 years before. No one knows what happened to the other 90% to 92% in terms of their reading and numeracy skills, especially those whose learning capacities were not of the highest order.

Even today the proportion of Australian students participating in higher education is about a quarter of that in the U.S.A. according to Dr Ken McKinnon, a former chairman of the Commonwealth Schools Commission. Of every 100 people who start secondary school in their seventh or eighth year of schooling only thirty-five survive into the Higher School Certificate year in N.S.W. Although there are important differences between the American educational scene and ours, it is apparent that in America there is a widespread expectation that the schools will provide a suitable curriculum and that all properly motivated and properly taught young people can succeed. Because of the failure of teachers to ensure automatic facility with basic skills, the motivation on the part of too many children to continue at school does not nearly match all the thought and experimentation in Australian education that has gone into providing suitable curricula to attract them. If Australia is to compete with the burgeoning economies and employment opportunities of our northern neighbours, such as Japan, Korea, China and Singapore, it will be necessary for her to look to high technology industries rather than footwear, textile and similar labour-intensive

industries. Such new industries will only be possible if the population has a high educational base. We therefore cannot afford the wastage of our young people from our schools.

We are currently waging a spirited debate about educational standards in the A.C.T. The *'Canberra Times'* editorial on Monday June 27, trenchantly criticised the report of the Committee of Review of High Schools in the A.C.T., known as the Steinle Report, which has claimed all to be well, and would be even better if the existing system and its procedures were implemented to an even greater degree. The editorial made such sweeping claims as:

'So poor, so variable, so unreliable is the standard of graduates from schools and colleges within the A.C.T. secondary schools system, so meaningless are the credentials that are provided to students, that a few years ago A.C.T. employers resorted to asking prospective employees to submit to a basic literacy and numeracy examination'.

There is a group of 30-40 teachers in the A.C.T. calling themselves the Professional Association of Classroom Teachers who have formed their association because of their concern for the declining educational standards in the A.C.T. Naturally a number of teachers replied through letters to the editor in the usual way, ridiculing what they call — 'the good old "falling standards" and "back-to-basics" catch-cries being dragged out of mothballs and given an airing'. They referred to the lack of hard evidence to support the assumption that educational standards were falling anywhere in Australia and that such studies that have been done have shown a slow and steady improvement throughout the 20th Century. This is no doubt true in some respects.

Notwithstanding the studies just referred to, there is too much pragmatic smoke around there to be no fire.

The Canberra College of Advanced Education subjects each undergraduate intake to a literacy test called its 'Use of English' test. It comprises a reading and a writing test. In the first semester of this year one third of the undergraduates intake needed remedial reading assistance. Another one third were classified as marginal. One third of the intake needed remedial writing help. Forty per cent of them were classified as marginal writers. Put slightly differently, only one third of the student intake were able to write satisfactorily, and only one third of them were satisfactory readers, and these are young people about to begin tertiary studies. The only students entering college not required to submit to the test from the second semester this year will be those entering the School of Education. The Board of the School of Education regards the test as defective and irrelevant as a guide to the performance of students in the School's courses. The Board objects to the literacy test on the grounds that there is no standardised accepted literacy test anywhere in the world and that the test tended to label some students as 'unsatisfactory' who did not deserve the description. It is interesting however, that the Board then declares that some students — 'performed poorly in the test for several reasons apart from poor literary capabilities — reasons such as being poorly taught or poorly examined'. It is this very 'poorly taught' reason which has people worried. And further, children reaching tertiary entrance constitute the top 'cream' of our school population. So one is left to wonder about the literacy and numeracy capabilities of the two-third majority remainder to take their places as reading, thinking, decision-making members of an intelligent democracy.

On the point of the increasing numbers of homeless and hungry sleeping in parks and the like, the *'Sydney Daily Telegraph'* of Friday, June 10 1983, reported the Smith Family as claiming that:

'More and more homeless people are being forced to sleep on park benches or in cars, and many more are going hungry

for days'.

The Smith Family attributed this to an alarming explosion of poverty in N.S.W. emphasised by the circumstances that more than two-thirds of people coming to the Smith Family at the time in question were doing so for the first time. The Brisbane *'Sunday Sun'* of July 24, featured a special report headlined:

'Homeless at 13 and It's Getting Worse'

claiming that as many as 2000 children a night in Brisbane, 1000 in Cairns and 800-1000 in Townsville are wandering the streets, lonely, with nowhere to turn and sleeping huddled in alleys, on doorsteps, in parks and bus stops. The figures were apparently drawn from a Senate Standing Committee Report, tabled late in 1982. This conference no doubt would be interested in why these young people are adrift at night, but space available to newspaper writers preclude offering such information. The bland laying of blame on 'society' for the children's plight is of little help.

The most comprehensive survey of homeless youth, incorporating the only uniform data available from all states and territories to date, is found in a national evaluation of the Youth Services Scheme set up at the Australian Welfare Minister's Conference in November 1978, when state ministers urged the then Minister for Social Security, Senator Guilfoyle, to provide Commonwealth funding to assist them to meet the increasing demands for special emergency accommodation for homeless adolescents. In the late 1970s it had become evident that there was an increasing number of homeless youth, including females. Many were sleeping 'rough' or presenting at welfare agencies seeking accommodation and other forms of assistance. The scale on which this was occurring indicated that much more was involved than a number of young people running away from home. This changing structure of economic and social life was thought to be exerting pressures beyond the control of youth and forcing them into homelessness. Youth homelessness was increasing and changing in nature.

In 1982 a national committee was set up to evaluate the Youth Services Scheme. Their report appeared in February this year. In this report no attempt was made to enumerate the discrete individuals who became homeless over the year of examination, as this is not a feasible exercise. I was also thus advised by Ms Ann McDermott of the Commonwealth Department of Education and Youth Affairs. It is impossible to determine from the data how many actual requests for emergency accommodation services were made by the same individuals at different times. We do learn, however, that there were an estimated 12,300 separate requests for accommodation at all services over the 12 months from October 1980 to September 1981. The rate of gross demand increased from an estimated 2,432 in the October/December quarter, 1980, to 3,807 in the July/September quarter, 1981.

In terms of the gross number of requests, approximately 60% were not met in most States and 30% were not met in the A.C.T., the Northern Territory and Queensland. The data collected relating to the rate of youth turned away because the service was at capacity show that, consistently over the period, the services were regularly unable to meet demands, notwithstanding variations in utilization patterns or the increasing capacity.

The vast majority of youth use emergency services because, for one reason or another, they do not have adequate emotional and/or financial support from a family. Eighty-two per cent of the youth were in the work force, and were also unable, because of unemployment, to support themselves when their families did not. For many of these youths their current income from unemployment benefits was insufficient to permit them to obtain and maintain accommodation in the private housing market, and they were generally excluded from access to public housing. They were likely to be around 16-17

years of age, but older in the northern and western states. Younger youths under 16 were more likely to be female. Approximately 20% were school children, and the remainder were unemployed youth who had either no income or inadequate income to meet the basic necessities. The needs of the youth were:

- Firstly and overwhelmingly, for immediate accommodation;
- Secondly, for assistance to effect a stable living situation either at home or independently;
- Frequently for a breathing space from home;
- Frequently for personal counselling for emotional problems and family relationships;
- Consistently for advice and assistance in basic living skills, housing, employment, and income security entitlement; and
- Often for an adequate income to obtain and maintain independent housing and to facilitate access to housing.

Now where does all this 'hotch-potch' of information leave us?

My literature search and preparation for this paper did little to sort me out but I doubt if I am any more confused than when I started. I was not surprised by an excellent article by Peter Travers in the latest issue of *'Australian Society'* (Vol. 2 No. 6 July, 1983) inspired by press speculation that:

'today's unemployed teenagers are a doomed generation, one that will never acquire work-habits, will turn to crime and self-destruction, and will have its lives blighted by unemployment-induced illness'.

Believing that this sort of speculation confuses two separate issues, viz., lack of opportunity and personal pathology, Travers examined the careers, health and family patterns of two groups of men now living in Adelaide who were unemployed teenagers in the Depression of the 1930s. One group experienced unemployment, often of several years duration, whilst the second had steady jobs throughout the whole period. His study unearthed no suggestion of the former (unemployed) group being tracked into life-long dead-end jobs, nor was there the slightest sign of lasting pathologies, despite often bitter memories of years of suffering. Conscious of the argument that changes in the family and in the welfare system since then, (to say nothing of the combination of a war-time crash programme of industrialisation, followed by 30 years of boom), 'have made it pointless to compare the two periods' (all his words), Travers insists that the key factors in their lives lay: 'In the structural transformation of the world they lived in, not in whether they had acquired some form of "pathology".' He concludes that: 'the lesson from the 1930s is surely that the problem and its solution lay in structures that were the responsibility of the whole community'.

Another article in the same issue, by Duncan Ironmonger, demonstrates a disarmingly feasible plan for just such a structure. It is aimed at keeping more children at school and lowering the level of youth unemployment through 'the payment of a universal youth allowance to all teenagers from 13 to 19 inclusive to replace the present "dog's breakfast" of income allowances for this age group'. Ironmonger's article is strongly recommended to you for careful study. His is that kind of brilliantly simple, workable plan that causes one to marvel why it has not been thought of before and already put into action.

Although I do not feel I have nearly exhausted all the areas of enquiry and comment I might have dealt with, it is time I ceased to ramble. I leave you with a final thought. Having just sat through the better part of two days listening to probably one of the most informed groups in this country on criminal justice matters debating the establishment of a national crimes commission, I am struck by the failure, even at that level, to understand that crime and alienation are never so much influenced by isolated pockets of political or economic events

as they are a function of a culture's total life-style. As a simple example, Mr Justice Xaviour Connor may have done more to prevent an escalation of organised crime in this country just by persuading the Victorian Government not to establish casinos in that State than all the crimes commissions in the world. It is basically the quality of all our educational agencies, such as our homes, our schools, the churches, our mass-media of communication, that determine quality of life and quality of total behaviour as a people.

If there is an alienated generation in this country it is likely to be that generation of people who were young during the 1960s. These incidentally would be the parents of the modern generation. In the 1960s it was fashionable to knock established values as 'sacred cows' that had outlived their usefulness in a modern age. Such attitudes were assisted by the economic buoyancy of the 60s and 70s. Few people were concerned about jobs, and students leaving school could delay working until they had seen the world. Their cavalier attitudes to life-long relationships in marriage, for instance, were such as to lead to permissiveness and relatively light-hearted change of partners. The modern generation are the children of these relationships and perhaps this in part accounts for their demonstrated conservatism. A number of the organisations dealing with supposedly 'disaffected' children on the streets and in the shelters conveyed to me their surprise at the amount

of real conservatism they encountered. Dr Ian Burnley, a senior lecturer in Geography at the University of N.S.W., reported himself astounded at the basic conservatism of the students of his acquaintance. He was surprised that people so young were so non-radical at their age. Conservatism in his experience usually comes later.

Now, however, young people are so concerned about obtaining employment when they finish their studies that their attention is geared to grades and qualifications. Other observers attributed this conservatism to the disillusionment on the part of young people with the irresponsible inter-personal relationship behaviour of their parents. They have experienced the results and they do not like them.

If the theme of this conference is based on concern for the futures of our currently young people because of the difficult political and economic times we have recently encountered, then I have tried to show what we can do about it. I personally do not find the solution so impracticable as to warrant anything but sanguine optimism.

1. Mukherjee, Dr Satyanshu K: *Crime Trends in 20th Century Australia*. George Allen & Unwin, Australia, 1981 (p. 145).

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