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The state of the nation starts in your street

Presentation by

Hugh Mackay

Psychologist, social researcher, author

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About the presentation:

Weighing the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary Australian society, Hugh Mackay calls for a renewed commitment to equality in all its forms. He believes the health of the nation depends on the health of our local neighbourhoods and communities, and he suggests we need to add a missing ingredient – compassion – to the national conversation about Australia's future.

Hugh Mackay
Thank you very much Denis and good morning everybody, lovely to be back at *Communities in Control*. If only they were! I want to share with you this morning what I think are the two most significant facts about contemporary Australia.

The first is that we are a society (and by the way we could be talking about most western societies most of it is not uniquely Australian but let's focus on us) in the grip of a mental health crisis. Because it's silent and invisible we don't seem to have fully comprehended the scale of the crisis. *Beyondblue* told us that last year two million Australians were suffering from an anxiety disorder and another two to three million were suffering depression and other forms of mental illness. And that all of us should expect that in the course of a lifetime one in three Australians will experience some kind of mental health issue.

The darkest shadow cast by our mental health crisis is of course suicide. The youth suicide rate has been falling, which has been very good news, over the last 10 years or so but not so for our national suicide rate. And just to put a number on it, every year between 65,000 and 70,000 Australians attempt suicide, not all those attempts result in loss of life. But just imagine, that's the population of a city like Albury. Imagine between 65,000 and 70,000 Australians every year deciding they've had enough and would like to check out. So that's the first fact.

The second fact is that we have become a more socially fragmented society than at any previous time in our history. Now social fragmentation is really the central theme of what I want to talk about this morning. But you have to justify a statement like that, 'more socially fragmented than at any time in our history'. What's the evidence for that, what are the signs? Well let me remind you, some of you have been at previous sessions where we've talked about some of these issues but let me just quickly remind you of some of the things that have led to a more socially fragmented Australia.

Our households are shrinking - the average Australian household now contains just 2.5 people. Are there any point fives in the audience? We've reached the point where in the last census it turned out that every fourth household in Australia contains just one person.

And the rate of shrinkage is such that within the next 15 years or so it will be one household in three containing just one person.

Now that number of single person households does not mean that in every third household there's going to be a lonely person, not everyone who lives alone feels lonely. Some people who live alone absolutely love it and experience it as a symbol of their freedom and independence. They say you can whistle out of tune and you can watch daytime television and you can eat baked beans straight out of a can, there's no one there to criticise you, and if you want to socialise you know where to find people. But many others of course don't experience single living as such a positive thing. Whether because of bereavement or divorce or some other factor, they do experience living alone as edging them towards feelings of social isolation. I'll say more about that in a moment.

So that's one big demographic change that's tending to fragment us. The fact that between 35% and 40% of contemporary marriages are ending in divorce is another fragmenting factor. By the way notice with all of these factors this is not something that's being done to us, this is something we're doing to ourselves, and most of the factors on the list are things that we want. People who are divorced want to be divorced, they don't want the divorce rate to fall or it might have left them out. But when you like at the cumulative effect of all of these things you see they're pushing us in a particular direction.

But with that level of divorce and relationship breakdown more generally we're obviously talking about huge social disruption not just for the couples who are splitting, not just for their families and extended families but also for their friendship circles and for the neighbourhoods and communities that they were part of as a couple and now that's all changed.

One of the things that's changed of course as a result of that is the high proportion of dependant kids who now live with just one of their natural parents. It's a million dependant kids in Australia who now live with just one of their natural parents and half of them, 500,000, once a week or once a fortnight are involved in a mass migration from the home of the custodial parent to the home of the other parent. Even when it's well managed it's hugely disruptive for all concerned.

While we're talking about kids, I should also mention our low birth rate because I think that's relevant to the problem of social fragmentation. Any of you who are parents will know that when you move into a new neighbourhood it's usually the kids who connect first. Kids get to know the other kids in the street or on the school bus or in the playground and gradually the families get to know each other, or the kids are playing sport together and the families meet on the sideline etcetera. Kids act like a kind of social lubricant. So, when as at present we're producing relative to total population the smallest generation of children Australia has ever produced - with a birth rate around about 1.7 babies per woman compared with a replacement level of 2.1 – obviously, that social lubricant is in shorter supply than ever.

We have to compensate for that to some extent and of course we do. You can see how people are compensating if you just look at the declining birth rate compared with the dramatic increase in the level of pet ownership in Australia. And we know that many of those pets are child substitutes. You don't have to imagine that you can conclude it from the names that people are giving their pets. I recently met a dog called Ian and I don't know why - you're laughing, I was laughing or trying not to laugh when I met the dog. It seems such a strange name for a dog, but I know a Fiona and I know a Harry so why not Ian? The problem of course is in trying to remember if Ian is the owner or the dog. So that works as a compensation for some people but perhaps not to the extent that children used to.

Other things that are both transforming and fragmenting us. We've become a more mobile population in two senses. We're moving house more than ever, on average once every six years. Australians are moving house, exactly the same as in America. And of course, we're more mobile in the sense that with virtually universal car ownership we are coming and going sealed in our little capsules. You see your neighbour's car arriving or leaving and you wave, you assume that your neighbour is driving, but that's not the same as having a chat on the footpath, is it?

We're busier than we've ever been. Notice how busyness has now been enshrined as a virtue in our society. It's even changed the way we greet each other. We say, "How are you going Dennis, busy?" as though [we're saying], "are you dead or are you busy?".

If any of you have retired or know people who've retired you know that in contemporary Australia it's absolutely compulsory for retired people to say, “I'm so busy I don’t know how I ever found time to go to work.”

Well, all this busyness and the rise of the two-income household, in most households with two adults they're both working at least part-time. The consequence of that of course is we just have less time and less energy available for the neighbourhood, for maintaining contact with neighbours and other members of our local community.

Then of course there's the information technology revolution, which you might have thought should go on the top of this list. But clearly, we are now, particularly in the last 10 years, and we've only had the smart phone for 10 years … but look how it's changed our lives in that period and before it of course the whole internet phenomenon, personal computers. It all promises to make us more connected than ever before yet it's a paradox, isn't it? Because while it does connect us at one level it makes it easier than ever for us to stay apart from each other.

We’re getting used to the idea of communication happening without human presence, and in terms of the sweep of human history that is deeply weird. It's not surprising that there's so much research now piling up telling us, and particularly among young heavy users of social media, the more time they spend with a screen the more lonely and anxious they are likely to feel.

Given the nature of our species as social beings, there's something deeply wrong with the idea that we could communicate with people or feel as though we’re part of a community where we’re not seeing each other. We’re not gesturing to each other, we’re not kissing or hugging or touching each other. We’re not picking up tone of voice, rate of speech, posture, gestures, all those things that contribute such richness to the experience of human interaction when we communicate.

And of course, courtesy of the IT revolution, we’re redefining the idea of personal identity. We’re even redefining our views on privacy. We’re coming to realise that most of the social media platforms are actually surveillance media as well as communication media. It's as though we willingly invited ‘Big Brother’ into our lives courtesy of Facebook and other social media platforms.

As I said a moment ago, if you look at all those kinds of changes that have been reshaping our way of life it's pretty clear what the cumulative effect is. It means that local neighbourhoods and communities are likely to be less stable and less cohesive than they used to be. People are likely to feel less comfortable, they are more likely to say, as has become a cliché in our major metropolitan areas, we don't know our neighbours. What a weird thing for human beings to say.

I was talking to someone in Sydney recently who lives in a terrace house and he said, "I sleep with my head up against the common wall between me and the next terrace and I know someone is sleeping just on the other side of that wall and I don't know who it is. I've never met them". It's very strange. I did suggest there was a simple solution to the problem of not knowing them. But obviously when people feel more disconnected from each other they also begin to feel less trustful of each other and less confident even in moving around their own neighbourhood. And of course, this also means that the more disconnected we feel - the more fragmented we feel - the more we fuel our sense of being individuals rather than members. Rampant individualism is one of the inevitable consequences of this increased social fragmentation.

Now I said I was going to present you with two facts about contemporary Australia; the mental health crisis, in particular the epidemic of anxiety, and the increased unprecedented level of social fragmentation. But I'm sure you've worked out that I'm really just talking about one fact, these two things are so inextricably linked to each other that they're not really two facts at all. It's like two sides of the one coin; heads we become more socially fragmented, tails we become more anxious.

Now there are of course many causes of anxiety in individual cases. Individual people might experience anxiety over job insecurity or rent stress or a relationship breakdown or loss of faith or addiction to an IT device or whatever. Even a concern about the future of the planet might provoke feelings of anxiety in some people. But when you're looking at a society like ours and you're observing an epidemic of anxiety, you have to look below all of those individual triggers at what sort of societal changes are happening to create such an epidemic.

And here's where it seems to me social fragmentation looks like the chief culprit for the very obvious reason that we humans are born to belong. We are social animals. Like most other species on the planet, we are social animals who need each other. We can only exist safely and sanely in human communities. Cut us off from the herd and our anxiety level will rise. The most interesting thing about you and me is the differences between us - that's what we always find really interesting. But actually the most significant thing about you and me is our common humanity.

That's a far bigger fact about us than any of the trivial things that divide us or distinguish us from each other. We are all part of the same thing, we're communitarians at heart, it's in our DNA. We need groups, herds, tribes to belong to, to nurture and sustain us and protect us but also to give us our sense of identity.

There's a lot of nonsense talked about personal identity as though you could discover who you are by looking in the mirror or gazing at your naval or rushing off on a weekend retreat to find yourself. Don't ever go on a weekend retreat to find yourself - save your money. That's not where you'll find yourself. You find yourself by looking into the faces of the people who love you. Look into the faces of the people you work with. Look into the faces of people who need you, that's who you are. We are defined by our social context.

So when people are cut off from the human herd - when they don't have that sense of being integrated with a neighbourhood or a community - obviously anxiety rises. Why is solitary confinement the worst punishment we can inflict on prisoners in our criminal justice system?

So the epidemic of anxiety is not just something we note and say, "Oh boy there's a bit of a mental health crisis we better put more money into the health budget for all of this".

It's actually a clanging alarm bell alerting us to the fact that social fragmentation carries a very high price. When people feel socially isolated that can easily morph into feelings of social exclusion and even alienation.

A prominent American psychologist - and her words have been echoed both here and in Europe but - at the conference of the American Psychological Association last year said, “social isolation is a greater threat to public health than obesity”.

Now we know what a threat to public health obesity is, but we haven't acknowledged the threat posed by social isolation. Again because it’s silent and relatively invisible.

So the tragedy of contemporary Australia, and most of western society as well, is that we are not always living as if we need each other though we obviously do. We’re not always living as if our own health depends on the health of the communities that we belong to, though it does. And another tragic aspect of our present situation is that we’re tending to look in the wrong place for solutions to our anxiety. The obsession with control, with certainty. Who ever got certainty, whose life was ever really under control? But we go in search of it when we’re feeling anxious as though somehow that would fix it.

That leads us into fundamentalism, whether in religion or in gender politics or in food fads or whatever it might be. People are looking for simple prescriptive certainties. It leads us into consumerism: “if I could just buy more stuff and maybe that would make me feel better”. We get a little bit of a kick out of retail therapy. It leads us into nostalgia - why can't we go back to the way it used to be? Well we never can. All those are natural responses but they all overlook what is the real answer to the problem of social fragmentation and its twin, heightened anxiety.

And the real answer I think can be captured in just one simple but rather old-fashioned word and the word is compassion. Now I need to explain what I mean when I say compassion because what I'm *not* talking about is some sort of bleeding heart do-gooding emotional state that you can get into, that makes you feel compassion towards individual people who have some particular need. The compassion that I'm talking about is a completely unemotional, a completely rational response to our understanding of the crisis that we are currently facing.

It's a cool mental discipline that says we’re all in this together, we won't survive unless we build up and nurture thriving communities. Therefore, the only way for us to respond to each other is with kindness and respect.

That's what compassion is. It's the decision to approach every encounter - especially encounters with people we don't particularly like and most particularly encounters with people that we disagree with - with a determination that in spite of our disagreement - in spite of the lack of affection - we're all humans. We've got common humanity and therefore you're part of me and I'm part of you. Why wouldn't we treat each other kindly and with respect even when we're in furious disagreement?

Now compassion adopted in that way has a double effect: it's got a personal and a social effect. The personal effect is that compassion is the great antidote to anxiety because of course compassion shifts the focus. And anxiety becomes a very self-absorbed state, you become preoccupied with your anxiety and you lose sight of the needs of people around you. Compassion says we'll keep shifting the focus onto the people around us who need us. Nothing steadies the emotions like the knowledge that someone else needs us.

But the social effect of compassion is that compassion is kind of like the high octane fuel that drives the machinery of social capital - the crucial ingredient in the life of any successful community, especially a local neighbourhood. In fact, I think if you want to assess the health of a society the way to do it is to assess the health of its local neighbourhoods.

If neighbourhoods, local communities, aren't working then society will be in an unhealthy state. Because of course the thing about the local community, about the neighbourhood, is that here is where we have to learn to get along with people we didn't choose to live with. It's okay with family, it's lovely with your friends, even in your workplace you're probably dealing with people who share your values and have similar world views to yours. But in the neighbourhood they can all be weird. They can have different religious beliefs from yours, different political views, different tastes in music, different ethnicity, different generations, all those sort of things are there and you're their neighbour. And if you have any sense of what it means to be a human being you understand that your obligation is to behave like a neighbour towards all those people.

Now many of you are doing work that encourages the sense of neighbourhood and therefore reduces the compassion deficit. It's sometimes done quite formally.

Many of you are probably already aware of a study that's just been completed in the UK based on the town of Frome in Somerset. Frome is spelt F-R-O-M-E if you want to look it up, pronounced 'froom'.

Some years ago, a GP in Frome came to realise that many of the health issues of her patients were connected to the fact that they were a bit socially isolated. And so she got together with the local council and a number of other community leaders in Frome and together they launched something that sounds really clunky but this is what they did. They launched the *Compassionate Frome* project. Now three years into that project an evaluation was made of the effect of the *Compassionate Frome* initiative.

And what emerged was that across most health indicators there had been positive improvements. But one in particular stood out as the most improbable health indicator, which was emergency hospital admissions.

During this three-year period in Frome emergency hospital admissions went down by 17% while across the county of Somerset emergency hospital admissions went up by 28%. And a palliative care physician in Frome said no other initiative that we've ever taken has reduced emergency admissions across a population.

Now what was this extraordinary initiative - what was the brilliant creative thing - that they did in Frome under the title of the *Compassionate Frome* project? They did form some little community groups with particular expertise to help people who were managing health issues or financial issues, but that wasn't the main thrust of *Compassionate Frome*.

The main trust was: reach out to your neighbours, make sure you know everyone in your street, be particularly alert to people who are living alone. If you don't see them for a couple of days go and knock on the door and make sure they're okay. Get engaged in local activities, join choirs, community gardens, book clubs, current affairs, discussion groups, Probus, Men's Sheds, anything that will get you involved in a network through the community. Never pass someone in the street without smiling and saying hello. Don't stand at a bus stop with a stranger and ignore each other, have a little conversation even if it's only about the weather.

That might be the very moment when that person needed to be acknowledged to save them from feelings of alienation or despair. Give people the gift of listening when they need to talk to you.

Not very radical is it? Get to know your neighbours, say hello to people in the street, join local community organisations. Well it's worked brilliantly in Frome and of course it can work anywhere. It is working in many parts of Australia that may not have used that label but are doing similar things.

Now it's very easy to complain about the state of the nation; in particular, as Denis mentioned at the introduction about the state of politics, the state of education, the state of our major institutions and the state of our rising income inequality, which is dividing Australia in a way that is completely unprecedented in our social and economic history.

Now most of us can't have much effect on any of that. And it is very easy to ring our hands about the state of the nation and in particular to dream of getting some leaders who will save us from whatever it is we think we need saving from. But at the moment as part of our general loss of faith in institutions we're pretty disillusioned about our leaders. And it's occurred to me that that might not be a really bad thing.

Maybe at a time when we have lost faith in many of the institutions that we used to look to for leadership, and in particular to political leaders, it might dawn on us that actually the state of the nation does start in our street. That we ourselves can transform – gradually, street by street, community by community - the kind of place Australia is.

Because when it comes to the character and the values of our society - quite apart from the national debt or the problems of banks cheating on their customers or whatever it is - who else is it up to apart from us and our local communities? We can have a powerful influence on the state of the various communities we belong to and cumulatively that adds up to an influence on the state of the nation.

Everyone knows how to act like a neighbour when there's a crisis, when there are bushfires or floods or a storm or some other trauma or catastrophe we all rush to each other's aid without so much as a backward glance.

Wouldn't it be a tragedy if we lost the sense of our role as neighbours except when there's a crisis. Wouldn't it be a tragedy if we overlooked the fact that people need neighbours to act like neighbours when they're going about their ordinary daily lives.

So if you think people aren't as friendly as they once were we know what to do about that. If you're surprised that people don't smile and say hello when they pass you in the street in a big city we know what to do about that. You don't know your neighbours, we know what to do about that.

And by the way we shouldn't be worrying about whether any of this community development work - that many of you are so brilliantly involved in - is making us feel better. The probability is that it will because if we're part of a healthy functioning community that will be good for our health as well.

But don't worry about whether day-by-day you're feeling happier because you're involved in developing communities. If you're really looking for something to worry about, worry about whether you gave someone your undivided attention when they needed it.

Worry about whether you really listened to someone when they had something they needed to tell you or whether you just pretended to listen.

Worry about whether you apologised quickly enough or sincerely enough if you wronged or offended someone else.

Worry about whether you were there - quite apart from the professional work you're doing in communities thinking of your own role as a neighbour.

Worry about whether you were there when someone perhaps even a total stranger needed your encouragement or support.

The Australia that I dream of, and I hope you share the dream, is a place characterised by compassion.

A place where at every level of our society and in every department of life we take it for granted that we treat even the people we disagree with most furiously with kindness and respect.

And the process of getting to become that kind of society can only begin in one place, this is one of those things that doesn't start at the top it starts at the bottom. It can only begin in local neighbourhoods where people like you are starting to make it happen.

Thank you.

ENDS

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