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The Future:
What the future holds, and how to get there first

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I want to tell you a succession of stories about what's happening with Australians right now, the stories that are coming out of the research that we do.

Before that I want to congratulate you, the people who work in the community sector. I know that you put your hearts, your minds, your energy, your emotion into your jobs and sometimes in our research we encounter you and talk to you about how you're feeling as citizens as well as community workers so I know the incredible job that you do.

Before I talk a bit about some of the themes today I wanted to tell you a little bit about what Ipsos Mackay Research does, just so that you have a framework, an outline of where I'm coming from in terms of the research that we do.

The *Mackay Report* was started 32 years by Hugh Mackay, who many of you would know. He pretty much founded social research in Australia, particularly for market research purposes.

The *Mackay Report* is Australia's longest running study on social trends and community attitudes, the attitudes of consumers to a range of things.

I've been the Director for four years. Every seven to eight weeks myself and a really dedicated team of all-women researchers go out into the living rooms of Australians. We get together groups of people who know each other very well, generally friends, colleagues, neighbours, everybody from 19-year-old girls from the beachside suburbs of Sydney to 65/70-year-old ex-truck drivers from Townsville.

We choose friends because most social and market research brings together strangers in a strange room and asks them a whole series of questions. We don't do that. We like to get friends in their clubs, in their living rooms and we ask them what's been on their mind, what have they been talking about, what's been concerning them over the last couple of weeks.

We emphasise to them if you haven't been talking about climate change and you haven't been talking about 'worthy, important' topics don't pretend now that you're doing so. That's why we choose friends because every time somebody starts to say, "I've been thinking about the serious geopolitical trends in South America," somebody goes, "No you haven't." So we like that.

It's a great job for a sticky beak because you honestly get a sense of people's homes. You eat their food (or, more importantly, you don't eat their food if they're 18 year-old-boys), you get a real sense of what's happening. We do that cumulatively every eight weeks so we get a sense of how things are slowly changing. It's unique and a privilege of a job to do.

What I'm going to talk about today is coming out of some observations and some reports and all this kind of work we've been doing over the past 18 months, starting with a report we did 18 months ago called *Our Community* which really explored how people are feeling about the communities around them – do they think that they live in strong communities and so forth. But it's also based on very, very recent fieldwork that we did only six weeks ago.

I want to thank Denis for inviting me. Actually, he rang me up and said, "Joan said you have to do this." She obviously put some kind of mechanism in my brain in my early 20s. When people say, "Joan said you have to do this," you go, "Yes." And then afterwards you go, "What did I agree to do?"

Today I want to emphasise five different things that I think are happening right now that pose challenges or opportunities to people in your sector. That's really the guiding principle.

I've got the Prime Minister there [refers to PowerPoint presentation]. He's looking quite nice isn't he? I actually feel a bit sorry for him. I think all the hairdryers in the world can't make up for his very, very difficult job at the moment. The other reason I have to say that I feel a bit sorry for him is because of consumers' attitudes – voters and citizens – to governments at the state level and the federal level. To some extent local government as well, but in many ways local government is immune to some of the things I'm going to talk about right now.

Governments are thinking short term. There is a quote from one of our groups that we did a couple of months ago: "We've been waiting since last century for that new road and it hasn't happened. It will never happen."

I choose that quote because it reflects that sense of promise about something important and the sense of "I never believe this is going to happen". There is this very strong sense amongst the community that the kinds of things being promised are never going to happen, a real sense of disillusionment which I'm going to talk about in a minute.

I think it's important to remember when we talk about cynicism about politicians that this is not a new thing. Australians have always been pretty sceptical and cynical about politicians. And that's not necessarily a bad thing if it actually encourages people to scrutinise government decisions and engage in government because they want to watch the people that are supposed to be looking after us.

But I think it's gone beyond that. Our research, as well as research by other people in the sector, shows that in the last six to eight months cynicism and anger about governments is at really quite an all-time high.

A number of things have triggered that. One of the things that we got a lot of is anger about was the stimulus package, the first wave of the stimulus package, being the cash handout. The thing that was interesting about that was that the people in our group said, "We understand that the economy needs to be stimulated but why are they giving us money so that we can spend it on more handbags? It's an insult to us." A lot of people are saying, "Why don't they use that money to give us water tanks because we all know we need to have them? Why don't they 'up' the rebate for solar? Why don't they 'up' the rebate for converting our cars from petrol to gas?" I was really interested in the extent to which people were prepared to forego cash for something that they felt would have a longer-term benefit.

Don't get me wrong, they all spent the money. In fact I did sessions with groups of women who'd spent the money before it had arrived. They called it their "Kevin Rudd handbag". So they'll take the money and spend it but at the same time they were very cynical about that decision. They were more optimistic and more supportive of what they perceived to be the second wave of the stimulus package, around the BER [Building the Education Revolution] and so forth.

I think what has happened, particularly with the sustained campaign about that, is a sense of, "Did we overspend?" And, "The kinds of spending we're doing now, is this preparing for the education that we need in 20 or 30 years time?"

So people are a lot more supportive of the infrastructure spending part of the stimulus because they felt it was about long-term planning.

But more generally the anger in the community about roads, about public transport, about the general workability and mobility of citizens within cities but also within regional Australia is incredibly high.

There's also frustration about what governments of all types are doing about water, river health, water infrastructure – we get a lot of anger when a stage is changed because of a downpour of rain or something. It's happened in New South Wales, and to some extent Victoria. The people in our groups say, "We understand that Australia is a desert nation and we have to be careful about water. We've thrown ourselves broadly into the task of needing to save water and now why are you changing a stage? Because it's just going to make us more complacent." There's real and incredible frustration about water and incredible frustration about renewable energy.

One of the things we see amongst all of our groups is a concern about what's going to happen with the price of electricity, and what's happening with utility costs increasing, and what's going to happen with families that are already under quite a lot of stress.

I think that if those utility companies don't do something about renewable energies at the same time as they're increasing prices, they're going to have the kind of PR nightmare that the supermarkets have had over the last three years.

So for consumers, around issues such as roads, public transport, water and renewable energy, the frustration with state governments and federal governments with short-term decision making is incredibly high.

I was interested to hear David's talk about the whole issue of citizen disillusionment with democracy. I think there are some real dangers about the level of cynicism and disconnect that we feel in our groups around this.

I was in Ballarat two months ago talking to a group of women in their 40s, amazing women, all of them working in the public service, all of them very connected to doing things in Ballarat, very involved with local footy clubs, quite environmentally conscious.

One of the women was talking about a problem she was having with a neighbour and issues around her street. She said that her only recourse in that situation was to go to *Today Tonight*

or her lawyer. This is something that we're getting a lot of, the idea that "government won't help me – I have to help myself".

Now, we can't allow that kind of view about "government being not there for me" to continue. Those levels of cynicism are incredibly destructive for not only individual's sense of empowerment but empowerment for their communities.

One of the problems is we don't have any political leaders who are prepared to talk up the system. It's a lot easier for them to say, "We make all the right decisions and the moment that those guys are in power they're going to make all the wrong decisions." Nobody is telling some genuine, good stories about what government can do now and what it can do in the future because nobody wants to put that investment in now because the immediate reaction of people will be cynicism.

That trust needs to be rebuilt. And maybe that trust will start to be rebuilt when your opponent is in government. So you won't get the immediate dividends but you will eventually. My concern is that the brand of governments is now so low that unless we try and rebuild it people are going to continue to look to alternatives. So it's a real concern.

The implications are that as community organisations that get help from government you're part of that important and, I think, missing narrative about the continued importance of all levels of government in terms of building communities, in terms of the services they provide. We have to tell those stories or we're going to continue to get this level of antagonism.

The problem, of course, is that actually this level of community antagonism about government helps some politicians in that they're not very good. If they're not very good it's easier for them to do a job where people don't care about what they do except when they turn up at the ballot box.

But at the same time we don't hear about the dedicated people who decide to be politicians. I'm genuinely concerned about this whole area and I'm particularly concerned about what we're seeing in the polls, which was a real level of expectation that the Rudd Government would deliver on some key issues. And what we're seeing is a massive drop because of that terrible sense of, "Oh we had a bit of hope that he was going to do a few things but he's just

like everybody else, vacillating, not making decisions. I can't understand what he's saying. What is a fair shake of a sauce bottle? I've never heard that before."

Aggression is also in the spotlight. It was interesting listening to David's talk about that transition of a society from violence to money. But the issue of aggression in all different forms is something that comes up time and time again in the research that we do.

It manifests itself differently at different times. To some extent that's about what's in the media, but not entirely.

Recently, issues around bullying, not only in schools but also within workplaces, has been something that's been discussed. Glassing has been something that's been discussed – alcohol- fuelled violence. My prediction is that either the alcohol companies or the utility companies will be the next big corporate bad guy on Australians' agenda. But at the moment they're too busy hating the government to really find an alternative to the supermarkets in terms of who they dislike.

Knifing has been something that's been particularly discussed in all the groups that we've done in Victoria, along with bad behaviour on the internet – cyber-bullying, particularly amongst young people, is something that comes up. Binge drinking, all these kinds of forms of anti-social behaviour, is something that is continuously talked about. And this idea that we're in a society that's far more aggressive is something that's prevalent in all groups.

When I say this it sounds like the kind of nostalgia about a better time, something only older Australians talk about. But we get these kinds of messages even in groups of people as young as their early 20s. I think if we went younger and talked to 16-year-olds they'd talk about the anti-social behaviour of toddlers. I think it's one of those things that everybody talks about.

But I think you can locate this concern about aggression within this broader context about the erosion of trust, respect and shared community values that exist at the moment.

It's something that worries people to the extent that they feel like the only way they can get beyond it is by creating these kinds of housing fortresses where they do everything they possibly can inside, create as many barriers as they can to their kids with technology. This, itself, is worrying because we know that our houses need to get smaller not bigger for

environmental reasons. And how strong a community can you have if everybody's inside and nobody's talking to each other, if people feel that they not only have to drive their children to school and pick them up so that they don't talk to anyone on the way, if they have to walk their kids to school they have to walk them right into the schoolyard?

My concern around this issue with aggression, around a lack of respect for each other, is that it's often media-led but all it needs is a couple of stories for people to think "This is real". Again, it's one of those things that makes them retreat from a desire to engage with other people.

One of the prevailing messages from the people that we talked to when we did a report on the community was this sense that our sense of community in Australia is eroding, that it wasn't what it once was. We got lots of nostalgic comments, even from people in their 30s, saying "I remember a time when kids used to be out with the dogs and the bicycles and they'd wander the streets and people knew each other's names. Nobody was left to die in an apartment and only be found two weeks later." There's a real sense that we've lost something.

What is the immediate cause of that for people? It really is the long-hours working culture in our society. Australians like to cling to this idea that we're relaxed, laid back, outdoorsy people. Well, the facts don't seem to reflect that. We're actually incredibly hard-working people. We probably watch more sport than we play.

This long-hours working culture has continued despite economic upturns and downturns, despite the fact that for various points over the last 10 years, and even now, we have a skills shortage. For some employees it's actually a buyer's market.

Yet Australians are working incredibly long hours and this is one of the reasons why they say, "I don't have any time to devote energy to my community. I don't have any time to get to know my neighbours or to throw myself into that community project that I think is important." I'm sure you've heard these excuses when you've tried to engage people in your own community projects.

People also say, "Look we live in a much more mobile world. My grandparents or even my parents lived in a suburb for decade after decade. They knew everybody and they grew up with everybody." Now not only are people busy, they may only be in a suburb for a couple of

years and they may move from state to state, from country to country. Why would you invest that time in a community when you're going to leave it?

The other very worrying thing is groups, regardless of age and gender, sometimes say working mothers are the problem. They say, "We've gone from a society where a family could live off one wage and the mother had the choice to stay at home if she wanted to and it was really those stay-at-home mums that created a sense of community, that threw themselves into community projects. Now we have working mothers in their SUVs driving kids to school and this is the erosion of community that's happening." That's a really worrying conclusion, I've got to say, and I don't think it's correct. But I think in the absence of any other reason people sometimes grab that.

The fourth element about why our communities are eroding is that entertainment has all gone inside and kids are either doing crushing amounts of homework, not even just in Year 7, Year 8, but even before that. And then all of their entertainment is screen-based and internet-based.

These are some of the reasons that people identified about why our communities are eroding. What can we do about that?

The first thing we researchers always do when people use the excuse of time for not doing things is to look at that critically. And whilst Australians are no doubt working incredibly long hours and all of these things that have been identified are true, they still found time to do a range of other things. If you can spend the time on Facebook interacting with a community because you've made the time to do that then there's no reason why you can't do one, two, three, four hours of other community time. So questioning that excuse of time is something I think is important.

At the beginning of the year we did a report on retirees (which is not the right term to call them; they were an incredibly dynamic, amazing group). We looked at people who had, say, left the full-time workforce in their early 50s to mid 60s – sometimes they'd gone from full-time to part-time, or the global financial crisis had thrown them into part time work.

Then we looked at Australians all the way up almost to their late 70s, an amazingly dynamic, interested group, a group that are often presented as being only really concerned about the

cost of living. But of all the groups we talked to they were the least concerned about the cost of living. They had a real focus on what this part of their life was about, which they often described as their third life. They saw it in terms of not just months or years but decades.

Their focus was on grandchildren, on friends and on giving back to the community as much as they could. I know that they're in the armies of people that assist you in doing the work that you do.

So we're going to have an opportunity as the Boomers not exit the workforce dramatically but pare down their time of work. A lot of them perceive that they'll still be in some kind of paid work into their 60s and maybe early 70s, but they also want to think, "What else can I contribute to?"

So potentially when the age wave really breaks on us, and that's only a matter of time, it's going to happen obviously sooner rather than later, you may have an incredible influx of skills, energy. So it's about really getting ready for them and thinking about what you can offer them in terms of engagement with the community sector.

They're an amazing group of women and men. Although we did find that the happiest people in that group were single women and married men. Single women were really throwing themselves into life and the married men were also throwing themselves into the domestic sphere. They were saying, "Look, I've spent my whole life at work and I probably didn't spend as much time with my kids so I want to spend lots of time with my grandkids. There were all these things I never had time to do because I was buried in work. Now this is an opportunity to rejuvenate my relationship with my wife who's supported me for the last 40 years." So they were incredibly engaged.

Some of the most miserable women we met were married. It could just be the sample but one of my favourite stories came from fieldwork as I was sitting in the lounge room with a whole lot of women in their early 70s in Adelaide. It was quite a well-to-do suburb. They were all from a local church group and did a lot of craft together. At the end of the hour of talking I said to them, "Do you have any goals at this time of your life?" One of the women said, "I don't so much have a goal. I have a dream and my dream is that all our husbands will die in the same month so we can all go on a holiday and do what we want."

I thought it was a joke and I looked up to laugh and all the women went, “That would be wonderful.” They were nodding. As I exited the house and the husband who had been away for this conversation came in I almost – we’re not supposed to, we have to be very objective as researchers – I almost said, “You need to start cooking your own meals. You’re for it.”

Let me move onto this next issue which is quite complex. I don’t know if people saw in today’s newspaper but the Lowy Institute did a poll which gave the Federal Government four out of 10 for their handling of the asylum seeker issue. That totally meshes with what we find. We find groups completely polarised by this. We find groups that say, “Why are they letting all these asylum seekers in?” And then we have other groups that say, “Why aren’t they letting these asylum seekers in?”

So by trying to chart a middle uncontroversial course by not staking a claim one way or the other, the government is pleasing nobody. What a surprise!

There’s no doubt that in the groups we do people say things that you would describe as racist. But I need to explain to you the intricate layers behind this issue around racism and around immigration in Australia.

I suppose the first thing I would say, and it goes back to what I talked about before, is that for a lot of people in our groups they feel that something is awry in the way our cities work and something is awry with the state of our infrastructure.

So when we start to talk about Australia’s population being four or five million more in the next five years or say that by 2020 we’re going to reach 30 million, people don’t necessarily see colour. They think, “30 million people – that’s however many more million people trying to get the bus in the morning and I’m already so close to the guy in front of me we might as well be engaged”.

People are seriously concerned about how our system is working now for the people who are here. So until we start to address those issues around infrastructure, that there is a plan to get us there rather than just escalating housing costs, more difficult public transport, more traffic in the morning, then you’re going to get this resistance to further immigration. And I understand why that’s there.

We can go back 30 years to see how consumer attitudes and citizen attitudes have changed over that period of time in terms of issues about immigration, and the interesting thing is that previously people were often saying, “We need to secure jobs for Australians now and if we bring more people in they’ll either take Australian jobs or alternatively sit on the dole.”

You rarely encounter that attitude now. People recognise that actually there’s a skills shortage and certain kinds of industries like aged care, particularly the caring industries, are going to need more rather than less people. So in many ways the primary opposition to immigration is not an industrial one but a cultural one.

I go back again to the theme I talked about before, about aggression, about respect, about shared values. People are saying, “If we introduce more complexity and more people into our society, how can we be sure they’ll share Australian values?”

Now, people find it very hard to define what is an Australian value. In fact they find it easier to describe something that’s un-Australian than what’s Australian. So I wonder whether we’re a nation that defines our identity by things that *aren’t us* rather than things that *are us*.

This in some ways is a bit of a fantasy about what Australian values are. But nevertheless it’s keenly felt.

There’s absolutely no doubt about it, the concern about further immigration is not about more Irish backpackers, who are just as likely to overstay their visas here as anybody, but Muslim immigrants. In some areas it’s Muslim immigrants who are also of colour.

I think there’s a really interesting thing that happens when this issue comes up in our groups. First of all there’s always a bit of an indicator that it’s about to start because somebody says, “I’m not a racist but...” So you immediately get ready for that.

What often happens in these discussions is people say all of the kinds of things that they’re worried about: they’re going to be in their own separate enclaves, they’re going to live by their own rules, they’re not going to welcome us into their communities the way that we’ve welcomed them, their cultural values don’t fit with Australian values – all those kinds of things. That they bring violence, they’ve come from cultures which are at war. We don’t say anything

but I often think to myself that Italians and Greeks and German Jews came here because of wars and so did the Vietnamese.

One of the things that also happens, especially with older participants, is that people say, “We know that we said these things when the Italians and the Vietnamese came, but we were wrong. They came here and they worked hard and they integrated into our society and they brought us fantastic food. It’s all fine. If we could believe that the Muslims that come here would be the same then we’d relax.” So there is precedent that people recognise but for whatever reason they find it hard to apply that to the future and apply that to now.

This is such a crucial issue that no politician can afford to dodge it, particularly those who want to argue for a more tolerant, more accepting Australia – there’s no way that you can do this policy over in the corner and hope nobody notices. You’ve really got to stake a claim around it. You’ve really got to appeal to the better angels of the Australian people because they are there.

In absence of arguing why we need to have a more sophisticated, more tolerant and more open view about this next wave of immigrants who are here and coming, then I think there’s a real problem.

I just want to say very quickly *60 Minutes* did a show on this last week. Then they had some letters coming into the mailbox. One woman said, “We are not scared of Muslims. We are scared of people we can’t see.” This was the issue around the burqa. Part of that, really, is about making those people visible to the people who are scared of them, not as in taking away their burqa, but making them visible in terms of the diversity and what they can contribute to society. This is absolutely crucial – or we will continue to have this runaway discussion around Muslim Australians which is really damaging.

Finally I’m getting a lot of, “What about me? Where’s my stuff? Who’s listening to me?” in the research that we do. In some ways this entitlement complex of, “I want my chunk of cash,” which is in some ways in opposition to what I was talking about before but is still there, has been fed by these kinds of cash handouts that we’ve been getting, not only from the current government but from the previous government.

This desire for better services but also to pay less tax is a very problematic one. There's also a perception that we're the most taxed country in the world, which is not true. So there's a sense of, "I'm giving and giving and what am I getting back in return?" In some ways, that's about a lack of knowledge of what people get. But it's also again about a lack of advocates for the role that government plays in our lives.

The other problem I think we have is the way that politicians use language in the current system. That is something that I'm really unhappy with. Somebody should say to Kevin Rudd, "Never use the term 'working families'". It's the most stupid term in the world and I'll tell you why. I sit amongst groups of women who aren't married and don't have kids but they're parts of families. They look after their aunt, they're connected to their brothers and sisters, they look after their cousins.

They say, "When he says 'working families' he does not mean me. So why should I pay more tax? Why should I do more when he talks about delivering services for people that aren't me?" I even talk to women in their 40s and 50s, some of whom might have grown up children living with them because they can't find jobs or they can't get decent rental properties, who are working, have seen their super dive, almost halve overnight because of the global financial crisis, they've still got issues around their mortgage, they're wanting to put more money in super but they can't, they're working hard. And they say, "I've got a 19-year-old and a 23-year-old but does he mean me when he says 'working families'?"

We need to move around that sectional interest that the commercial world does very well at, deciding who they want to sell toilet paper to or who they want to sell a car to and talking to that group.

Government is trying to deal with this kind of language of sectional interest and we have to get away from it because I do believe that Kevin Rudd means everybody when he says the term 'working families'. But trust in government is so low people think, "He doesn't mean me. I'm left out of the picture," and that's a real problem and adds to all the other issues I've talked about previously.

That's a lot to digest, but thank you very much.