

Silencing Dissent

According to a survey of non-government organisations conducted by the Institute, 90 per cent believe that organisations that speak out against the government risk losing their funding. But as *Silencing Dissent (Discussion Paper No. 65)* shows, funding cuts are just one of the mechanisms that governments, and especially the Federal Government, have available to them.

No. 39 June 2004

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It is widely accepted that a well-functioning democracy is not limited to elections every three or four years but involves a continuing process of consultation between government and the citizenry.

Non-government organisations (NGOs) serve as essential intermediaries between community and government, conveying important information about the needs and preferences of a wide range of groups in the community to governments that would otherwise remain remote and uninformed.

NGOs provide a voice for marginalised groups and the means and opportunities for citizens to make claims on government between elections. NGOs are therefore an essential component of a healthy and robust democracy.

This understanding of the role of NGOs has been embedded in Australian political practice for decades. Recently, however, the legitimacy of NGOs and their contribution to democratic processes has been under attack. Questions have been raised about the representativeness of NGOs and the legitimacy of their standing as policy advocates in a liberal democracy such as Australia.

The attacks on the legitimacy of NGOs have been led by a neo-liberal think tank, the Institute for Public Affairs, now undertaking an 'audit' of NGOs at the behest of the Howard Government.

The concerns of the NGO sector were heightened by the proposal by Treasurer

Three quarters of respondents disagreed with the statement that 'Current Australian political culture encourages public debate'.

Peter Costello to disqualify a charity that engages in advocacy other than that 'ancillary and incidental' to its main purpose. Despite the recent announcement that the Government will not proceed with the draft Charities Bill, and will retain the common law definition of charity, many NGOs remain concerned that there will be a crackdown on their charitable status should they continue to engage in advocacy work. As most NGOs survive on the basis of their charitable status, such a move would see many disappear.

No government, and no organisation, has a monopoly on good ideas. Public debate is therefore a vital element of both the democratic process and the policy formulation process. Ideas need to be tested before they are implemented if mistakes are to be avoided, and the best way to test them is to subject them to informed scrutiny.

NGOs are engaged in a diverse range of functions ranging from the provision of hot meals to the elderly to the development and advocacy of public policy. In recent years many NGOs have expressed growing

concerns about their lack of access to Australian governments, the lack of funding provided to them to conduct their work, and, more alarmingly, the growing willingness of governments, particularly the current Federal Government, to seek to silence those NGOs which speak out against government policy (see figure).

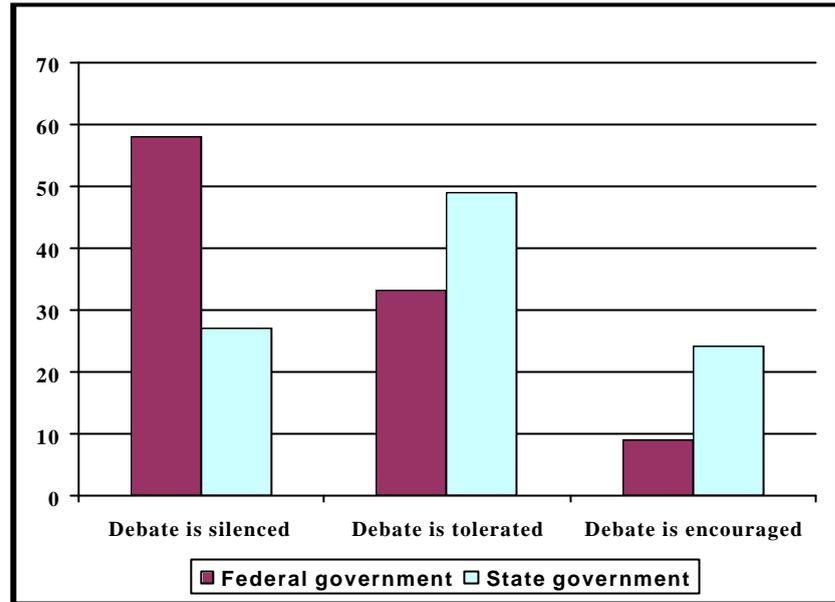
In order to understand better the nature and extent of these concerns, the Institute has conducted a survey of NGOs that, in addition to service delivery, engage in advocacy. Invitations were sent to around 750 NGOs and 290 responses were received, of which 92 per cent provided the name of their organisation on the condition of strict confidentiality. Most of the best known NGOs in Australia participated in the survey, along with a wide cross section of small and medium sized organisations.

NGOs serve as essential intermediaries between community and government.

The results were instructive and disturbing. Only nine per cent of respondents believe that the Federal Government encourages public debate with nearly 60 per cent believing that the Federal government actually seeks to silence debate in Australia.

A number of other results from the survey lend support to this worrying view of the state of public debate in Australia.

Attitudes of state and Federal governments to debate (%)



- Three quarters (76 per cent) of respondents disagreed with the statement that 'Current Australian political culture encourages public debate'.
- Three quarters (74 per cent) agreed with the statement that 'NGOs are being pressured to amend their public statements to bring them in line with current government policy'.
- 92 per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement that 'Individuals and organisations that dissent from current government policy are valued by the government as a part of a robust democracy'.
- 90 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that 'Dissenting organisations and individuals risk having their government funding cut.'

In addition to the high percentage of respondents who believe that speaking out against the government could result in organisations having their funding cut, a surprising number provided written responses indicating that organisations know not to 'bite the hand that feeds them'. The following quotations illustrate this concern:

Common sense dictates that you don't bite the hand that feeds you, even if the meal is meagre!

We would be unwise to bite the hand that feeds us.

Although this is not written into the funding agreement it is often made clear that organisations that 'bite the hand that feeds them' take the risk of being defunded.

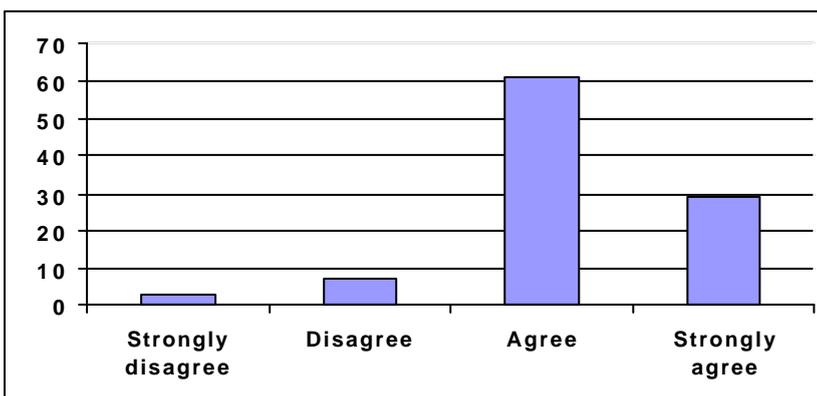
Cutting the funding of dissenting voices is not, however, the only course of action available to governments wishing to silence their critics. As one respondent put it:

It's done very cleverly - by selectively destroying organisations, defunding public criticism, ministerial interference and criticism, excessive auditing and 'review'.

A range of strategies became apparent from an analysis of the written comments that accompanied the survey answers, including personal bullying by ministerial staff, publicly disparaging and demeaning individuals and organisations, and creating distractions in the media to draw attention away from

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Dissenting organisations and individuals risk having their government funding cut (%)





Tax deductible donations

As the end of the tax year approaches, why not consider a donation to The Australia Institute's research fund?

All funds are devoted to our policy research and all donations are tax deductible to the donor.

Dissent from page 2

concerns being raised by NGOs (see the box).

The data collected in the survey provide clear evidence of an NGO sector that operates in a climate of fear. While for some groups the potential to lose government funding acts as a constraint on their public voice, for others the fear of being personally or publicly attacked keeps them quiet.

Only nine per cent of respondents believe that the Federal Government encourages public debate.

When Prime Minister Howard took office he spoke of lifting the pall of political correctness that he perceived as covering Australia. The results of the Institute's study suggest that he has failed in his endeavour, and has imposed a new form of censorship. ■

Sarah Maddison



How to deal with your critics

Apart from the withdrawal of funding, the report identifies four types of strategy used to silence critics: denigration, bullying, management of consultations and diversionary tactics. Here are some quotes from the survey respondents.

Denigration and public criticism

The Fed Govt strives to silence or weaken debate by Fed Govt ministers or parliamentarians openly denigrating certain sections of the community. This influences community opinions even though the community is not in possession of all of the facts.

Automatic visceral attacks on opinions counter to party line.

Persistent dismissal of contrary views by Government; attacks on the credibility of NGOs

... people disagreeing with government policy are invariably discredited.

Bullying

Reactions to public comment are extreme ... e.g. phone calls from senior staff keen to reduce further public debate.

Threats, bullying, personal attack unless debate is 'commissioned' by and 'controlled' by the Agency.

Management of consultation processes

It is clear from our funding contract with Government that it sees our role not as a peak body in a democratic society but as a mechanism to help the Government 'get its message out' and help the Government implement its policy objectives.

Making certain that public representatives appointed to government advisory committees and regulatory bodies are friends of the Government who will be loyal to the interests of the Government over and above the interests of the public.

Diversionary tactics

Government is very clever at pre-emptive announcements ... Also clever at keeping the debate on its own terms through public comment, question time in Parliament and denial of problems by consistently producing Government's record rather than considering what still needs to be done.

Debate is manipulated and the political differences between the states and the Commonwealth are mercilessly exploited - almost above all other interests.

NOTE:

New telephone and fax numbers

Tel: 02 6125 1270

Fax: 02 6125 1277

Is the growth of private schools good for Australia?

In January 2004 the Prime Minister sparked a national debate when he declared that public schools were ‘values neutral’. Private schools, he argued, were growing rapidly because they better reflected the desire of parents for better, but unspecified, values. The Institute has investigated the social implications of the shift to private schools (Discussion Paper No. 66). The report’s principal author, Deb Wilkinson, explains.

There is an important distinction between what individual parents think is good for their children and what policy makers think is best for Australia. While it is easy to understand that some parents wish to provide their children with a ‘head start’, the pursuit of private benefits comes at a public cost.

The Federal Government has increasingly adopted the rhetoric of ‘choice’ in its justification for providing an ever-growing proportion of Federal schools funding to private schools. But choice in any ‘market’ will only deliver desirable outcomes when there is ‘no market failure’. Governments became so heavily involved in schooling throughout the 20th century due to the widespread acceptance that the benefits of schooling spread well beyond the individual student.

In other words, a society that is better educated is in itself a good thing, quite apart from the improvements gained by individual students. In addition, it was widely accepted that only a well-funded public system could overcome the inherent inequalities of a private system based on user pays.

Individual choice in the schooling market seems driven largely by the desire of parents to provide their children with ‘the best’. This desire suggests that there is evidence, at least in the minds of parents, of significant differences in the quality of education on offer across a wide range of private and public schools.

However, given that places in the most sought-after schools are constrained, it is impossible for all children to receive ‘the best’ education. Demand from more parents for a place at an exclusive school is likely simply to drive prices up even further. This is exactly what has been observed around Australia in

recent years. Fees at the most expensive schools are rising at a rate significantly above that of inflation, and this is occurring despite the large increases in assistance to expensive private schools from the Federal Government.

Schools and inequality

Historically the objective of Federal school funding policy was to try to reduce the gap between the best resourced private schools and the most poorly resourced public and private schools. In recent years, however, in addition to providing a greater proportion of Federal Government funding to private schools, the implementation of a new funding model for private schools resulted in the best resourced ‘category 1’ schools receiving among the largest percentage increases in Federal Government grants.

For parents forced to make decisions in this new environment of ‘choice’ it is understandable that some would opt to ‘give their child a head start’. However, according to research conducted by the private schools themselves, many parents

feel guilty about their decision. While they seek to do everything they can to help their children, they are aware of the consequences of their choice for both their local public school and the school system more generally.

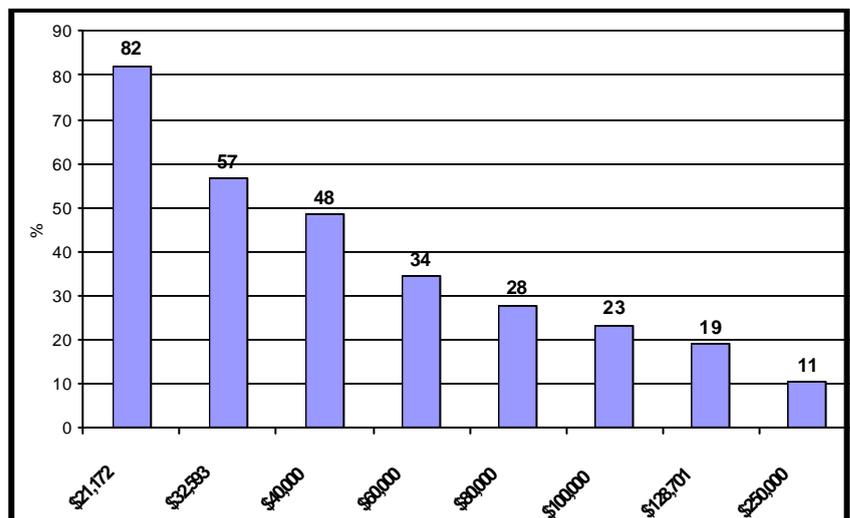
In order to better understand public perceptions of the role of private schools in advancing the national interest, the Institute commissioned Newspoll to conduct an opinion survey of Australian adults.

The survey asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the following statement.

Policies to increase the number of children going to private schools would be good for Australia.

Only one third of Australian adults agree with this statement, while 57 per cent disagree (ten per cent are unsure). Significantly, respondents aged 18-24 were the most likely (62 per cent) to disagree with the statement that more private schooling is good for Australia.

Percentage of disposable income required to pay \$15,000 per year for school fees



The good, the bad ...

Private schools have played, and will continue to play, an important role in the education of Australian children. But rapid growth in private school enrolments means that policy makers should more closely scrutinise the funding and regulatory environment within which private schools operate.

Urban sprawl and 4WD ownership, for example, can be seen simply as an indicator of individual choice. Alternatively, the framework within which such choices are made, along with the relative costs, can be analysed and the need to make policy changes in the national interest discussed.

There are good and bad schools in both the public and private sectors. The current approach of the Federal Government is tilting the playing field in the favour of private schools. While the primary beneficiaries are those parents who already send their children to private schools, the group that loses the most are those who are unwilling, or unable, to send their children to private schools.

In addition to rethinking the current allocation of funding between private and public schools, if private schools are to play an important role in the teaching of community values, there needs to be a significant rethink of the regulatory controls over private schools.

There are anomalies in the values practiced by some private schools. For instance, few people are aware that most private schools in Australia are free to discriminate against gay children and pregnant girls. While there is no doubt that most private schools do not practise this sort of discrimination, the fact is that at present all Australian states have exemptions in their anti-discrimination legislation allowing them to discriminate on various grounds if the school seeks to do so.

In articulating the national goals for Australian schools, both Federal and State Education Ministers have highlighted the need for creating a schooling environment that is supportive and free of discrimination. To that end, the current range of exemptions from anti-discrimination

Exemptions from NSW and Victorian anti-discrimination laws specific to private schools

Area of discrimination	NSW	Victoria
Age or age group	✓	✓
Disability/impairment	✓	✓
Homosexuality/sexuality	✓	✓
Marital status	✓	✓
Pregnancy or potential	✓	✓
Race	X	✓
Sex	✓	✓

Key: X = No exemptions
 ✓ = Specific exemptions for private or religious schools

legislation would appear to be outdated and undesirable.

The Newspoll survey commissioned by the Institute found that nine out of ten Australians believe that private schools should not have the right to expel gay children, and eight out of ten believe that private schools should not have the right to expel pregnant girls.

Opposition to the 'right' of private schools to discriminate in these ways is as strong amongst parents who send their children to private schools as it is amongst those who send their children to public schools. An abhorrence of discrimination is an Australian value, and all educational institutions, especially any that receive tax-payer support, should be required to put it into practice.

... and the dodgy

The Institute's research has also uncovered some questionable financial practices on the part of some private schools. Private school fees are not tax deductible in Australia but donations to school building funds are.

In order to qualify as a donation, money must be freely given with no expectation of a return to the giver. However, it appears that illegitimate practices are widespread. While the majority of private schools operate within both the letter and the spirit of the Taxation Office guidelines, some schools appear to be placing pressure on parents to make 'donations'.

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The 'freedom' to discriminate

In response to the Institute's report on discrimination in private schools, the Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Pell defended the right of religious schools to discriminate against gay students, claiming that it is integral to religious freedom in Australia.

"We have a right to teach our Christian teachings and to follow the consequences of that," he declared. "Nobody is forced to send their children to Catholic schools."

"Parents send children to Catholic schools because they know they will get a certain set of values there."

No-one is forced to send their children to Catholic schools, but does not Christian compassion extend to those children who one day discover that they are gay and enter a period of fear and self-doubt?

And we know from our survey that the set of values sought by parents includes tolerance of diversity, including sexual orientation.

Institute's porn filtering strategy vindicated

The Australia Institute's reports last year on youth exposure to pornography demonstrated that the existing system of regulating sexual content on the Internet is failing. The Federal Government relies on voluntary filtering by end-users as the principal method of minimising children's exposure to inappropriate material.

But the Institute's reports demonstrated that there are few if any age-related barriers to children's access to pornography, and children can be exposed to material which it is illegal even for adults to see on video.

There are few, if any, age-related barriers to children's access to pornography.

The Institute's reports recommended that all Australian Internet Service Providers (ISPs) be required to apply filters to their content, while adult end users could 'opt out' of filtering to receive X-rated and other materials. We proposed additional technological strategies to limit minor's exposure (both accidental and deliberate) to pornographic materials, including stronger age-verification technology, 'plain brown wrappers' for Internet sex sites, and instant help functions for children exposed to offensive material.

Internet industry advocates argued last year that the Institute's proposal for ISP-based filtering was 'technologically impractical', too costly for ISPs, and likely to lead to steep increases in the costs faced by consumers. Prime Minister Howard conceded last year that existing systems of Internet regulation were inadequate. Since then, there has been a review of the operation of those sections of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* concerned with online content, by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA).

However, the DCITA review vindicates the Institute's claims. The review notes

that a national filtering system blocking access to pre-determined lists of websites and web addresses certainly is feasible, and would not increase computer response times. However, the use of more complex filtering technologies, 'ones that analyse the text and images on particular web pages', is not practical in a national filtering system. The DCITA review notes too that a process through which users could opt out of ISP-based filtering is practicable.

Costs minor

A national system of ISP-based filtering would impose additional costs on ISPs, and they are likely to pass these costs on to consumers. However, the estimated costs per subscriber for ISP-level filtering are lower than the typical costs borne by end users in purchasing filters.

The DCITA report notes that for all but the smallest ISPs, costs of ISP-based filtering per subscriber range from \$6 to \$9 for initial set-up and \$3 to \$9 for annual maintenance. The report does note that among the 500-plus ISPs in Australia, the smaller ISPs would face the greatest impact and some would go under.

While The Australia Institute's report recommended ISP-based filtering, another option canvassed by the DCITA review that meets some of the same aims is a requirement that ISPs offer end-user filtering on an opt-out basis. Under this system, subscription to an ISP automatically would include an end-user filtering product or service, and users could choose not to accept the filter.

One advantage of an end-user system is that more sophisticated filtering technologies can be used because of the smaller volume of content flowing through individual computers. Another is that computer users have greater discretion in determining the kinds of content they or their children can see.

However, we have already seen that the current system of end-user filtering is

A national filtering system blocking access to pre-determined lists of websites certainly is feasible.

failing to protect children from exposure to unwanted and inappropriate materials. End-user filtering would only be an effective strategy if the Federal Government played a much greater role in facilitating end-users' adoption of blocking and filtering technologies.

The Government could do this by compelling ISPs and other Internet players to encourage the use of such technologies, by participating in the development of rating and filtering programs and promoting their use, and by compelling online providers of 'adult' content to adopt additional strategies to limit minor's exposure (both accidental and deliberate) to pornographic materials. ■

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At least one school actually informs parents that donations to the school building fund are 'compulsory' and tax deductible. Another quotes its fees on its website and then instructs parents to make out two different cheques, one to a tax deductible building fund and the other to the school's general account. Structuring private school fees so that they include a 'donation' to school building funds both reduces the cost of private school education for parents and increases the cost of private schools to the taxpayer.

Income raised from donations can be substantial. For example, in just two years, the Scotch College Foundation raised \$7 million in support of the James Forbes Academy, a state of the art centre for music and drama at the school. This money was raised through the Foundation's building and library fund, meaning that tax payers contributed approximately \$3.4 million. ■

Children's exposure to porn increasing

Three-quarters of youth aged 16 and 17 have been accidentally exposed to pornographic materials on the Internet. This was the troubling finding of a report by The Australia Institute released early last year. But the situation appears to be deteriorating. Michael Flood outlined his concerns in a keynote address to the recent 'Internet, Media and Mental Health' Conference in Brisbane.

The report argued that exposure to pornography, and especially violent pornography, leads to increased tolerance for and participation in sexual aggression, particularly among those boys and young men who deliberately and regularly view such materials. In addition, younger children can be shocked and disturbed by premature exposure to sexually explicit images.

There are three reasons to think that the problem is getting worse. First, children's access to the Internet continues to increase. In 2001, just under a third of Australian households had the Internet connected, but within a year this had climbed to just under half. All children need access to the Internet, given its power as an educational and community tool, but this access also brings potential risks.

Second, new channels of exposure to pornography are opening up to children and adults alike. Web-enabled '3G' mobile phones now offer access to pornography, and 'mobile porn' is projected to become a billion-dollar business worldwide. At least one Australian mobile phone service already

offers pornography, both still images and videos, and other devices such as video game consoles and personal digital assistants increasingly allow access to Internet content. As with the worldwide web, at present there are few if any age-related barriers to children's exposure to such materials, whether accidental or deliberate.

Another new route to children's exposure is satellite television. Several overseas 'adult' services are broadcasting pornographic movies on to Australian televisions via satellite. This operates outside Australian television guidelines prohibiting X-rated and 'Refused Classification' materials from being broadcast, and the Australian Broadcasting Authority is now investigating the matter.

The third reason to think that there is a growing association between pornography and sexual aggression among youth comes from the people who work with children who have sexually abused other children.

In November last year, the Child At Risk Assessment Unit at Canberra

Hospital reported that it has seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of children sexually harming other children, from three a year in the early 1990s to about 70 in 2003. Ninety per cent of the 101 children seen by the unit in the past three years had regularly seen sexually explicit imagery on the Internet, and researchers at the unit suggested that exposure to pornography informs children's sexually abusive behaviour.

Exposure to pornography leads to increased tolerance for and participation in sexual aggression.

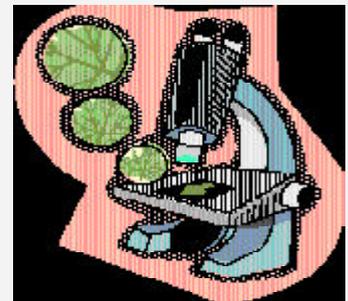
Providing quality information on sexuality and sexual health to youth is part of raising healthy children and building healthy communities. But pornography generally is a poor sex educator, and forms of violent and extreme pornography can be particularly damaging. The Federal Government so far has done little to address this, as the previous article in this newsletter outlines. ■

New analysis backs up Institute findings on PBS

A recent analysis by Professor David Henry, a former Chairman of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC), and the ANU's Professor Peter Drahos has found that the impact of the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement on the PBS could cost up to \$1.5 billion dollars per year.

These results are consistent with the conclusions reached by the Institute in a discussion paper released in May last year. While the US drug companies have been unsuccessful in achieving many of the changes they sought, the text of the FTA shows that they have won a number of important concessions including the establishment of new review and appeals bodies as well as changes to intellectual property laws.

Now that the deal has been signed the Australian Parliament must ratify it. The Institute has made a number of submissions to the ongoing parliamentary inquiries.



Fortress Australia against climate refugees

There is a blind spot in the Howard Government's preoccupation with security, one highlighted by an incendiary report leaked recently from the Pentagon. Clive Hamilton explains.

While the security implications of global warming and changing weather patterns have been the subject of backroom chatter for two years or so, no-one was prepared for the disquieting picture painted by the Pentagon report titled *An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and Its Implications for United States National Security*.

The Pentagon report was leaked earlier this year to *The Observer* newspaper in London, but no-one in Australia seems to have realised that there are some alarming references to the implications for security in this country.

The most startling claim for Australia is that we, along with Americans, may find ourselves building 'defensive fortresses' around the country to protect our resources from desperate outsiders and aggressive states created by rapid and unpredictable climate change.

The report was commissioned by a senior Pentagon adviser, Andrew Marshall, who in his decades in the defence department has acquired the status of a guru.

Mega-droughts

The 'plausible' scenario created by the report's authors considers a world dramatically affected by climate change, with large changes in average temperatures, rainfall patterns, droughts and storms. It focuses particularly on food security and the implications for countries like Australia if crops persistently fail in developing countries leading to famine and mass migration.

The security problems generated by food shortages may be exacerbated by disputes over water and disruptions to supplies of strategic minerals.

It also raises the increasingly frightening prospect of the collapse of the thermohaline circulation, the vast oceanic conveyor belt that carries warm water to the North Atlantic. If this system stops due to climate change, then within 10-20 years from now Northern Europe could see average

temperatures *fall* by up to 3 degrees centigrade (while the global average rises). In addition, annual rainfall could decrease by 30 per cent and wind storms like those that flattened many of France's trees in 2001 increase in intensity.

The halting of the thermohaline circulation is ringing loud alarm bells amongst climate scientists. If it happens, the conditions the Pentagon report describes for Europe would spread also to Southern Europe and the USA resulting in 'mega-droughts' in some regions, with others subject to unprecedented flooding.

Could it happen?

The Pentagon report paints a bleak picture of a humanity reverting to constant warfare over diminishing resources. It canvasses the possibility of persistent conflict in Southeast Asia, India and China including border wars, nuclear brinkmanship and civil unrest. Instability in the region may lead Japan to re-arm and the USA to strengthen border protection to hold back waves of 'unwanted starving immigrants'.

Could this really happen? The Pentagon report says that the scenario it has developed is more plausible than the political community is prepared for, and that it could begin in the near future. It calls on the US Government to begin planning and rehearsing responses to massive migrations, epidemics and water shortages caused by climate change. And it flags the need for new forms of security arrangements to deal specifically with energy, food and water supplies.

More alarming than any scenario imagined by hard-core environmentalists, the Pentagon report marks a dramatic shift in the international debate over climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has confirmed that Australia will be one of the regions worst affected by changes in weather patterns and a recent comprehensive report by the CSIRO paints a disturbing



picture of the expected impacts of climate change across the continent.

While the Pentagon report envisages building a fortress Australia to protect ourselves from the effects of climate change in the rest of the world, no walls or military strategy will protect Australia from the effects of climate change here.

Vale Tuvalu

Climate change has already generated an environmental refugee problem for Australia. In October 2001 the Government of Tuvalu appealed to Australia to accept the population of 10,000 as refugees over the next couple of decades.

Tuvalu is a group of nine Pacific islands that sit no more than two to three metres above sea level and is expected to be one of the first nations inundated by sea-level rise. The latest UN report on climate change predicts sea-level rise of up to 95 centimetres by the end of the century. Tuvaluans say they are already being affected by coastal erosion, salt water intrusion affecting crops and an unusually high level of tropical cyclones.

When the Pentagon warns that Australia may need to turn itself into a fortress to defend ourselves against waves of environmental refugees and aggressive states, perhaps the Australian Government will at last start to take notice and join international efforts to tackle the problem of climate change. Of course, ratifying the Kyoto Protocol is a vital first step. ■

Caring for Children

Inequalities in parents' access to child care and preschool entrench existing patterns of disadvantage, reports Michael Flood, author of an Institute discussion paper titled Lost Children: Condemning children to long-term disadvantage.

Policy contests over Australian families have been intensifying over the past 12 months, and child care is one of the family issues on which the Coalition Government has been particularly vulnerable.

The Government has been subject to repeated criticism for its failure to address the substantial shortfall in child care places faced by Australia's parents, lessen the growing expense of child care faced by parents, remove inequalities in preschool provision, or support appropriate working conditions and pay for child care staff.

The Australia Institute's contribution to these debates was its analysis of *which* parents are unable to access the child care they want for their children. Using previously unpublished ABS data, the Institute's report showed that parents' access to and use of child care is heavily influenced by income.

Parents on low incomes are more likely than other parents to report that cost is the main reason for not using child care. Eighteen per cent of low income parents and 21 per cent of middle income parents cite cost or expense as the main barrier to their use of additional child care, compared to 12.9 per cent of high-income parents. In absolute terms, 12,000 children from low-income families and 11,100 children from middle-income families are missing out on child care because of its cost, compared to 4,400 children from high-income families.

Negating disadvantage

Poorer parents in Australia are being priced out of the child care system, and parents from disadvantaged areas are more likely to find that no child care places are available even if they can afford the fees. While these findings are not surprising, the report also argued that such inequalities in access to early childhood education and care entrench existing patterns of disadvantage unless they are remedied.

The report outlined the evidence that early childhood education and care are beneficial for children in general. Quality early childhood education and care provide significant benefits for children's emotional and cognitive development, education, economic wellbeing, and health. More widely, they help to build social inclusion and community cohesion.

Early childhood education can reduce and even negate the impact of early disadvantage. In Australia, one in four five-year-olds is at risk of learning difficulties, and one in seven children lives in poverty. Poor economic and social circumstances launch children on to low educational and interpersonal life-paths unless there is substantial intervention.



While quality early childhood education and care make a significant difference to the lives of disadvantaged children, this amounts to little if they cannot actually participate in child care, preschool, and other early childhood services.

Public debate regarding support for families reached a fever pitch in May with the release of the Federal Budget. In response to widespread community complaints regarding child care availability and significant policy proposals on family support by the ALP, the Coalition Government did increase the child care places available. Its budget promised an additional 30,000 places in outside school hours

Poorer parents in Australia are being priced out of the child care system.

care, an additional 1,500 places in family day care, and incentives to providers of long day care to open new centres.

Social inclusion

However, this did not resolve the problem of child care affordability, and many parents will continue to be priced out of early education and care for their children. Moreover, little interest has been shown by the Commonwealth Government in helping to improve the pay and conditions of child care staff, easing staff shortages, or addressing inequalities in preschool provision.

The report *Lost Children* emphasised that early childhood education and care play a crucial role in enhancing children's wellbeing, community participation and interaction, economic and occupational opportunities, and social equity. In *Lost Children*, these benefits were framed in terms of 'social inclusion' – the ability of all children and adults to participate in society as valued, respected, and contributing members.

The Institute's work on child care complements its earlier research on fathers' participation in family life and on Australian families, and its ongoing examinations of work, consumption and well-being. It contributes to a growing public conversation about the changing nature of family life and paid work, interpersonal relationships and social networks.

These issues have been understood in diverse terms, whether of 'work-life balance', 'social inclusion', or 'social capital'. But regardless of the language one uses, there is no doubt that these are increasingly prominent areas of community concern and policy activity. ■

The growing price of cultural fraud

Richard Eckersley

Cultures bring order and meaning to our lives. Of all species, we alone require a culture to make life worth living, to give us a sense of purpose, identity and belonging – personally, socially and spiritually. Some cultures do this well, others poorly. One of the most important and growing costs of our modern way of life is ‘cultural fraud’: the promotion of images and ideals that serve the economy but do not meet human psychological needs or reflect social realities.

While the costs of cultural fraud are not yet obvious in aggregate measures of population health and happiness, they are revealed in the trends in young people’s psychosocial wellbeing (for example, suicide, depression and drug abuse) and in surveys of public perceptions of life today, which reveal widespread disquiet about social trends and developments.

Of all species, we alone require a culture to make life worth living, to give us a sense of purpose, identity and belonging.

And when we look at the causes and correlates of wellbeing, the evidence is also compelling that focusing, as we do, on the material and the individual - and especially on both together - reduces social cohesion, confidence, trust and stability, and leaves us personally more isolated and vulnerable; it produces an existential emptiness that distresses and disturbs us.

Our political and business leadership continues to try to convince us that ‘go for growth’ strategies based on a philosophy of material self-interest are the key to a better world. Perceiving that this approach isn’t working and frustrated by the blinkered political response, many people are disengaging from a wider participation in national affairs and focusing on their own lives and welfare. And they may be happier

for it; it is an effective coping strategy – at the individual level.

At the same time, however, there is growing evidence that a cultural upheaval is taking place, a profound reorientation in attitudes as people become more aware of the problems our present course is creating, at both a personal and global level. The old way of life still dominates, but as our cultural excesses grow ever greater and more destructive, more people are dumping what they sense is an obsolete worldview and are searching for a new one.

Surveys suggest about a quarter to a third of people in Western nations are making this leap of faith. We can label this paradigm shift as one between the dominant ‘idea’ of material progress, which gives priority to economic growth and a rising standard of living, and sustainable development, which seeks a better balance between economic, social and environmental objectives to create a high, equitable and lasting quality of life.

We can also characterise the change as replacing the outdated industrial metaphor of progress as a pipeline – pump more wealth in one end and more welfare flows out the other - with an ecological metaphor of progress as an evolving ecosystem – a complex, dynamic process involving many entities that interact in often multiple, weak, diffuse and non-linear ways.

Deep democracy

When I ask very different, but mostly well-educated, professional or student audiences about how they line up on this issue, the proportions choosing sustainable development over material progress usually range from a large minority to a substantial majority (in one audience, the vote was unanimous). People are relieved that these big issues are being examined and discussed, so affirming their own deep doubts about society’s direction. Many feel isolated because they do not see these doubts echoed in the mainstream media and political debate.

The many paradoxes and contradictions we encounter when we examine ‘the big



picture’ of human life today reflect not just not just its inherent complexity and our incomplete understanding of it, but also parallel processes of cultural decay and renewal, a titanic struggle as old ways of thinking about ourselves fail, and new ways of being human strive for definition and acceptance.

Hope for the future rests on several crucial developments: a potent synergy between scientific and spiritual understandings of the world and life; our unprecedented potential as individuals to make our own moral choices and to accept responsibility for these choices; and the evidence that the necessary cultural changes are already taking place.

These developments need to come together in a new form of ‘deep democracy’, a political participation that goes beyond specific acts and roles such as voting in elections to be reflected in the whole way we lead our lives.

Richard Eckersley is the author of Well & Good: how we feel and why it matters, published this year by Text Publishing, Melbourne. RRP \$32. He is a fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University. ■

Good news on population ageing

Ageing baby boomers are healthier and wealthier than their predecessors and should be seen as a resource not a burden, according to a new report by Judith Healy.

There is widespread pessimism among policy-makers regarding Australia's ageing population. Population ageing is seen to threaten a social and economic crisis: it heralds spiralling health costs, a shrinking workforce, and far greater demands on retirement pensions and superannuation. But, as a report released by The Australia Institute in April outlines, new generations of older people in fact make substantial contributions to society's resources rather than depleting them.

The baby boom generation represents those individuals born during the years 1946 to 1965. Their numbers will ensure that by 2051 over 6.4 million people in Australia will be aged 65 years and over, compared with 2.3 million in 1999.

Stereotypes and misconceptions of older Australians have clouded the debate about population ageing. Older people in Australia are now better educated, more prosperous, healthier and better able to maintain independent and productive lives for longer than the poorer, more dependent aged of previous generations.

The gloomy predictions that this generation is ushering in economic and social ruin are misplaced, according to the Institute report. Ageing baby boomers have lived in prosperous times and have greater economic and electoral power and higher expectations than their predecessors. They are able to remain in the work force for longer given the right incentives and right jobs, contribute more through taxation, and fund more of their own retirement and health and social care.

Older Australians already make an important contribution to social capital in their role as grandparents and in their extensive volunteer work in the community. Far from being net receivers of help and support, older people are, in fact, net providers. They provide childcare and practical and emotional assistance to family members and

others. Such unpaid caring and voluntary work adds up to a significant proportion of GDP, around seven per cent on some measures.

Healthy ageing

Nor is the baby boom generation the burden on health care costs that is often made out. This generation is projected to be healthier, more active and more productive than preceding generations. In addition, advances in medical science and easier access to improved therapies will lessen significantly the burden of disease amongst older people.

As Treasurer Costello signalled in February, current Government policy is to halt the trend to early retirement and encourage older people to remain in the workforce, thus continuing to assist productivity and contribute to tax revenue. Given the right incentives, many older people may choose to go on working for longer.

Stereotypes and misconceptions have clouded the debate about population ageing.

Mature age workers today have a greater capacity than previous generations to work beyond a retirement age of 60-65 years as they are healthier and better educated and the nature of work is less physically demanding.

The involuntary retirement of mature age people involves the loss of a considerable pool of skills and experience. The evidence is that, after controlling for experience, education and type of occupation, age does not seriously deplete workers' cognitive, perceptual or psychomotor abilities. In the context of a diminishing labour force, employers will need to re-think their preference for younger workers and their desire for companies to project a youthful image.

Industrialised countries are moving through a demographic transition to 'greyer' societies, a process involving slower population growth and hence a more sustainable global population. The challenge is to promote healthy and productive ageing in these added later years of life, and to adjust societal practices and structures to include older people as contributors to society.

The good news is that older people are active and productive rather than 'a burden' upon society, and they will continue to play a valuable role in the future. Rather than inciting intergenerational competition, we should be viewing ageing as a natural part of the life course and population ageing as a transition rather than a crisis.

At the same time, there is a gap between government exhortations to work for longer and the conditions and attitudes of the workplace. Australia must offer structural incentives to make work more attractive, flexible and manageable for older workers, and revise the ageist attitudes of many employers. Positive and equitable policies must be designed to ensure that all older Australians, not just a prosperous minority, are financially secure in their old age.

The main reason that the Australian 'baby boomer' generation will not be a 'burden' is that they have enjoyed good opportunities throughout life. If we are to avoid greater dependence in old age, we must maintain for future generations the socially equitable policies on which most baby boomers were raised. ■



Institute notes

New Publications

S. Maddison, R. Denniss and C. Hamilton, *Silencing Dissent: Non-government organisations and Australia democracy*, Discussion Paper No 65, June 2004.

D. Wilkinson, A. MacIntosh and C. Hamilton, *Public Attitudes to Discrimination in Private Schools*, Web Paper, May 2004.

C. Hamilton, *Carpe Diem? The Deferred Happiness Syndrome*, Web Paper, May 2004.

D. Wilkinson and R. Denniss, *Tax Deductibility of Donations to School Building Funds*, Web Paper, May 2004.

M. Flood, *Lost Children: Condemning children to long-term disadvantage*, Discussion Paper No 64, May 2004.

J. Healy, *The Benefits of an Ageing Population*, Discussion Paper No 63, March 2004.

Forthcoming Publications

The disappointment of liberalism

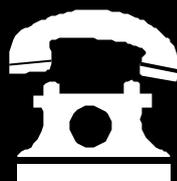
Complexity and policy

Trading in food safety

The impact of HECS debts on fertility

Border tax adjustments for greenhouse taxes

Geosequestration: The answer to climate change?



NOTE:

New telephone
and fax numbers

Tel : 02 6125 1270

Fax : 02 6125 1277

Staff Notes

Clive Hamilton visited the UK in March where he attended the launch of Growth Fetish which had its European publication at that time. He also attended the first meeting of the International Climate Change Taskforce at Windsor which was very successful.

Institute policy proposals having an impact

In 2002 the Institute was asked to write an options paper for the NSW Environment Protection Agency. One of the five options proposed by the Institute was to introduce water efficiency labelling for backyard garden plants.

The Institute is pleased to report that the NSW Minister for Energy and Utilities has recently indicated that the NSW Government is seeking to introduce a one, two and three drop rating system for garden plants with one drop indicating low water users such as eucalypts and three drops indicating heavy water users such as willows.

Another policy suggestion made by Richard Denniss in a paper to a transport policy conference in January 2003 also looks like being implemented. The NSW Government has announced that it is considering a ban on mobile billboards being towed through cities or placed on the back of trucks.

The Australia Institute

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