

# John Menadue – Pearls and Irritations

## *Pearls and Irritations*



### **HUGH MACKAY. What kind of society do we want to become?**

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*Australia Day is widely regarded as a chance to celebrate what it means to be Australian. Perhaps, this year, we might turn the national day into a time of sombre reflection, and ask: are we the kind of society we want to be?*

Like patriots everywhere, Australians like to brag about our achievements – and with some justification. It's true that we've created such a harmonious society out of our mongrel diversity that when outbreaks of racial prejudice or ethnic tension occur, they tend to make the news. We are rightly proud of our inventiveness – everything from the stump-jump plough to wi-fi. We like to say we punch above our weight when it comes to Nobel prizes, Olympic medals, Oscars and cricket.

We're not quite so keen to acknowledge that we also punch above our weight when it comes to carbon emissions, though we are, in fact, among the world's heaviest per-capita carbon polluters. Nor are we so keen to claim the title of 'world's most overweight nation', though we're heading there, too.

On reflection, many aspects of Australian society raise searching questions about the kind of society we are becoming. For example: how did we end up slithering so far down the OECD league table of school education outcomes? Could that have something to do with the fact that, every year, we pour \$12 billion of public money into non-public schools, which means our once-proud public education system is struggling to maintain standards across all its schools? (Finland, the country we tend to look to for inspiration on the subject of schooling, simply doesn't have private schools.)

How does a society like ours tolerate such a persistent problem of homelessness, with more than 100,000 Australians having nowhere to call home *tonight*? (Again, Finland's example is instructive: they solved the problem by giving homeless people homes. *D'uh.*)

Have we given up on the egalitarian dream? In spite of our fabled 26 years of continuous economic growth, two million Australians are still either unemployed or underemployed. How did we become such an *increasingly* unequal society, with three million of us living in poverty and 16 percent of our dependent children lacking regular and reliable access to safe and nutritious food?

How, in a society that once prided itself on its 'mateship', have loneliness and social isolation joined the list of our most pressing social issues? In a recent study conducted by the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University, almost half the respondents felt they couldn't call on their neighbours for help, and 25 percent reported feeling lonely most of every week.

The factors driving social fragmentation are well known: shrinking households, high rate of relationship breakdown, excessive busyness, population mobility, increasing dependence on IT at the expense of face-to-face interaction ('connected but lonely' has become an accurate description of many members of the smartphone generation). But their impact is not inevitable. We have unwittingly promoted social fragmentation, isolation and loneliness by embracing a culture of individualism and materialism. In the Age of Me, deteriorating mental health is just one of the symptoms of the trouble we're in.

There are pinpoints of light, though: all over Australia, enlightened individuals are starting to galvanise local neighbourhoods and communities into rediscovering the joy of neighbourliness. Book clubs, community choirs, ukulele bands, street parties, Friday night drinks, sporting clubs, library-based community events, sausage sizzles, trivia nights ... all good signs of pushback against influences that would otherwise divide and fragment us.

Another pinpoint of light – our generosity in a crisis – can be glimpsed through the pall of smoke from a bushfire season that, as predicted by climate scientists, is longer and more intense than ever. (We may say the 2019-2020 season is shocking in its ferocity; we can't say it was unexpected.)

Yes, we can be generous, kind and compassionate in response to a catastrophe, but what a tragedy it would be if we *needed* a catastrophe to make us generous, kind and compassionate. What a tragedy it would be if we lost sight of the fact that we belong to a species that depends for its survival on our willingness to co-operate rather than compete; that we are people for whom generosity, kindness and compassion come naturally when we are not being distracted by baubles, corrupted by wealth or power, or seduced by selfish dreams of personal gain.

The response to appeals for bushfire relief is a welcome sign that the nation's heart still beats, (though it's legitimate to ask why more money had not previously been spent on precautionary measures). But where is the sense of urgency about all the other challenges, including those related to climate change, that don't force themselves on us as obviously as smoke in our eyes and lungs?

Where, for instance, is the comparably generous response – whether from socially sensitive governments, a more enlightened tax system, public appeals or philanthropy – to the socially corrosive problems of homelessness, poverty, and the malnourishment of all those kids?

When institutions – political and otherwise – fail us, we tend to take matters into our own hands. As successive governments harden their hearts against people seeking asylum, great generosity is being shown by local communities towards organisations who offer them practical support. In the absence of a coherent energy policy, millions of us are seeking our own ways of transitioning to the clean energy future the government seems unable to imagine. We're starting to look for smaller, more accountable alternatives to the discredited big banks. Some disenchanted ex-churchgoers are joining the growing 'house church' movement. New online media platforms (like this one) are usurping the role of traditional mass media.

In response to too much disappointment, too much anger, too much frustration, perhaps we're gradually learning how to reshape our society, piece by piece, street by street. That might be grounds for some muted celebration, after all.