



Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia

Promoting the Social Sciences

Portrait of a Nation 2003: Reporting on the Inaugural Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA)

Report from the Academy sponsored workshop, held in Canberra, 7-8 June 2004.

The goal of the workshop was to provide a forum for presentation of the findings from the first Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) conducted in August 2003. The AuSSA is planned as a biennial survey of Australian citizens and was developed by researchers from the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research (ACSR) at the Australian National University (ANU) in conjunction with a team of national and international experts. The AuSSA is designed to provide high quality data on the opinions of the Australian population toward their government and society. The survey was conducted as a mail-out, mail-back questionnaire by the Australian Social Science Data Archive (ASSDA) during August – December 2003. The workshop offered the first opportunity for dissemination of the findings from the AuSSA and brought together a range of scholars from a wide variety of social science disciplines and Universities in Australia. The papers focused on empirical analysis of the survey data and covered a variety of social, economic and political topics including taxes and government spending, working hours, civic trust, immigration, and the power of the media. As well as providing a vehicle to ‘showcase’ the important findings from the dataset, the event also offered paper-givers the opportunity to gain advice on how to best structure their papers for a forthcoming edited volume with UNSW press ‘Australian Social Attitudes: The 1st Report’.

The timeliness of the workshop was evident from the range and depth of the questions explored during the course of the two day event. Fundamental themes surrounding Australia’s national identity and values surfaced consistently across the panels, and led to reflection on the future direction for society. While evidence of increasingly liberal attitudes emerged in areas such as social spending and immigration, views on genetic testing and media power revealed a more skeptical nation. From a historical perspective, it seems that despite all the talk of economic rationalism and neo-liberal reforms, people have not given up on the importance of government as an agent of social and economic control. Nor, it would seem have they abandoned the idea of the importance of community or lost their faith in key institutions like the Courts, Parliament and Police. Indeed overall, there does seem to

be strong evidence that Australians are quite trusting as a nation and display a marked willingness to get involved in voluntary associations.

The workshop was run in conjunction with the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research the Academy of the Social Sciences, and was opened by Professor Frank Jackson, Director of the Research School of Social Science (RSSS) at the Australian National University and Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences. Altogether it involved twenty participants from a variety of academic disciplines including sociology, political economy, demography, economics, political science and criminology. The background and experience of participants also varied from early career researchers through to distinguished scholars. Thirteen papers were presented, organised into four sessions as follows:

Session 1: The Australian Way: Attitudes to Economic Reform

This first session dealt with attitudes toward economic policies and the world of welfare and work. The first paper 'Have Australians embraced economic reform?' by Michael Pusey and Nick Turnbull (University of New South Wales) confronted the issue of how the shift toward economic rationalism by successive federal governments had influenced Australians attitudes toward the market, income distribution and ideas of community. Overall, it was concluded that there was clear majority support for the government as provider of key social services and disquiet existed among the population about the gap between the richest and poorest in society. Big business, while seen as overly powerful, was not distrusted on a level disproportionate to state bodies. The examination of responses to economic reform was then followed by the paper 'Where to for the welfare state?: Attitudes to spending, welfare and social services' by Shaun Wilson (Australian National University) and Gabrielle Meagher (University of Sydney) which focused on attitudes toward tax and social spending. Using over-time data the authors showed that people had become more supportive of government spending, even if it meant higher personal taxation. Not surprisingly perhaps, this was found to be age-related. Overall, the evidence pointed toward the need to question the view of Australians as supportive of a low taxing and low spending welfare state. The final paper in this session, 'How do Australians Feel about their Work?' by Jocelyn Pixley (University of New South Wales) and Bill Martin (Flinders University) dealt with the orientation of Australians toward work. With much being written currently in academic and media circles about the so-called 'Work-Life collision', this paper dealt with a decidedly timely issue. The authors showed that overall work satisfaction was reasonably high in Australia, although there were clearly some work sectors, particularly the unskilled that experienced a high level of job insecurity combined with strong fears over their future employability. A significant minority of the population were found to be working more than average hours per week, although this did not necessarily correlate with those who expressed a desire to work less. Overall, the evidence pointed to the workplace itself as a key determinant over workers' positive experiences, rather than forces outside such as family and personal circumstances.

Session 2: The Social Fabric: Attitudes to Families and Crime

Building on the understanding of work/life collision the first two papers in this session provided an insight into current views on what constitutes a family and the extent to which the policies of the current government have proved responsive to popular understanding of this central social pillar. In 'What makes an Australian family?' by Ann Evans and Edith Gray (Centre for Social Research, ANU) the authors reported that for Australians the understanding of what constitutes a family has become quite pluralistic, with around two fifths of AuSSA respondents agreeing that a same-sex couple with children fits the definition. This was largely related to age, however, with younger people being much more likely to entertain a more inclusive definition of family. In 'Families, white picket fences and barbecues' by Deborah Mitchell (Centre for Social Research, ANU) the theme of generational differences and orientations to family was underscored. In particular, the 'baby boom' cohort and Generation X revealed distinctly more positive views toward working mothers and single parents than their older counterparts. Shifts in policy by the Howard government in its 2004 budget toward financial support for families and recognising same sex couples were seen as, in part, a recognition by political elites of the rise to the fore of these more liberal views. Finally, in their analysis of crime and anti-social behaviour in 'Zero tolerance: Are we getting harder on lawbreakers?', David Indermaur and Lynne Roberts (Crime Research Centre, University of Western Australia), who were added to the program at short notice, reported on a very preliminary strategy for analysing attitudes toward lawbreakers.

Session 3: New Social Identities

The final two sessions saw the focus of the workshop widen to look at Australians' understanding of their broader social context and their behavioural participation within it. In Postmaterialism, Values and Political Action, Mark Western and Bruce Tranter (University of Queensland) noted the presence of a significant cohort of postmaterialists in Australia at the turn of the 21st century. As well as endorsing more 'liberal' causes such as the environment and being willing to pay higher taxes to do so, they exhibited a marked propensity to engage in more energetic types of 'bottom up' political action. In demographic terms, while the expected relationship to higher education and age emerged, youth effects, it was argued, should be understood in the broader context of cultural change, i.e. greater exposure to higher education and the declining significance of organised religion for young people were also important to consider. Picking up on the theme of engagement in political activities, the second paper in the session 'Voluntary Associations and Political Participation' by Andrew Passey and Mark Lyons (University of Technology, Sydney) reported a strong link between those who join in more community-related group activities and political action. Overall just over half of Australians reported some form of voluntary association membership and while the majority of members of voluntary groups were largely passive – paying dues and giving donations – there were one quarter who were more active, either holding office or attending meetings and raising support. The fact that voluntary association membership remained significant in predicting political participation after socioeconomic status had been

accounted for was seen as important to underscoring its independent and positive effects on increasing engagement in democracy.

The third paper of the third session, 'Attitudes to Immigration and National Identity' by Murray Goot and Ian Watson (Macquarie University) moved the focus to Australians' perceptions of 'other', particularly racial minorities, and how positively they were regarded. Overall the paper concluded that there were some positive changes to note over time in attitudes toward immigrants, particularly in terms of popular perceptions of their value to the society and economy and expectations of any anti-social behaviour. National pride was also noted to have increased, although a 'nativist' streak in Australians was noted, with more negative and stereotyping views being espoused by certain groups, particularly those of lower education. Rounding the session out, was a highly provocative paper 'Knowing your Genetic Information: Freedom, Burden or Power?' by Kristine Barlow-Stewart (The Centre for Genetics Education, RNSH). The author pointed to the low level of effective knowledge that Australians have about the laws governing the extent to which their genetic information can be stored and used by employers and insurers. While attitudes toward the use of genetic tests were generally cautious, overall most Australians were not set against expanding its use in the future. In particular, its use for immigration purposes aroused substantial levels of support compared with its deployment in the workplace.

Session 4: Australian Institutions: Media, Globalisation and Trust

The final session offered a glimpse into the impact of the international environment and outside forces in the shape of the mass media on popular attitudes. In 'The Mass Media in Australia' by David Denmark (University of Western Australia) the heavy reliance of Australians on the TV in particular was noted, alongside a deep distrust and suspicion of its negative influence on social relations. Fears about the impact of television violence on society were evident, and the media's power overall was seen as being too great though media power was not seen as able to keep governments honest. Such contradictions pointed to an uneasy and complex relationship that while problematic, defied any easy solution. A similar ambivalence, it would appear also characterises Australians relationship to globalisation as Ian Marsh (ANU) pointed out in 'Australians and Globalization: an unconsummated affair' by Ian Marsh (Australian National University), also lies at the heart of Australians' relationship to globalization. This paper showed that despite fears about its impact on national cultural integrity and job security, as well as the power of international companies, the widening of product choice and exposure to other cultures brought about by globalisation were generally favourably regarded. Drawing all these strands together, the paper 'Is there a Crisis of Trust in Australia' by Clive Bean (Queensland University of Technology) provided some key insights into the state of trust among Australians toward one another and their social and political institutions today. In general, levels were reported to be holding relatively steady compared with a decade ago. Certainly among institutions, the defence forces and police were found to be riding high in terms of popular trust. The courts, unions and commercial entities such as banks and financial institutions, however, are revealed as

the most vulnerable to accusations of a crisis of trust, with significant majorities voicing not very much or no confidence in them at all.

In conclusion, the workshop fulfilled a number of vital functions for social science in Australia. First, by bringing together an inter-disciplinary field of experts to utilise a new and exciting dataset it helped strengthen and build networks within quantitative social science in Australia. In addition, it allowed for a significant exchange of perspectives, promoting the rigorous evaluation, updating and even confronting of some common assumptions. In doing so, it provided an important overview and updating of our knowledge about the significant social trends affecting individuals and families in Australia today. Finally, while the papers provided important new evidence to feed into key debates among academics, the importance of the AuSSA and the workshop output as a resource that will inform policy and make it more 'evidence-based' was also noted. In addition to the publication of the book, plans for a series of short media 'friendly' pieces to be generated by authors were also discussed to coincide with its publication.

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Papers from *Portrait of a Nation 2003: Reporting on the inaugural Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* will appear in the forthcoming edited UNSW Press publication '*Australian Social Attitudes: The 1st Report*'.