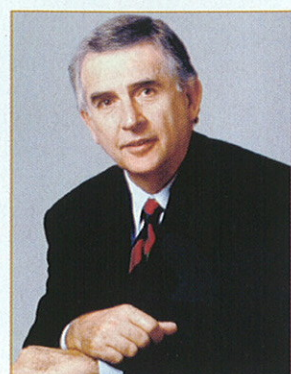


Australia at a turning point

It is the greatest of all clichés to say that Australian society is changing. It is a bit hard to talk about contemporary Australia without mentioning the changes, but it is possible to resist the widespread temptation to assume that change inevitably means degeneration.



Hugh Mackay,
Social Researcher
and Author

Many of our demographic statistics point to radical change, and some of them (like the high and rising rate of youth suicide, or the record level of tranquillisers and antidepressants) are a bit hard to interpret in anything other than a negative way.

But every statistics tells a story:-

■ our lowest-ever birthrate and our lowest marriage rate for 100 years. Combined with

■ our high divorce rate (40% of contemporary marriages seem destined to end in divorce).

That means the institutions of marriage and the family are undergoing significant change.

The women's movement has played a part (encouraging women to be more financially and emotionally independent), and so has the change in our divorce laws.

Obviously, as young people experience a high rate of divorce

among their parents, they become more wary of marriage.

But there's a cultural shift involved as well: as a society, we are moving from a view of marriage as an *institution* to marriage as a *relationship*:

■ older Australians entered the institution with a commitment to its stability;

■ younger Australians evaluate their marriage on the basis of the quality of their relationship.

This means that the entire concept of marriage becomes more subject to regular assessment and, in the process, more transient.

Attitudes to marriage and parenthood are also influenced by the tendency of the rising generation to postpone commitment: having grown up in a world of accelerating change, they've learned to keep their options open.

These factors - plus others associated with an ageing population - are driving the rise of single-person households.

The result? By 2006, the single-person household will be the most common household type in Australia.

Meanwhile, we have set a new record for the level of personal debt (largely driven by the influence of Baby Boomers who have not yet shaken the habits of the Sixties and who continue to embrace debt as the pathway to instant gratification).

Reviewing all these trends, it's perhaps not so surprising that the level of consumption of antidepressants continues to rise: some social analysts whimsically suggest that if you're not on antidepressants, you're not fully aware of what's happening to you!

THE OTHER VIEWPOINT

Underlying these statistics are a series of contradictions which

characterise contemporary Australia:

■ We are experiencing record levels of personal wealth at the top of the economic heap (fuelled by a boom in economic prosperity unprecedented since the 1950s) and yet,

■ we are experiencing a steady increase in the problems of poverty and homelessness.

ACOSS estimates that about 2 million Australians could be classified as 'poor'; about 30 per cent of households have a combined annual household income of less than \$20,000.

There are contradictions, too, in the way we are distributing work. While members of the full-time workforce are now working such long hours that their overtime alone absorbs about 500,000 extra full-time jobs, there are still roughly two million Australians who are either unemployed or seriously under-employed. Disturbingly, unemployment among young Australians has crept up to 25 per cent.

The Result? Most of us are walking contradictions: we experience great optimism about Australia's future combined with persistent pessimism about the state of contemporary society. We are experiencing a surge of confidence, yet we continue to feel deeply insecure.

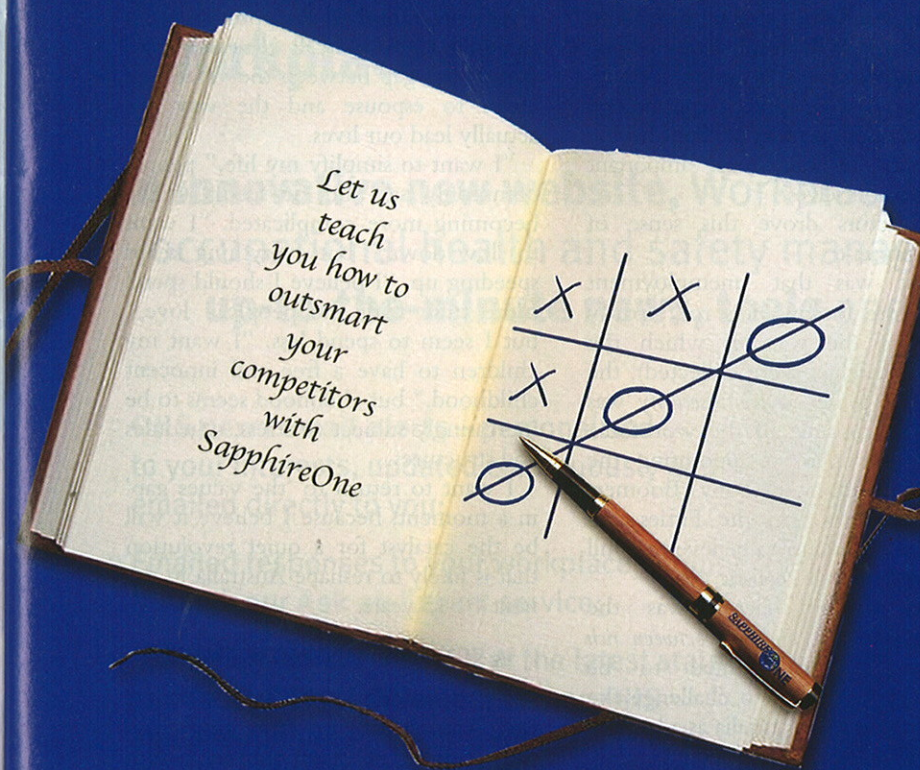
FOUR REVOLUTIONS AT ONCE

There is no mystery about the insecurity: it is a long-term problem in Australia, arising from the fact that we have been living through four socio-cultural revolutions at once.

The *gender revolution* has radically redefined the role and status of women (and, gradually, caused men to reassess their own roles and responsibilities).

In turn, that has reshaped the institutions of marriage and the family,

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