



ourcommunity.com.au



Leading the Revolt – What will drive the redevelopment of our communities?

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 7th June 2004

Hugh Mackay,
Social research commentator and author

(*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the
2004 Communities in Control conference, convened by Our Community and Catholic Social Services.)



Hugh Mackay, Communities in Control conference, June 2004. Visit www.ourcommunity.com.au.

Good afternoon everybody.

According to my research the favourite word in middle Australia at the moment is the word village. Everybody wants to live in a village. You'll notice that every retirement community is now called a village and we even have high-rise buildings now being called vertical villages, though I think they might perhaps have missed the point. But what is it when people are saying that they yearn for life in something that feels, looks a bit more like a village than the average suburban setting around Australia?

I think that what that reflects is a deep concern about the degeneration of communities and community life around Australia, but equally a deep yearning to get back in touch, to be reconnected with each other. One of the saddest things I ever hear and I'm sure you hear it as often as I do, is people, particularly in our two largest cities Sydney and Melbourne saying we don't even know our neighbours as though that's somehow the fault of the neighbours. I feel like saying to people "Well you could knock on the door and suddenly you would know your neighbours, its actually quite easy!"

But that is really of course a symptom of a malaise that many of Australians are suffering from. And the malaise is the feeling of not being an integral part of the community, not being connected to people with whom they share a neighbourhood.

Now although that's true at the moment I must say I'm optimistic about where this is going to take us. I think that the current yearning and the current sense of disconnection are staging posts on the way to something that I think will be a much fuller flowering of community life in future and I think that there are two current pathways that are taking us towards a reconnection with our communities.

One of those pathways is what I think of as the cultural revolution that's reshaping Australia. Now cultural revolution isn't a term that we often use, the mind leaps to China when you say Cultural Revolution but I think if you look at Australia in the last quarter of a century we've been living through nothing less than a cultural revolution. Four revolutions at once, any one of which would have been enough to destabilise and cause the high levels of anxiety that so many Australians report that they are suffering from. Even the epidemic of depression that the medical profession now tells us that Australia is suffering from, our consumption of anti-depressants has now tripled in the last 10 years. In fact there are some social analysts who are saying that if by now you are not on anti-depressant that's because you haven't actually understood what's been

happening to you. Anyone who's in touch is taking the pills! Well I think that's perhaps going a bit far.

But four revolutions at once has been very demanding, its not surprising that so many people say that they feel as though they are on a runaway train speeding out of control, destination unknown - too afraid to jump off cause they know they'll be left behind so they hang on but they really don't have any idea where this is all taking us. Well what are these revolutions? I hardly have to describe them because we are all living through them we know what they are. But let me just briefly outline what they are and what they are doing to us and what the implications of this are for communities.

The Economic Revolution we are very familiar with: a fundamental restructure of the Australian economy has been going on over the last 25 years. And for many Australians the effects have felt cataclysmic, for others this is a golden age. There have never been as many wealthy Australians as have sprung up over the last 25 years yet paradoxically and sadly there has never been in our history a wider gap between the top and bottom of the economic heap because part of the economic restructure has been about the redistribution of work and that of course means the redistribution of wealth. Its still the case that two-thirds of Australians earn less than \$45,000 per annum, the top 50 CEOs in Australia have an average annual personal income of \$3.5 million and that defines in some ways the extremes of the redistribution of work and wealth. There's been an in exorable swing from full to part time work in many industries. Many industries have shrunk or disappeared, many organisations are still in the process of downsizing. From having been a society in which we thought job security was one of the pillars of stability like stable marriage (I'll come to that in a moment) we're now getting to the point where we're thinking that job insecurity is part of the workplace. In fact we hear people talking about work and saying things like: "If you've still got a job that's because they haven't worked out how to do without you".

One of the implications of the extraordinary rate of change in our workplace as a result of economic restructure is that the workplace communities have been destabilised over these last 25 or 30 years. The idea that you would have work colleagues that you stuck with and you became a kind of community year after year has given way to the idea that the axe could fall at any time, no-one is safe and people will be coming and going. And the fact that in many organisations it's the people who've given loyalty and who've been there a long time are regarded as the most expendable because they represent the old way once the new broom arrives. So there is one fundamental revolution that has completely changed the attitudes of most Australians towards work and the workplace.

The Information Technology Revolution has similarly been destabilising us; there is a new and trendy branch of psychology called evolutionary psychology. The evolutionary psychologists have recently been telling us that the human species

has not yet had enough time to adapt to the impact of the industrial revolution; we've only had 200 years to get used to the industrial revolution and it takes longer than that to adapt to such radical changes in the way we live. So while we are still trying to adjust to the impact of the industrial revolution over the top comes the I.T. Revolution. Again radically changing the way we live, the way we work, the way we communicate, the way we inform and entertain ourselves. And creating the illusion that you can have electronically linked communities. And it is an illusion and it is a hoax. The global village is a hoax. It's not wonder that one of the great problems on the internet now is the problem of flaming. That is to say the problem of people hurling abuse at each other through cyber space because this is not a community. You don't hurl abuse to people with whom you share a community. But you are so anonymous on the net, you are so distanced from the people that you're communicating with that pretty much as with traffic where people cocooned inside their own cars are prepared to hurl abuse at their fellow motorists knowing that they are all strangers. And then cringe and crouch if they find out they've just hurled abuse at someone they know; it's a bit like that on the net.

Another piece of nonsense about the I.T. Revolution has been the explosion in the use of email where people are increasingly now thinking that if they want to say anything to anyone, even the person in the next office they do it by email. In fact in one of my research projects in the last couple of weeks I came across a person who said that one on occasion his colleague in the office next door sent him an email. He jumped out of his chair, raced into this bloke's office and literally shook him and said, "For goodness sakes you stop sending me emails! If you've got something to say why don't you come and say it". And more and more I think people are starting to experience the counter-revolution against the avalanche of email.

Well I want to say a bit more about the I.T. Revolution in relation to the younger generation who I think are getting it right, I think they are using it a lot more intelligently than some of the rest of us. But clearly that's another revolution that's re-shaping us, as is the revolution in our sense of our own identity. Multiculturalism as a concept in Australia is not yet 25 years old, we're still getting used to the idea and even before we're getting used to the idea it seems to be getting abandoned as an idea. Yet of course it's true to say of contemporary Australia is that our distinguishing feature is our diversity. Its not longer easy, perhaps not possible, to talk about the typical Australian, the typical way of life, the typical Australian household because we have become such a diversified, such a pluralistic society.

But still we're coming to terms with the idea that this is a different kind of Australia and many older Australians in particular are deeply uneasy about this ethnic and increasingly religious diversity as well. To say nothing of the implications of a changing identity brought about by changing relationships with the region and the world.

And on top of all that of course, the greatest of all revolutions of the twentieth century: the Gender Revolution. The revolution in which roughly half the population adopted a completely different view of the role, the status and the responsibilities of women. With implications for everything: for marriage, divorce, family life, the life of the community, the retail life, the political landscape, the workforce and even slowly, more gradually and more painfully perhaps the implications for men who finally 25 or 30 years after the revolution began have started to understand that it actually is a revolution. Its not going to go away, it wasn't just an inconvenient blip on the radar, that women did mean it. The idea of gender equality is something that we will no longer get away with just mouthing slogans about; we will really have to live like we really believe in that concept.

So put all that together and why wouldn't our heads be spinning. And there are a number of demographic outcomes, particularly of the gender revolution, which help to explain just why so many Australians do feel destabilised at the moment, and also explain why I'm describing all this as one of the pathways towards stronger community development in the very near future.

Let me just offer you a couple of quick demographic snapshots that indicate what I'm driving at. The divorce rate in Australia is now so high and has remained high now for 25 years that the Institute of Family Studies here in Melbourne is telling us that 45% of contemporary marriages will end in divorce. Now if you go back 25 years, the corresponding figure was about 9-10% so that's a revolution. And it's a revolution that involves community upheavals. It doesn't just mean that many households have fallen apart as a result of 45% of marriages ending in divorce; it doesn't just mean that those couples and their extended families have suffered a lot of pain. A lot of friendship circles, a lot of neighbourhood groups have been destabilised by this extraordinary rate of marriage breakdown. And of course there are children. One million dependant children, that's almost a quarter of the child population in Australia, now just live with one of their parents. And half of them are migrating regularly from one community to another as they move from custodial parent to non-custodial parent with a tremendous effect on local communities. Think of it every week or fortnight half a million kids are migrating from place to place and trying to unplug themselves from one micro-community and plug themselves into another.

Another snapshot is the birthrate. The birthrate is the lowest its ever been in our recorded history. We're down to 1.7 babies per woman. Right here in Melbourne the figure is slightly less than 1.6 babies per woman for reasons that we can perhaps discuss over afternoon tea, Victoria has the lowest birthrate in the country. In NSW, Sydney in particular the birthrate actually kicked up a couple of years ago and then subsided again. The demographers now refer to this as the Olympic Bounce. Presumably now that the excitement has died down so has the birthrate.

Here is an extraordinary change taking place in our society. What this means is that relative to total population size, Australia is now engaged in producing the smallest generation of children that Australia has ever produced proportionately. That's going to have huge implications for the children themselves, they are going to be the subject of much too zealous parenting because they are going to be far too precious to their parents. These are the parents who are going to be always down at the school saying, "Why is my son in the B Team and not in the A Team? I've only got one son and life's got to be perfect for him, I've got to be a perfect parent, I've only got once chance!" Perhaps you could rename all the teams A – that's a suggestion that's been put to more than one primary school teacher. Well there's going to be a lot more of that.

There's also going to be a group in the community who are not going to be terribly interested in children because these will be the growing minority of adults who have decided to have no children at all. And one of the things that is most deeply uninteresting to people who have not had children is the subject of other people's children. We keep hearing this in our research people who haven't had children saying how irritating it is when you go to a restaurant and there are children there. Or when you visit friends who have had children they only want to talk about their children. And the people with children saying how annoying it is to visit their friends who haven't had children because they lead such self-indulgent lives.

Well this is going to be an interesting generation; it's going to be a generation with a very small voice. And because children have often been community glue haven't they? It's often through the children that the parents meet. It's often the school that becomes the focal point for community connections and even community activity. With a relatively declining generation of children, a shrinking generation, obviously that glue is going to be in relatively shorter supply than we've ever known it before which is going to make the connections in communities harder to achieve because they won't come so naturally. Of course one of the implications of this tiny generation of children that we're producing is that the population age distribution changes. At the moment about 12% of Australians are over the age of 65. By the time these kids reach their middle years, a quarter of the Australian population will be over 65 and that's a very different kind of Australia, very different kind of community, and very different kind of demand for aged care services of all kinds in the future.

Another couple of snapshots: the marriage rate is the lowest its ever been and falling dramatically. Thirty years ago 76% of all Australians were married by the time they were 30, today 36% are married by the time they're 30. Thirty years ago 30% of Australian women were married by the time they were 20, and now 5% are married by the time they are 20. So the marriage rate has fallen off a cliff and you ask yourself has marriage gone out of fashion and as usual with statistics the answer is yes and no. Yes it's true that young Australians are

avoiding or postponing marriage in record numbers but those who do marry are clearly enjoying it so much that they are inclined to do it two or three times. So it's a fashionable activity for the heavy user category and we're becoming a society rapidly dividing into three almost equal groups in the marriage market: the non-users are about a third, the light users are about a third, and the heavy users about a third.

One of the reasons for that of course is that the rising generation of young Australians has never known anything other than this revolutionary period that has so destabilised their parents and it's taught them something. Growing up in a time of unpredictability and instability, growing up in a constantly turning kaleidoscope you don't just learn to take change in your stride, you also learn to keep your options open. And that's a generational characteristic of young, contemporary Australians that the question they're always asking is what else is there? And that's a question they're asking if they're talking about a sexual partner or a course of study or a job or a set of religious beliefs or a political philosophy or a musical genre or a commercial brand. "Yeah this is fine, I like this, I'm doing this but what else is there?" There are other options to be considered. And so obviously if you are committed to keeping your options open that doesn't encourage you into early marriage or into early parenthood. The median age of the mother at the birth of the first child now reflects that, it's now over 30 whereas it was about 21 just twenty years ago.

Now putting all that together we come to what I think is the good news for communities because one of the implications of all those social changes is another social change which is a phenomenon of shrinking household. This is not new – in the last hundred years while the Australian population has been increasing fivefold, the number of Australian households has increased tenfold. So we've been creating households at twice the rate that we've been growing the population. In the last thirty years as with so many of these trends that process has accelerated from a typical household of 3.3 some 30 years ago are down to 2.6 today. 50% of all Australian households now contain just one or two people, the fastest growing household type in Australia in the single person household. So if you live alone, or with just 1 other person you are now positively mainstream. If you live with a spouse, particularly if it's the only spouse you've ever had and three or four or your very own children and no one else's, you are now part of the eccentric fringe. It's as well to get these things clear.

Now what does all that mean? What this means is that the herd instinct, and I believe that we are herd animals. That is the nature of humans, we are social creatures, we belong in herds typically through history the human herd has been about seven or eight, that's the herd that most humans are most comfortable with. By the way if you are forming a committee to do some community development work never have more than eight people on your committee or you'll subdivide into a series of factions that will never be able to agree. If you're having a dinner party you only ask eight people, if you ask ten or twelve you'll

end up two dinner parties. There is something not magic but just something traditional about the number of seven or eight being the natural kind of work group, natural kind of social group, in other words the natural herd for humans.

The typical domestic herd in Australia used to be about seven or eight either because we were having more children or because we had more generations under the same roof but once you get down to households of one or two you can't talk about herds, these are not herds. So what happens to the herd instinct? And here we come I think to the first bit of good news in all this. That is to say that the herd instinct is not dead we are herd animals. The herd instinct is looking for somewhere to be satisfied. And if it's not going to be satisfied in the domestic arena then obviously we look out in to the community.

This is what's been driving the phenomenon of the book club, all these hundreds of thousands of Australians who've joined book clubs in the last ten years, sure they like reading, they like talking to their friends about the books they read. But most people who attend book clubs say that towards the end of the evening someone usually says "Don't you think we should say something about the book?" In other words they're herding and the book is the excuse. The same as when people are joining a bushwalking club or a discussion group or adult education class, a cooking course, whatever it might be, they're herding. All these other things are helping to provide the glue that keeps them together, the common interest.

But what's really happening here is that the herd instinct is looking for new ways. The phenomenon has taken off, as the household has shrunk we're more inclined to go to the coffee shop or the restaurant or the food court. You just plant yourself on the hillside with the other cattle, you don't even have to moo if you don't feel like it you can just quietly chomp and feel as though you're connected. And eventually you'll start to recognise the other people and you might even start mooing, which is when the community connections really begin to happen.

That's all fine but of course it's only the beginning of the process of community development which has much more going on than simply people who enjoy reading forming a book club or people who enjoy singing forming a choir or people who like Italian going to an Italian cooking class, communities are not about that. Communities are about neighbourhoods in which we have to get along with people that we don't like. We have to recognise that people we are never going to agree with are part of the community in which we exist and our connections with those people are fundamental to the meaning of the word community. They're fundamental to our moral as well as our social health, and I'll say a bit more about that in a moment. But unless we are connecting in the neighbourhood then all these other ways of satisfying the herd instinct are in a sense postponing the genuine development of communities, even though they are a step in the right direction. So what I'm saying is that the community is going to benefit from a herd instinct that's being frustrated in the domestic setting.

And very briefly I want to mention the second pathway that I think is leading us towards further development of communities and that is our response to all this upheaval through this period of cultural revolution. I think in a word we can capture a description of our response by saying disengaged. What seems to be happening to Australians particularly over the last five or six years is that increasingly we've turned away from the big picture; we've turned away from the national agenda, the political agenda, the social agenda, and we've turned the focus inward. It's almost as if we've said look we know about all these big issues we have to address: globalisation, tax reform, aboriginal reconciliation, the republic, foreign investment, population policy, youth unemployment. This is all very important stuff and it's beyond our control, it's all too hard.

So increasingly we seem to be wondering what we can control, the focus gets turned inward and we start thinking about the things that are under our control and that's where our interest, that's where our focus has gone. We can't have an impact on the effect of globalisation on the company we work for but we can decide what video we'll rent tonight so let's debate that. We can't make aboriginal reconciliation happen even if we want to, but we can decide where we'll send the kids to school next year so let's talk about that.

You can see the effect of this inward turning focus in our television viewing behaviour, increasingly we're moving away from news and current affairs programs, we can't get enough television programs about backyards or home renovations or cooking. That's highly symbolic, it's really the television channels responding to this urge we have to go into our backyards and to turn the focus inward, to tend our own patches. That has some implications, in the short term it might be quite healthy for us; it protects us from the big bad world just focusing on me, my kids, my backyard. But it has some negative consequences for us as well and certainly is the cause of what I detect in my research as the re-emergence of quite ugly prejudice in Australia, people being more disposed to make prejudice remarks against various ethnic, religious and cultural groups. It almost certainly drives the drying up of our sense of compassion.

Whether its compassion toward the disadvantaged or the asylum seekers or whoever it might be, we're getting tougher in our attitudes. Six of the top ten charities in Australia have suffered an actual decline in fundraising income in the last couple of years. We have become more self-absorbed, we have become greedier, and we have become more self-indulgent.

But even in all of that there is a bright spot I think which brings me back to my sense of optimism about where communities fit into all of this because when the focus turn inward, people do start to think about the quality of their own lives, they do bring the horizon up very close. That's bad for the health of our democracy, it does mean that governments can get away with murder etc, but it also does mean that when the focus is up close and personal, people are inclined to think about the quality of their own lives, to say things like well am I

living in a way that really expresses the values that I believe in? I believe life should be simple but mine's getting more complicated. I believe life should be lived at a slower pace and mine's being lived at a faster pace. I believe I should spend more time with my children but I seem to have less time with them.

And in amongst that catalogue of complaint about the gap between our values and the way we're actually leading our lives constantly re-emerges this word community. We feel as if we should live in a community, yet we don't know our neighbours. We yearn to live in a safe neighbourhood where people are at least on nodding acquaintance with each other, where you recognise the people across the road and round the corner and at the park but we haven't quite got there yet. But it's part of what I think is a significant reappraisal that's going on right now amongst many, many Australians who are saying life doesn't have to be like this; work doesn't have to dominate my life, I don't have to be so stressed, I don't have to spend two hours every day going through my emails and I don't have to feel like a stranger in my own street or my own suburb.

In this of course we are being strongly encouraged by the rising generation of young Australians. I've already said about them is that their great commitment is to not getting committed, their great art form is postponing commitment, keeping their options open. But there's something else about them, which I think is exemplary which I think we should observe and applaud and celebrate and copy. And that is because this is a generation who've only ever known instability and uncertainty and unpredictability, they seem intuitively to have come to the conclusion that the most precious resource they have for coping with life at a time like this is not information, not education, not technology; the most precious resource they have is each other. And they can't get enough of each other. They are the most intensely tribal, herd-based generation of young Australians I've ever known.

Sure they walk around with their mobile phones clamped to their ears or more particularly, biologists are saying that the human thumb is about to go through another period of dramatic redevelopment as you have a whole generation of people who can do that text messaging thing with such facility. Yes, they are constantly using the technology but what are they using it for? They're using it to augment their relationships with each other when they'd much rather be face to face. They go to school spend all day together then they get on the bus or the tram to go home, out with the mobile phone text messaging each other straight away. Not text messaging someone else, text messaging the people they've just left with admittedly important material like "Where are you now?" and even more important "Who are you with?" while their parents of course are paying a fortune for all this sophisticated technology. Then when they get home they're on the internet; emailing each other, into chat rooms, with each other "What'll we do tonight?" and so on.

Although probably when they get home from school is too early to be talking about what'll we do tonight. They don't usually make those decisions, particularly on the weekend till about 10pm and then they decide the three things they are going to do that night as their parents keep saying, "They're going out at the time we used to have to come home!"

Well this is a generation who are connected; who are more tribal and whose message to the rest of us is: if you want to live with some sense of comfort, some sense of identity, some sense of security in such a turbulent, ever-changing world and living with changes that will tend to fragment us and keep us apart, you'll have to work at getting back together, you'll have to work at making these connections. It's as though they've known what those of us who've studied these things have also known which is that connectedness is the key to our mental and emotional wellbeing as well as the key to our moral health. It's only really when we start to feel connected with people in our communities that we develop some sense of responsibility; not just for our own wellbeing but for theirs.

Now that just doesn't happen spontaneously, it does require leadership and you might say in many ways leadership has been sadly lacking over these past few years as people have yearned for a vision for a better kind of society but haven't had that vision presented to them. Obviously those of us who believe in the community in the local sense are beginning to realise that you don't wait for a national vision to be presented to you. You articulate the vision for your street, the vision for your suburb, the vision for whatever is the local community that you're concerned to inspire and energise and you get on with that.

At least you can say that at a time when Australia is undergoing such extraordinary changes people who've got a bright idea, people who want to make something happen can make much more impact at this kind of time in our history than at a time when we're more conservatively settled, when we're more stultified, when our institutions are not in the state of upheaval then they are now.

It's that sense of let's get connected, let's get to know each other, let's do things together in the local community that will really transform us as we come to an understanding of the thing that drives our sense of community in the end which is that we belong to each other, especially we belong to those that we wouldn't naturally choose to belong to. We belong to each other and it's time to start acting as if we do.

Thank you.