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The Trends Forum:

Future trends and the 25 – 45 age group: from a future of splendid and lovely isolation to the new communities and groups of the future. The unlocked secrets every community needs to know.

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
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*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the

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Services**

Chairman and friends, first of all thank you for the overgenerous introduction.

While I was listening to Phil, I listened to everything that Phil said, and I thought of saying: "I agree with it all, I've got nothing further to add and then sitting down". I won't quite do that.

What may follow is a kind of stream of consciousness presentation, because I want to talk about some of the philosophical and political contexts in which the issues of this conference are being talked out.

It's perfectly true that, Rhonda said some generous things about me in her autobiography. She also said I shout about her at one stage, so you've got to be warned in advance. I don't all together come over as Mr Nice Guy. But the book is very worthwhile reading.

I want to talk somewhat about what has happened in the period of the last probably 30, 35 years in which there's been a move away from the concept of community as the centre of what the political scene is about.

Probably the turning point in recent years was when in 1979 when Margaret Thatcher was elected as the British Prime Minister.

1979 is a very important year because, people argue now, this is when the trend away from having a nation's state to having a market state.

That once there was a nation state, and you had a whole number of institutions and so on that operated within that nation. And economies predominantly had a national basis. So that manufacturing for example was protected, because we've got to protect base here in this area. And that's why in many areas like Melbourne for example, which was a predominantly a manufacturing area, you had communities which built up and around a particular economic base.

But then, as we moved away from that, and moved away from the concept of the nation's state towards the idea of the market state, and as we moved more and more towards the concept of globalisation, it

meant that communities, except for those say like coal mining areas which were dominated by a particular physical form, they weren't particularly mobile.

But it meant that you could no longer say that this is a textile manufacturing area, this is a car manufacturing area, because increasingly you had a very striking change in the whole nature of the economy. More and more work was outsourced; fewer and fewer jobs were confined to a particular region. And this was one of the factors that had an eroding impact on the nature of neighbourhood.

And it also meant that politically there was increasing evidence on the concept of the individual rather than the collective, or to summarise it, the moving away from 'we' to 'I'.

I want to mention the name of somebody who's really a forgotten figure but quite an important Australian political thinker, called Sir Frederick Eggleston. And what Eggleston was talking about, I won't say too many political remarks but I'll just have one or two now. He said the great strength of the conservative parties, and it's been conservative parties which have dominated Australia since the war, that the essence of the conservative parties was that they could prise what he called unorganised majorities. *Unorganised majorities.*

And the suggestion was that the Labor Party with its trade union base really constituted organised minorities. And they were the people that Sir Robert Menzies in a series of broadcasts called the forgotten people.

Individuals who, while they might have been to church and supported a particular football club or they might generally vote in a predictable way, or they worked in a trade or profession, they were not by their nature, unlike yourselves, they were not activists in or joiners of community groups. They might be beneficiaries of them, but they tended not to be activists. They were that unorganised majority. So they didn't necessarily identify themselves as part of a particular group.

And they comprised the constituency of a single family or an individual. And of course they are overwhelmingly numerous. And

they're the people who determine the results of elections. But as individual voters, not as members of a group, they are one plus one plus one plus one plus one ad infinitum.

Mrs Thatcher notoriously remarked in 1987, "There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people. And people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after our neighbour. There's no such thing as entitlement unless someone has first met an obligation."

Now I think she was only half right. She asserted that individual interest was the most powerful motivator of activity. Of course increasing pre-occupation with the immediate and the material has had a crowding out effect on community values and the concept of the public good.

Now I've been worrying for years about the implications of adopting economics as the dominant intellectual paradigm and its impact on non-material values, as if nothing else really mattered. Now protagonists of economic rationalism will argue that market choice is more democratic and personal than political choice through elections. Because individual consumers make decisions of actualised judgements every day.

But inevitably, as the public domain contracts, it means that education, health, childcare are regarded as commodities to be traded rather than elements of the public good. Universities fell into the hands of auditors and accountants. Research was judged only by the potential for economic return. And in the arts, best sellers displaced the masterpiece. Language became deformed. Citizens, passengers, patients, patrons, audiences, taxpayers, even students, all became customers or clients, as if the trading nexus was the most important defining element in life. Values were commercialised all with a dollar equivalent. Essentially, as I said, the nation's state was transformed into a market state.

Wedge politics is an extreme but very effective public relations technique, combining mis-information and propaganda. And it became very powerful in the 1980s and it's still with us. It's essentially

the technique of divide and rule, persuading the poor and defenceless to defer to the interests of the rich and powerful, rather than making common cause with each other.

Now the essence of contemporary wedge politics is finding a natural fault line in society and then driving a wedge into it, widening the gap between the larger and the smaller elements, appealing to a majority rule in a more winning strategy, that is, by marginalising or denigrating minorities. So practitioners of wedge politics might target their message to English speakers versus cultural minorities.

Because if you put your emphasis on the English speakers you know that you've got a larger group that can possibly be matched by all the other groups joined together, even if they did, which in practice often they don't.

Europeans versus non-Europeans, home owners versus the homeless, the secure versus the dispossessed, non-unionists versus unionists, heterosexuals against homosexuals, popular opinion versus elite opinion. So minorities such as Muslims, refugees, intellectuals, cultural elites can be dismissed as irrelevant or alien to mainstream societies.

We are passing through a period where the political process is apparently in some disarray and politicians generally are regarded as being pretty far down the food chain. And yet, and yet no alternative method of decision making has emerged, and in my view is likely to emerge.

It's a matter of some concern to me that the total number of members of the Labor Party, living or dead, appears to comprise about 30,000 people across the continent. The total number of members of the Liberal Party is about the same number. So if you add it up, and as I say you've got to make some discount for those who are deceased but whose names haven't been struck off the branch records. But the point is you've got twelve million voters, but the political process is, at the very most, of 60,000 people. And in fact it's much, much less than that. The people who are movers and shakers may only constitute a very few thousand.

Now that ought to mean that the political parties are extraordinarily weak. But they're not. They're not because there's enough brand loyalty, that while if you talk to people they will perhaps even complain about their own political party, in the end they will still overwhelmingly go and vote for it.

And when I look at some of your material, some of the very exciting material produced for the conference, and there's a revelation that you have 700,000 Australian community organisations, you think, "Well, even if there was only one person in each of them, those 700,000 constitute more than ten times as many people as you've got involved in the major political parties." That ought to put you in a position of incredible power.

But I'm not sure that's right. The danger about dealing with numbers is that you've got to think about Archimedes and his lever. You've got to look at where the fulcrum is placed and where the lever is pulled.

To take an area I've had a long interest in for decades, and that is the state school system. Now you would think that the parents of state school children ought to be by far the most significant political pressure group in the whole of the Commonwealth. You couldn't imagine a group that's bigger. Because you've got more than 60% of the children in the school age cohort a part of the state school system. That ought to put the states schools in an incredibly powerful position.

But it simply isn't true. It simply isn't true.

Because the minority are much more effective because they play much more strategically, they're much more professional in the way in which they operate. And they make assumptions and take for granted that automatically they will succeed in what they get. And that's why you can see the power of the minority is completely disproportionate to the power of the majority.

And that's one of the reasons why we've got to be very careful about how we can get community organisations to collaborate, to work together in order to exercise the kind of legitimate influence that should be exercised when we're talking to governments.

Just a few points that I wanted to fill in. I draw your attention to two very interesting essays, part of the Quarterly Essay series put out by Black Ink. One little article called *What's Left: The Death of Social Democracy* by Clive Hamilton.

You can still find it around in some of the book shops. And then the next issue, and it's not actually this subject that I was drawing attention to. The current one is an essay by Amanda Lowry called *Voting for Jesus*.

But the reason I draw your attention to this particular edition is that at the back of each quarterly essay they have a discussion, a serious exchange of writing, about the previous essay. And the result is that in this essay *Voting for Jesus* you've got a series of six or seven serious commentaries by way of analysis of what Clive Hamilton is saying.

And what Clive is talking about was the shift, it overlaps very much with what Thorn was saying, that the Generation Y, people born roughly after say about 1975 or that kind of period, they do seem to have a greater sense of their cohort, that they may be less disposed to simply say, "I'm interested in my family at the most, or my own individual interest, but I don't have a particularly strong sense of community".

It's probably too early to be certain about this, but it is conceivable that there will be a kind of mood shift as Generation Y becomes more and more significant in the voting population.

So Generation Y, sometimes called the "Google Generation" or the "I Generation", seems to be very keen on kinship with their age group and axis, even desperate to communicate and share experience, is the observation of young people using their mobiles, talk or send SMS confirms. Now whether this continues throughout their thirties and forties may be of very major political significance.

Just a couple of observations that I wanted to make. I mentioned before about the comparative impact of people who are lobbying for the state school system, which does seem to me to be somewhat

defuse, as against the use of the lever by people in the private school system who are much more effective.

You might say that there are similar parallels over issues like Greenhouse and some of the other environmental issues. Now all the polling indicates that there is a very strong concern in the community about global warming, about climate change generally. That between 75 - 80% regard it as probably the most important issue facing the country, even more significant than tourism.

Does this mean that it has a significant impact on the government?

Answer: no it doesn't. It has zero impact on the government. Because the groups who in a position to exercise influence and power and control, for example the coal industry, although the numbers are very small, strategically they're much more effective than the other groups.

It's worthwhile perhaps saying a word or two about the implications of ageing. As a member of what the term that the demographer Peter Laslett coined was "The Third Age" I'm very conscious in my eighth decade that I've got every hope of being able to continue as an active member of society as long as I can.

The question is whether the group that I belong to, which was actually born during the depression era, whether we continue to act in a way that reflects our deep seated philosophical commitment to the kind of society we would like, or in effect whether we give up.

But on the whole, you see you find people who develop a short term enthusiasm for something and then that enthusiasm passes off and something else or some other people actually replace them. I recognise that there's an insufficiently high recognition of the importance of voluntary work and community based work in keeping some of our systems going and in keeping community areas going.

It's clear that the community would fall in a heap if you were not there collectively to supplement whatever is provided for by Commonwealth and state government outlays, that the schools wouldn't work without

the volunteers, the hospitals wouldn't work without the volunteers. You do a tremendous amount.

Now the final point that I wanted to make, and it's really very well dealt with, both in Clive Hamilton's original piece and in the more recent Quarterly Essay.

And that is that the surveys suggest that there does seem to be some growing conflict between the goals of consumerism, that is consumption for its own sake, and the search for meaning and value or values in life. And it's argued, I think quite persuasively, that there are increasing moods of angst, alienation and also envy.

In other words people are consuming more and at one level they say, "If I only had a little more income I could buy something else." But then having achieved that, having pursued the consumerist goal they say, "I recognise there's something missing in life. I'm consuming at a faster rate than I was before but it doesn't give me an inner sense of value." And that's one of the reasons why, and this is partly reflected in the essay *Voting for Jesus*, that people are now looking increasingly for non-material values.

But I think the quality of debate in public life has been very poor. I think the quality of debate in our parliament has deteriorated to a very disturbing level. And I'll just tell you as I close why I think this is the case.

It is very difficult, in fact impossible, to identify a single opposition in Australia that's worth a cracker. It's true at the state level and it's true at the Commonwealth level. And it doesn't matter what state we're talking about. This is because oppositions have come to see themselves as government in exile.

And I won't quote what Guy Rundle suggests is a possibility of what could change the situation. You'd better read it for yourself, because I think people would be shocked. But have a look at what Guy Rundle said in this latest Quarterly Essay. In other words, oppositions are really hoping that governments will destruct. They're not really presenting an alternative vision of society; they're not presenting an alternative view. That politics in effect has leached out of politics.

There's no ideology there any more. You're really looking at two alternative management models. And they say, "If we get in, we'll manage it more effectively." You say, "Will there be different directions?" "Certainly not. Same directions, just more efficient management."

Now the result is that's not the sort of thing that inspires people to say, "The political process is meaningful and we've got to do it in order to transform society". And the result is that people are not attracted to being involved in public life. They trot along to vote, partly because of the compulsory voting, but they trot along to vote. But they don't do it with any great enthusiasm, or not sufficient enthusiasm.

The result is that to a very large extent you provide the leaven in the whole baking process. Without your work, without your input society would be very much diminished. The political process I think is not working particularly well.

I congratulate you on what you do and long may you continue to do it.