

## **“Developing Communities in Changing Times”**

A paper based on a Keynote address delivered to the  
Local Government Community Development Association of  
Western Australia  
Bi-Annual Conference. 2008

By

Hon. Dr. Mal Bryce.

April 10<sup>th</sup> 2008.

Perth.  
Western Australia.

*“.....Community development is about the journey of discovery, rather than the planned arrival. It is about a community being helped to be self-determining which contradicts the idea of clearly defined objectives. We cannot know in advance how long a process may take or where it may end up. In this sense community development is a more chaotic, unpredictable and postmodern activity than most planners or managers would like and does not fit neatly, if at all into conventional bureaucratic guidelines.....”*

**James IFE.** (Community Development: Creating Community Alternatives.)

**Introduction:**

In the last thirty years, the world has changed more fundamentally than in any other comparable period in history. Australia has changed in very significant ways, and our communities have changed. The rate of change has been quite extraordinary.

Walter Lipman reminds us:

*“.....We have changed our environment more quickly than we know how to change ourselves...”*

The foundation causes for such change at the local, national and global level will ensure that the rate and extent of change is unlikely to slow down in the foreseeable future. Learning to cope with and eventually to enjoy the process of change will empower us as individuals and communities to influence the change process.

This paper examines the drivers and shapers of major global change; it outlines a number of the fundamental changes occurring in Australia; it describes some of the key changes to Australian communities; it seeks to answer the question “Why Bother?” and it provides some interesting reminders and suggestions for community development professionals who maybe developing important strategies or action plans.

**The Drivers and Shapers of Global Change:**

The drivers and shapers of major global change in recent decades are well documented however there is little agreement about any absolute order of priority or the length of the list. For the purposes of this paper ten of the more significant drivers and shapers are identified and summarized.

- Unrelenting Technological Change, rates highly in the opinion of all experts as a primary cause of major global change. In association with an unparalleled period of growth in scientific knowledge the veritable explosion in the volume, variety and scope of technological breakthroughs has been quite unprecedented. In a technological sense the last two centuries were dominated by revolutionary developments in water powered mechanization; steam powered mechanization, electrification, motorization and computerization.

Breakthroughs in all five areas underpinned the development of the world's major economies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the time, the rate and significance of change in the opinion of contemporary scholars warranted the use of the term "revolution". In contrast to the rate of change experienced since the 1970's the two preceding centuries now seem like periods of manageable if not modest innovation.

Together with ongoing major developments in cyber technology we are currently in the throes of serious revolutions in life sciences / biotechnology, nano-technology and new materials technology. Of perhaps greater significance than any of the current individual revolutions is that fact that they are all on a path of convergence.

- Unprecedented environmental pressures are now widely recognized as a principal driver for global change. The push for rapid industrialization in China, India and a number of other significant developing countries has created hitherto unseen levels of atmospheric pollution. The world's oceans are sick in many places owing to indiscriminate dumping and the planets fish stocks have been heavily depleted. The widespread clearing of the earth's remaining forests has caused major soil degradation issues and has clearly disturbed the fine balance of nature so far as the atmosphere is concerned. A consensus has emerged amongst the world's leading scientific organizations that man's activity on the planet and his mismanagement of the earth's resources has made a significant contribution to climate change. Minimizing the serious loss of bio diversity, reducing carbon outputs and achieving environmental sustainability have become objectives widely but not universally subscribed to by governments around the world. Handling the implications of this mismanagement will be one of the most complex and costly set of challenges facing all nations during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- The population explosion in many respects goes hand in hand with the fundamental increase in the pressure on the earth's environment. It took millennia for the population of the human race to reach one billion people in 1800. By 1900 that figure was 1.6 billion and had reached 6 billion by 2000. The UN Population Report of 2004 predicts the world's population will peak between 9.6 and 10 billion in approximately 2050.

The hopes for this peak are pinned on the belief that the rate of population increase will ease with increasing affluence and levels of education in the developing world during the next four decades. One of the most perplexing aspects of the population problem is associated with the physical distribution and the age characteristics of the human race. The population growth rates are greatest in those countries least able to support their existing populations. This has led to significant mass migration of people from the world's poorest nations to the more affluent regions of the globe. Such a phenomenon is not new but the scale of the mass migration is unprecedented. The population of the developing world is living longer and the overall proportion of the elderly is increasing throughout the world. Governments of all complexions are facing challenging times in coming to grips with the implications of the ageing of their populations.

- A massive increase of the world's middle class is another source of serious challenge for the planet. The existing middle class populations of North America, Europe, Japan and parts of SE Asia (including Australia) have set standards of consumption and life style which have now become the basic expectation of very large numbers of middle class citizens in both India and China. In a special report published by The World Future Society in 2005 the current middle class population of India was estimated to be 300 million people and 200 million in China. Worldwide, middle class families seem to assume conspicuous levels of consumption as a right and live in hope for (expect) a clean environment, democracy and safe communities. With the anticipated continued success of the economic growth strategies for developing nations these estimates of the size of the world's middle class population can only be expected to rise substantially. The ability of the planet to deliver the non renewable resources to underpin such a level of overall consumption has already become a contentious issue.
- A major threat posed by serious water shortages is another key issue impacting on world security and a potential limit to economic growth in many nations. In the 2005 report by Cetron and Davies (Trends Now Shaping the Future) it was argued that by 2050 up to two thirds of the world's people could be dealing with serious water shortages and that 80% of the world's existing health problems are associated with contaminated water. Not only is climate change producing serious drought in many parts of the world, throughout most

continents the consumption of high quality ground water far exceeds the rate of replenishment. In his latest book *The meaning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* James Martin suggests “.....*that mankind is using about 160 billion tons more water each year than is being replenished by rain and fed back into water storages...*” Much of the planets water, essential for growing food, comes from large underground aquifers and dates back to many ice ages ago. The “politics of water” has now reached centre stage and as this vital resource is diminished further it is quite conceivable that wars will be fought over water. We also face the prospect that by 2020 as much as 30% of the world’s existing arable land will be salty.

- Tribalization and democratization after a world of empires has taken many people by surprise. Following the collapse of the vast European global empires (post WWII) and the end of the forty years of cold war (1980’s) the world has witnessed the fragmentation of many large entities into smaller states based on ethnic differences. As examples the former Soviet Union is now 15 individual nation states and the former Yugoslavia has become five different entities. In terms of basic tribalization some experienced observers believe Europe itself is really comprised of 70 tribal groups and that existing national boundaries simply reflect the results of two centuries of military struggle and political compromise. Interestingly enough the fragmentation of the old historic entities has occurred at the same time as a widespread increase in the number of democratic administrations. In 1945 there were just twelve democratic nations in the world. By 2006 there were 122. Throughout the world where democratic forms of government have been established in the last sixty years the role of the middle class has been absolutely essential.
- Globalization has in practice meant much greater integration and inter-dependence. Greater integration of ideas, products and services and greater inter-dependence between nations and governments. The nineteenth century was a world characterized by empires and was all about domination and dependence. The twentieth century was about movements, struggles and wars for independence and the twenty first century is clearly all about much greater inter-dependence.

- Ever increasing urbanization of the world's people has characterized both the developed world and developing nations. During the last century but especially the last thirty years across the planet there has been a major drift in the world's population from remote, rural and regional centres to heavily populated urban centres. In the developed world 75% of people now live in urban areas (79% in North America). This trend is of course aggravating most environmental and social problems. The growth of mega cities (especially in the developing world) has been rapid. In 1950 there were only eight cities in the world with more than five million people. By 2015 that figure is estimated by the World Future Society to be fifty nine cities.
- Major changes in Management, the Labor Force and the Workplace. Specialization of the workforce is spreading and the demand for constant re-skilling is universal. Despite the promises of the leisure society that we would all enjoy by the turn of the century, time has become the world's most precious commodity and people are working longer hours and retiring later. Third and fourth careers are now common and two income families are the norm. There are fewer levels of bureaucracy in large corporations and increasing levels and forms of transparency.

### **Australia has changed:**

The last three decades has also seen fundamental economic, social and cultural changes occur in Australia. Some of these changes have been heavily influenced by global trends beyond our control and many have been of our own making. Since the late 70's Australia has experienced four important ubiquitous revolutions. The economic revolution which began with a major program of deregulation and micro economic reform in 1983, a gender revolution which has had a major impact on the role of women in the work force, a technological revolution which mirrored the transformation of all first world economies and a social revolution which actually changed our perception of ourselves.

Twenty years of economic re structuring has seriously modernized Australia. We have achieved a high level of integration into the global economy and in addition to a host of new opportunities for exploitation Australia's

production and export of traditional commodities has become much smarter. During this period we discovered the importance of intellectual property and throughout the economy competition for key people became fierce.

Although there remains significant room for argument at the margins, today Australia has a highly trained, well educated, innovative and flexible workforce.

The same program of economic restructuring has regrettably redistributed work and wealth in a major way. By 2006 the average household income for the top 20% of incomes in Australia amounted to \$180,000. The figure for the bottom 20% was just \$12,000. This is a major widening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots. We now have a fully employed workforce, working very long hours. The line of demarcation between work and home life has been virtually erased for many and the number of Australians involved in precarious employment has increased greatly with the casualization of the Australian workforce.

Of all the forces for change the most pervasive has been the impact of the revolution in Information and Communication Technology. With a reputation for very fast diffusion of technology Australia has developed a dynamic information infrastructure. Regrettably the role out of seriously sophisticated broadband has lagged badly in recent years. Broadband is the new essential utility as vital to prosperity and social development as clean water, reliable power and good roads.

The ICT revolution has;

- Fostered greater networking in the economy
- Made possible the faster diffusion of knowledge and ideas
- Made science more efficient and linked it more closely with business
- Given us the capacity to transform knowledge
- Facilitated our ability to apply that knowledge to machines.

Basically, how we learn, where, how and when we work, how we communicate, how we take our recreation, how we market, buy and sell things and how we organize our lives have been forever changed by the new ICT products and systems.



So according to when we were born, who are we now?

- Born before WWII: The Silent Generation (real seniors).
- Born 1943-60: Baby Boomers are the “new seniors”
- Born 1961- 80: The X Generation
- Born 1981-2003: The Y Generation
- The Thumb Geners and E Geners.

The Baby Boomer Generation (born 1943-60) was the stress and the great expectation generation. They created the two income household and became the most divorced generation in our history. They redefined the dynamics of family, delayed having children and lead the gender revolution. Their voracious appetite for information has been second to none.

The X Generation (born 1961-80) is well known for their individualism and self sufficiency. They are sceptical of institutions and they work to live NOT live to work. They live with change and embrace it, they value pragmatism before “Truth” and reason. They are technology and media savvy and in general terms music is huge.

Generation Y 1981-2003 are known to be fiercely independent as active information seekers and constantly pushing technology to its limits They tend to view the world as 24 X 7 and demand real time. They understand the need to verify resources and authenticate people and they are online people for whom race and prejudice is not important.

Justice Michael Kirby in delivering the keynote address at the launch of The Chain Reaction Foundation in 2002, said inter-alia:

*“.....Generation Y will be superbly informed. But will it be wise? Will it have enough emotion and involvement to be concerned? Will virtual reality breed actual indifference.....”*

In summary we are a rather diverse and interesting bunch, well educated and information hungry, technologically savvy who relate to the online world, demanding, impatient and ambitious, increasingly comfortable with change and increasingly respectful of the value of knowledge.

Culturally we have become a much more diverse society. Multi-culturalism has become a reality. At the same time we have seen declining levels of tolerance and compassion. In recent decades we have all seen the face of Australian racism. A nation that once prided itself on a special degree of racial tolerance now has to admit to being as intolerant as any other nation state on the planet.

As a society we have experienced a fundamental shift in our thinking about marriage. The Institute of Family Studies now predicts that 40-45% of contemporary marriages will end in divorce. This compares with a figure of 9% just 25 years ago.(Hugh Mackay: Advance Australia Where?) The marriage rate has plummeted and the Australian birth rate is the lowest in recorded history. Households are also shrinking fast, to the point where more than half of all Australian households contain only one or two people. Consumerism through the eyes of many has gone beyond the pale and television content seems to have reached an all time low in terms of standards. Australia in line with the US and Europe now even exploits the so called “Tweeney Market” (children aged 6-13 years). This is proving to have significant negative consequences for the health and behavior of our youth. Despite, great economic prosperity, amazing technological change and a world of diverse choices, people feel increasingly insecure, unfulfilled and vulnerable.

In the words of Phillip Hughes (Building Stronger Communities)

*“.....Many people are extremely lonely in this incredibly connected society in which we live. Many feel lost, unsupported and are struggling.....”*

### **Our Communities have changed:**

In describing a major dilemma confronting the USA at the turn of the century Robert Putnam in his well known best seller (Bowling Alone 2001) argued that

*“.....The bonds of our community have withered.....”*

With the vast majority of Australian’s living in heavily built up urban areas Putnam’s view would be widely but not universally accepted in Australia. The stable but somewhat static concept of the geographic community has all but disappeared for many Australian’s. The community of location which

many of us think of in terms of a village holds fond memories. In the past people's identity was often based on their village. Several generations of the same family lived in close proximity and work and leisure all happened locally.

Today for a significant majority of the Australian population our residential communities, our occupational communities and our recreational communities have few overlaps. Hughes and Black (Building Stronger Communities) go so far as to suggest that:

*“.....While some forms of locational community will continue to be important, Australian society will not return to dependence on local communities as the sole or even necessarily the primary form of community.....”*

My head suggests they may be right. My heart hopes they are dead wrong. There is a strong alternative view that our communities are not necessarily dying, rather they are fragmenting and that we will all experience the benefits of being members of various different communities and that those memberships will change over time. The explanation for the fragmentation seems to be agreed throughout the world and includes such factors as, busyness, time pressure, two career families, the electronic revolution and the privatization of entertainment and the much greater mobility of individuals, families and businesses.

Apart from this process of fragmentation another important aspect of the change in Australian communities has been the decline in our Social Capital base. What most of us have become familiar with as the quality and intensity of civic involvement (the glue that holds communities of location together) has diminished in large quantities. Evidence abounds to suggest that informal connections between people are on the wane, the level of participation of volunteers is on the decline, as are the levels of trust, reciprocity and philanthropy. By way of a constructive response Putnam urges us to focus community development initiatives on the youth and schools, urban design, the workplace, arts and culture and the role of religious groups. In Australia there is a desperate need for more sophisticated applied research and program development to tackle the decline of our social capital. The intangible nature of this concept and the long term nature of necessary turn around strategies make it difficult to attract understanding and support from governments.

The third and equally important respect in which communities have change lies in the changed definitions of community.

Community is a concept with a wide-range of meanings. It can be thought of in spatial, organisational and interest based terms.

The word community is made up of three parts: com (with, together), munis (exchanges), and ity (intimate).....exchanges that link us together in an intimate fashion.

In recent years we have witnessed a paradigm shift from the manufacturing age to the age of knowledge and creativity. The paradigm shift in the economy has brought about some fundamental changes in the nature of communities. A large cross section of the world's people is feeling increasingly isolated and alienated from the communities in which they live. Many of those people yearn for a more inclusive society. The answer in part lies with the newly defined scope of communities of interest.

Communities of Interest offer members with similar interests the opportunity to engage in discourse and critical thinking from the perspective of their special interests. Today there are as many communities of interest as there are communities of location. They may be scattered all over the state and beyond. They are not defined by socio economic status and they often have a constantly fluctuating level of membership. Some communities of interest claim large numbers of long-time members. Others may be based on a unique idea or specialised issue that the membership is relatively small for a very short period of time. Some communities of interest are open to the public and others are members only.

Generally "Communities of Interest" enable participants to:

- interact with others of similar interests;
- participate in forum discussions with other members;
- check out the calendar of community events;
- participate in online polling; and
- visit recommended sites on their favourite topics.

Communities of Practise and Communities of Culture are generally subsets of Communities of Interest, although some commentators regard them as quite separate categories of community.

Historically, communities of location have been the most evident and influential. Given the growth in ICTs, communities without geographic borders have grown in depth and size over the past ten years, to the point where they are just as, if not more, influential than geographic communities. Given their use of technology, borderless communities tend to be more connected, communicative and cohesive than some geographic communities. This immense shift has provided a completely new view of how we characterise community behaviour, what constitutes a 'healthy' community, and how we create, empower, develop, transform and sustain geographic communities.

### Why Bother?

Communities of location vary in importance, relevance and success as do communities of interest. In Australia, communities of location have been and continue to be of great significance in regional, rural and remote locations. However people in those communities with access to modern communications infrastructure also display passionate involvement in borderless communities of interest. In large cities in many cases neighbourhood groupings are proving to be more relevant than larger scale communities of location. Within large cities there are clear differences between inner urban, outer urban and massive suburban communities of location. Communities of interest, practice and culture have very special appeal to people in urban environments often in preference to involvement in geographical communities.

Highly successful, engaging communities, rich in social capital offer very tangible benefits to the members of those communities. When we analyse just what those benefits are for members of geographical communities we discover that many of the benefits are to be found in communities of interest. Great communities are communities which; involve respect, harmony and cooperation, provide safe and secure opportunities to satisfy the herding instincts of people (the alternative to privatized entertainment), offer effective encouragement for creative civic engagement, provide support for local problem solving, provide opportunities for skills development, reduce

the sense of alienation and isolation in many people and provide the means of tapping into the energy, creativity and passion of others.

### **Some Suggestions and Reminders**

The following suggestions and reminders are not based upon theories of community development. They are derived from some years of involvement at the pointy end of implementing community development strategies and action plans.

- In building community development strategies reject the old fashioned SWAT analysis. Asset Based Community Development is the way to go. The SWAT analysis inevitably concentrates on weaknesses and threats and generates a great list of sound reasons for doing nothing. Remember: “...*Communities have never been built upon their deficiencies. Building a community has always depended upon mobilizing the capacities and assets of a people and a place.....*”  
McKnight and Kretzmann
- How well developed and readily available is the most important mud map for the future of your community? The mud map referred to here is the Telecommunications Infrastructure Plan for your village or town. Most communities don't have one and are relying on the good will of the telecommunications companies to look out for their future.
- Revolutionize the role of the Community Library. Turn the library into a community learning centre. Turn it on as a wireless hot spot and turn on the coffee. Where practical, community libraries should incorporate a coffee shop. Re-invent the training and professional development programs for librarians. Measure the success of the library by its contribution to community development not simply the tomes borrowed.
- In your community how relevant are your initiatives for Life Long Learning? Check out the work and recent reports of Peter Kearns. Remember that more than half the adult community is digitally challenged (basically IT illiterate). IT skills development programs for adults and seniors are the tip of the iceberg of what is needed.

- Does your community development strategy contain specific initiatives to recognize, reward and celebrate creativity and innovation in your community?
- The days of the silo mentality are numbered. Co-location and integration must replace dedicated silos and separate facilities.
- Understand, develop and harness the power of Social Capital.
- It is time we simplified and more clearly understood sustainability as a community objective.
- In designing and implementing worthwhile community development strategies one of the most frequently repeated errors of judgment relate to the timetable. We all too often miscalculate and underestimate the time it takes.
- Do creative industries rate a mention in the economic development strategy for your community? Check out the recent analysis of Perth's Creative Industries undertaken by Telesis Consulting for the Perth City Council.
- Don't underestimate the capacity of the members of your community to contribute. Most of them have never been asked.

No one sums up this sentiment better than Harold Flaming the Executive Director of the Ontario Rural Council when he said: *"The wisdom of the community always exceeds the knowledge of the experts"*

MJB 10/04/08

\*\*\*\*\*

