

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rachel Gibson, Shaun Wilson, Gabrielle Meagher,
David Denmark and Mark Western

BRINGING TOGETHER SOCIAL RESEARCH AND PUBLIC POLICY

Australians and their policy-makers demand sophisticated insights into social attitudes and behaviour and how these shape work, families, politics and Australia's links to a larger world. Living in a dynamic and educated society, Australians increasingly reflect on the state of their institutions and their different ways of living. But this kind of self-reflection depends not only on values, but also on facts, which are often not available when they are needed most. Evidence – including feedback from the public, systematic social analysis, legal opinion, expert judgment and overseas experiences – is increasingly part of policy-making, as Meredith Edwards (2004) recognises in her exploration of the future policy role of Australian social scientists. And as German sociologist Claus Offe points out, many policy problems can no longer be 'solved' from above without a diverse public's input and co-operation (Offe 1996, pp. 111–19). As governments are obliged to deal with active and informed citizens, considered social research will increasingly be important to make policy work. *Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report* takes up the challenge of providing high-quality social research to the Australian community and to policy-makers, research that informs both public debate and sound decision-making.

The empirical social research found in this book also contributes to the development of the social sciences themselves. As well-known sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2000, pp. 72–5) makes clear, the future for the social sciences is to engage deeply with our changing community, and to answer the many hundreds of questions about

contemporary society that interest the public at large. Reporting his findings to the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences, another prominent social scientist, Immanuel Wallerstein, also affirmed the need for social sciences to engage in empirical research that combines researchers from different backgrounds to develop new methods and to construct research problems in innovative ways (Gulbenkian Commission 1996).

In addressing the twin challenges to contribute to public debate and to the social sciences, *Australian Social Attitudes* is positioned between public opinion research, social commentary and ‘pure’ academic research. Public opinion polling is able to read the public pulse, but rarely tries to understand how social attitudes and social behaviour change over time, or to tell us why different constituencies find themselves in conflict. Social commentary reflects back to us images of Australian society that can prick our collective conscience and stir our emotions. But, without the support of detailed evidence, commentary risks repeating conventional wisdom or perpetuating myths. At the same time, ‘pure’ academic research can tell us about a subject in great detail, but often fails to speak to interested citizens beyond the walls of the university.

This report brings together a widely shared interest in addressing topics at the top of the social agenda with a commitment to the social sciences. Our main tool for undertaking this report is the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), a statistically representative national survey of Australians, first conducted by the Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University in late 2003 (Gibson et al. 2004). Drawing on a systematic analysis of the survey data, we track the attitudes and activities of a large and diverse sample of Australians – more than most of us could hope to meet and know well in a lifetime. We do this aware of the limitations of survey research. Conducting surveys is not the same as engaging in face-to-face communication, which gives us a more complete, nuanced picture of how people think and act. This report does not intend to have the ‘final say’, but seeks instead to add to the resources of the national conversation.

AUSTRALIA IN THE HOWARD YEARS

As well as a reflection of Australia now, *Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report* is also a wide-ranging assessment of how social attitudes have changed during the Howard government, now in its tenth year. Many commentators feel that the country has become more conservative. They argue that this new conservatism is evident, for example, in the rejection

of a republic in 1997, in hostility to immigration and welfare, and in narrower ideals of family and the priority of affluence (see, for example, Manne 2004). Other commentators fear a decline of trust in others and in institutions, and falling participation in voluntary life as an affluent Australia ‘cocoon’ itself at home (see, for example, Cox 2002). The findings we present in this report do not entirely confirm this picture. Using data from AuSSA 2003 and from Australian Election Studies and other major surveys, this report reveals instead the nuances in public opinion – and some surprising patterns in Australian social attitudes. Below we give readers a sense of this complexity.

Deborah Mitchell confirms in chapter 3 that family *does* remain central to Australian identity – three-quarters of all respondents to AuSSA 2003 list their family as one of the three groups most important to who they are. However, Ann Evans and Edith Gray show in chapter 2 that our understanding of what relationships make a family is quite broadly defined, especially among women and younger generations. Among these Australians, a majority believe that gay and lesbian couples with children, and single-parent households, are indeed families. And despite Health Minister Tony Abbott’s attempts to reopen the abortion debate after Howard’s election victory in October 2004, Evans and Gray find that Australians overwhelmingly support women’s right to choose.

On welfare, Shaun Wilson, Gabrielle Meagher and Trevor Breusch also make surprising findings in chapter 7. Australians are less preoccupied with lower taxes than at any time in the last quarter century, with more now preferring higher social spending. A large majority of Australians are even prepared for taxes to rise to support more spending on health, Medicare and education. Still, the public appears to support the Howard government’s emphasis on increasing obligations on welfare recipients to find work. But this does not add up to support for cutting welfare, which is rejected by the majority.

We find similarly complex patterns in attitudes to immigration, multiculturalism and national identity. In chapter 11, Murray Goot and Ian Watson report that a declining number of Australians support lower immigration: two-thirds wanted this in 1996, compared to less than two-fifths now. Attitudes to the economic impacts of migrants have also become more positive, as the economy has boomed through the 1990s and early 2000s. While attitudes to multiculturalism remain complex, there is little sign that there has been any great shift in public opinion on this question. Goot and Watson do find, however, that, compared to the

mid-1990s, fewer Australians now are ashamed of things Australia has done.

Though Australia's long period of economic growth has sustained a new prosperity and affluence, some fear that the costs of this growth are higher debt, longer working hours and a degraded community and environment (see, for example, Hamilton 2003). Are Australians feeling prosperous? Certainly, a majority of respondents indicate that, with the ways things are at the moment, they feel that they have a good chance of improving their standard of living. But most telling is Goot and Watson's finding that Australians are much more confident in the Australian economy than they were in the mid-1990s, with some 80 per cent now proud of Australia's economic achievements (up 32 per cent since 1995). How this economic prosperity has assisted the Howard government is a story that will be revisited by many after the government's easy win in 2004.

One benefit of economic prosperity is relatively low job insecurity. As Bill Martin and Jocelyn Pixley show in chapter 4, only 13 per cent of AuSSA 2003 respondents feel insecure about their employment. But the costs of prosperity for work are also registered. Most working Australians see long working hours as a social problem, and many recognise the effects of long hours on personal and family life.

A picture emerges, then, of low job insecurity, a desire for more spending on key public services and more confidence about Australia's economic performance. But how are economic and social achievements anchored in social and community life? We have already mentioned that younger Australians and women have a broader idea of family and family life. But are we less trusting and more isolated in our communities? In chapter 8, Clive Bean shows that, on the figures, Australians are not losing trust in each other, but that their trust in some institutions – including major Australian companies and churches – has declined since the mid-1990s. The armed forces, active in campaigns in the region from East Timor in 1999 to the Asian tsunami operations of 2005, remain the institution in which Australians have most confidence, a finding mirrored in many other countries.

When it comes to participation in civil society, Andrew Passey and Mark Lyons, in chapter 5, find that Australia is a nation of joiners: 86 per cent of AuSSA 2003 respondents belong to at least one voluntary association, and more than a quarter of members are officeholders or active members. Participation in voluntary associations is strongly linked to the political participation that is the lifeblood of democracy. Members

of these associations are nearly three times more likely than non-members to undertake political activity, such as contacting a politician or taking part in a protest. Participation also seems to be closely linked to our values. Although material happiness has featured a great deal in Australian life in recent years, many Australians continue to support environmental protection and other ‘quality of life’ or ‘postmaterial’ values. As Mark Western and Bruce Tranter show in chapter 6, Australians who hold postmaterial values are eager participants in environmental and social causes.

No doubt, how we view the world is shaped by mass media, and, as David Denmark finds in chapter 13, television is our primary source of news, information and entertainment at home. But although we are absorbed by the electronic media, we are not uncritical of it. Most Australians think that television violence contributes to social violence and that media ownership is far too concentrated among a few rich families. The media may be playing some role in the contradictory reality that David Indermaur and Lynne Roberts find in chapter 9 when it comes to crime. They show that crime rates in most categories are actually falling in Australia, but perceptions of crime are yet to register this. As their international evidence suggests, the media (and politicians) have played a part in creating a climate of fear about crime in which public misperceptions thrive.

And what of the future? Do we want more engagement in Asia, as former Prime Minister Paul Keating urged? Do we want further economic reform? And how are Australians responding to the potential benefits and threats of new biotechnologies?

Australian engagement in the Asian region is bound to become increasingly important in the coming years. Yet, as Ian Marsh, Gabrielle Meagher and Shaun Wilson show in chapter 14, Australia is not particularly exposed to international trade compared to other small advanced democracies – and this is reflected in our comparatively protectionist attitudes to trade, local film content and the role of international organisations in national affairs. Australians want closer economic relations with Asia, but are less enthusiastic about closer political and cultural ties; few report feeling close to Asia. Many Australians also believe that globalisation is increasing insecurity at home. Marsh, Meagher and Wilson suggest that this might explain why attitudes to Australia’s future global engagement have been slow to change.

The Howard government stunned political pundits when it managed to secure the first Senate majority in a generation after the 2004