

KEYNOTE SPEECH:
**Advance Australia: The Turning Tide of
Popular Political Engagement**

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I want to describe what seems to me to be two very significant tidal movements in the mood of Australians over the past decade. Both of these movements have been reflected very directly in Australians' level of engagement with the political process and even I would go so far as to say their level of engagement with the idea of democracy itself. Both of the movements I want to describe are really about the community's sense of control; about Australians' sense of having some control over their lives and over what is happening in their country.

The first turning of the tide happened in the late 1990s — there had been many others previously; I am just talking about the two most recent ones — at a time when Australians seemed overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness. It was common in my own research — described by David Solomon as asking different questions; the essential feature of my research is that I ask no questions, I just invite people to talk in a very spontaneous and unstructured way, a very informal way about issues that are on their minds — to find Australians overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness that led to comments like, 'I feel as though I am on a runaway train', 'I have no idea where this is all going but I know it is beyond my control, I know I cannot jump off because I will be left behind, so I hang on but I really wonder where this is taking us.'

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That sort of comment was really a reflection of three driving factors. One was the extraordinary extent and rate of social, cultural, political, economic and technological change over not just the previous six or 12 months but over the previous quarter century. By the end of the 1990s Australians were suffering, as many other countries particularly around the Western World had suffered, from this thing we now identify as reform fatigue which drives people to the GP saying things like, 'I feel vaguely crook but I am not really sure what is wrong with me. I feel anxious but I do not know what I am anxious about.' They are classic symptoms of people who are being destabilised by too many changes happening in their lives or in their community or in their society. That seems to me to have been the first driver.

The second was a feeling of a rising level of external threat certainly beyond our control. Whether the threat was expressed as international terrorism or border protection or environmental degradation, this was big-scale stuff that seemed as though it was crowding in on us, casting shadows over our present and our future, again beyond our control.

The third thing that led to this feeling of powerlessness was a sense that we had too many disenchantments, particularly in the political context. At times when we thought something significant was going to happen — and I will mention a couple of examples in a moment — it did not happen. That left the voters in general feeling, 'It does not really matter what we say, it does not really matter whether we march or demonstrate, write to the paper or to the local member, nothing much seems to happen.'

Let me expand very quickly on those three factors to illustrate the extent to which people were driven into this sense of loss of control, of powerlessness. Let me talk very quickly about a very big subject — namely, the extent and the rate of social, economic and technical change over that 25-year period. In a sense, the best way of capturing this is really just to flash a few demographic statistical snapshots that will illustrate the extent of these changes.

Let us begin, for example — and there are many that I am not going to mention— with the institution of marriage. There is a paradox about many of these changes, by the way. They are changes we have done to ourselves. They are changes that we have welcomed and yet, as they have begun to become almost institutionalised, we have wondered where this is all taking us.

The institution of marriage: 30 years ago almost all Australians were married. Some 90 per cent of them were married by the age of 30. Today the marriage rate is the lowest it has ever been and only about 45 per cent — half the number of Australians — are married by the age of 30. In fact, you look at our marriage statistics and you wonder whether marriage has gone out of fashion until you look at our remarriage

statistics and then you realise that there is a core group in the community who love getting married and want to keep on doing it.

So we can safely say of the rising generation that the marriage market is going to divide as many consumer markets now divide into roughly equal components — about a third the non-users, that is about a third of the rising generation of young Australians will never marry; about a third light users who will marry once; and about a third heavy users who will marry two or more times. Thirty years ago divorce was stigmatised — only about seven or eight per cent of Australian marriages ever ended in divorce. Today about 45 per cent of contemporary marriages are ending in divorce. This is not just a trend. This is the fracture of a trend. This is a fundamental social change reflected in many things.

I will just pluck a couple of quick examples. It is reflected in the fact that now almost a quarter — somewhere between 20 and 25 per cent — of the population of dependent children live with just one of their natural parents. Thirty years ago, that was almost unheard of. Twenty-five per cent of all families with dependent children are single-parent families. This weekend about half a million dependent kids will be involved in a mass migration, going from the home of one parent to the home of the other for their weekend access visit. This is all radically new stuff for us—destabilising, troubling, anxiety-producing for all of the parties involved.

Another quick snapshot: the birthrate. Here is one of the most astonishing things about Australia. In the late fifties and early sixties, we were creating, relative to total population, the largest generation of children Australia had ever produced, the so-called baby boomers. The birthrate at the time was about 3.6 babies per woman. There is talk of a mini baby boom at the moment, which is an extraordinary expression to describe a birthrate of 1.8 — exactly half what it was when we had a real baby boom. So we do not have a baby boom; what we have is a little blip and why we have it is another subject which we do not have time to explore this morning.

But our birthrate is heading, as are the birthrates of most western democracies, inexorably downwards. Goodness knows where ours will bottom out. Europe, Spain and Italy have birthrates around 1.3, 1.4 babies per woman. There are a lot of disobedient Catholics in Italy driving the birthrate to almost the lowest in Europe. We are down to 1.8 at the moment and we have been 1.7. We do have a little blip at the moment.

Why has the birthrate plummeted? We know the reasons. The rising education level of women is a primary reason. If you really want to get the birthrate up, just ban women from universities; it is very straightforward! The most highly educated female population in Australia is in Canberra; Canberra has the lowest birthrate in the country. That is not just a coincidence, that is the pattern.

The other thing that drives the birthrate down of course is something that we really need to understand if we want to understand Australia's future or the future of any country — that is, the ethos of the emerging generation of young adults, those in their late teens and their 20s. This is the generation of Australians who have been born during this period of what, for us, feels like revolutionary social, cultural and economic upheaval. If you have been born in a society where things seem as if they are constantly changing — if you get a piece of technology in your hand and you know it is in your hand and it is on the market because it is obsolete because the next thing is already being developed and the next and the next—that creates a mindset, and the mindset of the rising generation of young Australians is, 'Keep your options open, hang loose, wait and see, don't get too committed too soon.' This is not a generation that will be rushing into marriage. It is a generation that I am prepared to bet money on will drive the birthrate significantly lower than it is now.

Look at that generation, look at a generation that is constantly saying, 'What else is there? This is fine' — whether they are talking about a sexual partner, a job, a course of study, a set of religious beliefs, a fashion label or a musical genre — 'I enjoy this, but what else is there?' That is a generation that is going to reshape our society as they move into positions of power and influence in the future.

Another quick snapshot: the Australian household is shrinking at an alarming rate. Of course, we are shrinking it but we are just alarmed when we see how it is happening on a large scale. By the way, the household is shrinking but the houses are expanding, and that is another curious feature about Australia. The Bureau of Statistics is estimating now that, by the year 2026, 34 per cent of all Australian households will contain just one person. It is already the case that the single-person household is our most common household type and that if you are living alone or just with one other person, in terms of household demographics, you are now positively mainstream. The eccentric fringe consists of people who are married to each other, have only been married once and are currently living with three or more of their very own children and no-one else's. We used to think of that as normal but that is now quite eccentric.

There are a lot of implications that flow from that. What happens to the old herd instinct when the domestic herd is no longer large enough to satisfy that instinct? The answer to that question is not one for this morning, but it is an answer that leads us into further speculation about how Australian society will change. In the short term of course the shrinkage of the household has led to a greater sense in the community of isolation, loneliness, fragmentation, et cetera.

While all of this has been happening, we have been through a major restructure of the Australian economy. I will not even get into the details of that, except to say that we have moved from a society living with a sense of job security as our birthright to the contemporary sense in the Australian workforce of job insecurity, of feeling that

the axe could fall anywhere at any time — ‘Not just my job, but my company or indeed my industry might no longer exist in the near future.’

As a result of the economic restructure, we have got used to the idea or are getting used to the idea that, at least in economic terms, this sense of Australia as the broadly comfortable, middle-class society is yesterday’s story; the middle is shrinking. The top 20 per cent of Australian households now have an average annual household income of \$225,000, and the same number of households at the bottom of the heap — the bottom 20 per cent — have an average annual household income of \$22,000. We are not used to such growth in rich and poor in Australia.

Many people have already mentioned the IT revolution. It is important to understand what the IT revolution is doing to us. Again, we do not have time to explore it in depth, but let me just say two things that I think are fundamental that in terms of our democracy we need to understand. The first is that, for the rising generation, the IT revolution has already blurred the traditional distinction that we used to make between data transfer and communication. For this generation which has grown up with SMS, email, chat rooms and social networks — Facebook, MySpace, etcetera — that distinction no longer makes any sense. You do not have to be present to be communicating.

The other thing that the IT revolution is doing to the rising generation is more or less destroying the traditional idea of privacy. In Australia, we have just enacted a whole lot of privacy legislation in time for a generation who could not care less about privacy, a generation who will demand the sort of reforms that David Solomon is involved in with the freedom of information. The idea of anything other than freedom of information is both alien and absurd to this rising generation. And of course we have even been through a revolution in our sense of who we are, of what it means to be an Australian, of what a multicultural society is, et cetera.

So those are the changes at lightning speed. The threats are well known—international terrorism, border protection, environmental degradation, economic uncertainty as Australians begin to get a sense of a world economy over which we have virtually no control. The disappointments in the late nineties were two: disappointment over the fact that, after all the marching and all the talking and all the prospect, Aboriginal reconciliation did not take a great leap forward and an official apology was not made; and the republic referendum is now said, and was then said, to have been hijacked and was led to a no result when it was clear that the vast majority of Australians do want their own Australian head of state.

So all of that led to this sense of, ‘It doesn’t really matter what you think. It doesn’t matter what you say. Things are happening. Things seem beyond our control. Everything is changing too quickly.’ During the nineties, our consumption of antidepressants was a good symptom of how we were feeling. It tripled during the nineties. By the end of the nineties, some cynics were saying, ‘If by now you’re not

on antidepressants, it's because you haven't actually understood what's been happening to you.'

Of course offsetting all of these things that I have been describing was all the sweet-talk of the resources boom: 'All this stuff is out of control, but we're having another resources boom and everything will be fine.' It is the Donald Horne story all over again. We are going to be the 'lucky country' courtesy of our coal, gas, minerals and so on. So how did we respond to all this? It seems to me this was the great tidal movement of the late nineties. We switched off, we disengaged. We narrowed the focus and turned it inwards. We turned away from the big picture because it was too daunting.

We stopped watching news and current affairs on television in droves and began instead to watch programs that reflected our narrow and inward focus. Home renovations — there was a ratings bonanza for home renovation programs. You could not stop people talking about their home renovations. This became a kind of national epidemic because here, of course, was something we could control — 'I can control the colour of the bathroom tiles even if I don't know what to do about Aboriginal reconciliation.' What was the best selling book in Australia just three or four years ago while we were still in this period of disengagement? Do you happen to know? *Spotless* — a book about home cleaning hints. Australians are great book buyers. This is what we buy — *Spotless*. The second bestseller was a book called *Speed Cleaning*, the sequel to *Spotless*.

It was a period when we became obsessed about our bodies, because that was something we could control — the CSIRO diet book, the cosmetic surgery craze, body piercing and tattoos. All of these things were saying, 'I can't control all this other stuff but I can control my own body.' It was a period also where our sense of disengagement, particularly political, was reflected in the fact that we just kept re-electing governments. People change a government only if they are engaged and if they are disengaged, politicians will be seduced into thinking that this is some kind of golden era, that the community thinks there is some kind of utopia that has occurred. It is exactly the opposite. Whether out of disgust, or apathy, or disenchantment, or disappointment, people turn away from politics and, ironically, keep on electing the governments that might have disgusted, or disappointed, or disenchanted them.

Federally, at the state level and locally, we saw not just re-election after re-election but often with increased majorities, which oddly — paradoxically — was a reflection of our disengagement, as was our lack of outrage about things like the Pacific solution, the civil liberties implications of our anti-terror laws, and even WorkChoices, when first enacted, we were still asleep then. The AWB kickbacks, suggestions of lying in high places — all of these things that would once have

engaged us and got us angry essentially passed us by because of our mood of acquiescence.

For the health of our democracy, this was a very bleak period, and the label I have given it is the dreamy period—the period when we were in a kind of a political torpor of disengagement. We were more prejudiced, as people usually are when the focus turns inward. We were less tolerant, we were less compassionate, we were tougher, we wanted mandatory sentencing for just about everything. It was the period when the rise of fundamentalism in religion, in economics, in feminism and in environmentalism occurred as people were looking for simple black-and-white solutions that would get things back under control.

The good news was that it was a time of reflection. It was a time when we were talking more about personal values, about getting the balance right between our working lives and our personal lives, when the idea of getting some meaning into our lives was getting more currency. So perhaps it was a kind of societal retreat in which we were not just self-absorbed but we were also a bit more reflective. It is true, of course, that we were extravagant in that period. We were self-absorbed in the retail sense. We racked up record levels of personal and household debt in order to fund our furious desire to distract ourselves by spending, whether it was on the renovations, or the fashions, or the cosmetic surgery, or whatever it was.

But then something else happened. Around about—and it is hard to pinpoint it, but I would say around about the middle of 2006 — the early signs emerged of the second great turning of the tide. The mood began to change. A flicker of evidence that some re-engagement was occurring began to emerge. What did it? I wish I was clever enough to be able to say what did it. There are perhaps a dozen things that did it. Maybe the main one was the water crisis — the drought — which caused people to say, ‘We really are running out of water in Brisbane and in lots of other cities and towns around Australia. Perhaps that means there is something to this story of global warming and climate change.’ Even if it was not the drought, perhaps there were other things about that whole climate change story that got people energised and activated with the thought that something very serious was going to happen and that we would have to do something about it.

Of course, once you wake up to one issue, you are awake, and the dominos start to fall in the same way as they do with prejudice. Once you are given permission to be prejudiced against asylum seekers, then you can be prejudiced against anyone. Once you have woken up to an issue, then you start to wake up to WorkChoices, or David Hicks in Guantanamo Bay. The list goes on. Gradually people started lifting their heads and saying, ‘This is not right’ — almost retrospectively saying, ‘We should have been angry about some stuff back there. We should have been alert and now we are going to start being alert.’ Maybe it was our debt that got to the point where we said, ‘The rampant materialism of this decade has got to be reined in.’ Or maybe

there is just a turning of the tide in the mood of society and that is what happened around about 2006 and into 2007.

Whatever the reason, certainly by the end of 2006 the tide was clearly turning. John Howard seemed, in a way, to demonstrate the extent to which he had lost touch with the electorate when he said just before the September 2007 election, 'If you change the government, you will change the country.' I hope he did not think it was original. I hope he knew he was quoting Paul Keating. But that is what he said — 'If you change the government, you will change the country.' Of course, that was not the story at all. The country had changed. The tide had turned, which was why a change of government was inevitable and which is why, incidentally, no incumbent government today post this second tidal movement should feel secure. Even a newly elected federal government has no grounds now in a newly re-engaged electorate for feeling as though a second term is inevitable. No state or local government should feel as though incumbency has the magic power that it seemed to have during the dreamy period.

People are talking about a new order. They are saying those words — extraordinary. They are talking about a new way of doing things, things like the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, the apology to the stolen generations, even the calling together of the 2020 Summit, although I think perhaps — echoing did many others — that it might have been a more enjoyable phenomenon for the community if they had been randomly selected rather than the usual suspects. But that is another issue. The arrival of so many impressive women on a federal government front bench, the withdrawal of the troops from Iraq — all of these things feed the idea that something really significant is going to happen and is going to change which, of course, leads to a new hazard, the hazard of the euphoria of re-engagement. Euphoria, of course, is almost always the precursor to disappointment. So we will have to watch that. Certainly, we are looking at a community not just newly engaged in politics but wanting to be newly engaged, and not just in politics — engaged in conversations about everything from their rights as consumers to the democratic process.

It seems to me, to summarise this, that there is a new willingness to act, whether globally in relation to things particularly like climate change, or nationally, particularly in relation to public education and public health, or locally, in our own local community, where increasingly people are saying, 'I want to connect. I wish I felt more like part of the neighbourhood.' The desire for control, the desire for participation, the desire for reconnection is back. The sense that real change is possible is back and the only question is: do the governments — federal, state and local — understand the depth of this desire for re-engagement? Because if they do not, and if they do not respond to it very quickly, it will be squandered. ▲