1. Social Attitudes Towards Contemporary Challenges Facing Australia

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The latter years of the first decade of the twenty-first century were characterised by an enormous amount of challenge and change to Australia and Australians. Australia’s part in these challenges and changes is borne of our domestic and global ties, our orientation towards ourselves and others, and an ever increasing awareness of the interdependency of our world. Challenges and changes such as terrorism, climate change, human rights, community breakdown, work and livelihood, and crime are not new but they take on new variations and impact on us in different ways in times such as these.

In this volume we consider these recent challenges and changes and how Australians themselves feel about them under three themes: identity, fear and governance. These themes suitably capture the concerns of Australians in times of such change. Identity is our sense of ourselves and how others see us. How is this affected by the increased presence of religious diversity, especially Islamic communities, and increased awareness of moral and political obligations towards Indigenous Australians? How is it affected by our curious but changing relationship with Asia? Fear is an emotional reaction to particular changes and challenges and produces particular responses from individuals, politicians, communities and nations alike; fear of crime, fear of terrorism and fear of change are all considered in this volume.

Governance is about leadership and management—crucial themes in times of change. What are the impacts on people’s livelihoods of a changing economy and changes to our industrial relations system? What is the role of politicians and of political integrity in times of complex change? What do Australians think about the role of government spending and the very role of government in such times? This work attempts to unravel some of this complexity and provide the reader with insight into Australia as a changing nation at the start of the twenty-first century.

Empirical research takes many forms and survey research such as that presented in this volume has its drawbacks and disadvantages; however, a key advantage of survey research is that we have enough data, with the aid of an accurate and representative sample, to ascertain opinion for the whole nation. Another key advantage of this approach is that data such as those produced in the
Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) are longitudinal and to some extent transnational, giving researchers the means to compare measures and patterns over time and across countries.

Like Australian Social Attitudes: The first report and Australian Social Attitudes 2, this report provides interpretations of issues and events using survey data. In doing so it makes a claim for an empirically informed addition to the national debate around a set of important topics. Topics of national importance covered by this report include Indigenous issues, engagement with Asia, religion, crime, terrorism and the roles of government. Indeed, Australia: Identity, Fear and Governance in the 21st century presents a collage of themes, foci and evidence from Australian opinion and attitude about key contemporary dimensions of social, political and economic life. What characterises this report is the timely research into some of the more important questions that faced Australians in the last few years of the first decade of the twenty-first century. In doing so this third report provides readers with a unique, empirically informed, national snapshot of what Australians think and how they feel about these key issues. The ultimate rationale for this collection of writing is to provide the public with the benefits of empirical evidence in the hope of aiding public policy through rigorous and professional social scientific investigation, leading to insight and increased understanding of how these topics were crucial to how the nation has changed.

Identity, fear and governance: A changing Australia

The year 2007 was in many ways a watershed year for the nation. The key event signalling such change was the federal election. Kevin Rudd brought federal Labor back into office after 11 years in opposition. John Howard’s defeat represented not only a disaffected electorate but also more broadly a reorientation of national priorities and concerns. Rudd’s overwhelming victory in the November election of 2007 signalled a nation ready to change and more willing to properly consider Australia’s responsibilities towards the environment, a greater willingness for and a different means of facilitating Aboriginal reconciliation, to re-evaluate profound change in industrial relations, and a reassessment of Australia’s commitment to the ‘war on terror’ through revised thinking and policy about our engagement in the Iraq and Afghanistan theatres of war. Rudd’s Labor campaigned on all of these issues and won the 2007 federal election convincingly, securing 83 seats in the House of Representatives with a swing of 5.4 per cent. Among the Rudd Government’s first decisions of national significance was the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, the 2020 summit and the
Elections are important and useful indicators of change but they do not provide us with a complete inventory of how a nation thinks and why. The government is voted in by the people, so it stands to reason that when there is a change of government such as there was in 2007, there is something stirring in the electorate and wider community. Of great interest and importance then was how the nation felt about various issues and how these attitudes impacted on our relationships with our institutions, with our national identity, our connections with a global network of ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’, and work and everyday life. The 2007 iteration of the AuSSA gives us another means of assessing national change through a ranging and unique view of a changing Australia with the benefit of professional analysis that can link data to themes and theories.

Reflecting a changing Australia in this regard, the report identifies and holds as seminal the themes of identity, fear and governance. While the 2007 AuSSA sought opinions and attitudes from Australians about a range of issues, these themes represent a coherent set of concerns of national importance for a changing Australia. These themes suitably contextualise and address some of the key substantive social, cultural and political challenges that Australia faces into the twenty-first century pertaining to its internal historical and social logics and external referents via relationships with other countries through trade, migration and cultural traffic. Identity, fear and governance provide a conceptual context and thematic backdrop for the empirical investigations contained in this volume. This third report, derived principally from the AuSSA 2007, brings together a collection of writing and analysis from leading social scientists around Australia. While ostensibly disparate, these themes are, for the time, interrelated and impact upon one another in a variety of ways. The writing here provides insight, analysis and empirical illustration of identity, fear and governance in Australia. These themes have a number of dimensions, be they internal or external to the nation, locally based or national, and correlate with similar change and concern internationally.

Public attitudes and opinions concerning such themes are arguably important to a nation and its people at any time in its history. These themes in a nation’s history, however, are characterised by the differentiated social, economic,
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political and cultural contexts that produce change through time. There is value in examining these themes in times of particular change so as to gauge how people relate to the various impacts of change, revealing in kind a lot about a nation like Australia. The later years of the first decade of the twenty-first century represent for Australia a time of accelerated change associated with questions about what it means to be Australian, how we relate to the rest of the world, the role of terrorism, the changing nature of communities, the role and behaviour of government, the nature of work and the role of religion. These questions are not new but they are important for the time they were asked, and representative answers from the public are often difficult to ascertain without instruments such as the AuSSA.

Identity, among other things, is an ongoing reflection of who we are as individuals and as a nation. Identity, through processes of socialisation and acculturation, prescribes and proscribes belonging, relationships with specific groups and larger conceptual ‘we’ communities, and is a much debated source of self and community. Identity also shapes our views about groups with whom we may or may not be familiar but hear a lot about. Opinions are an excellent insight into what influences how people relate to those they have little experience with, with change and with difference, and also how they see themselves. This point is clearly evident in Walter’s (Chapter 2) analysis of non-Indigenous opinions towards Aboriginal Australians and Bouma’s (Chapter 4) examination of Australian feeling towards religious groups. Indigenous, religious and migrant groups have been a feature of the national conversation about identity and belonging of late and have drawn strong responses about how they relate to the nation.

Surveys such as the AuSSA consistently report a very large proportion of Australians as feeling ‘close’ or ‘very close’ to Australia or being Australian. In the 2007 AuSSA, 91 per cent of the sample reported this emotional connection to the nation, strongly affirming a key aspect of identity. This level of feeling is commensurate with a nationalism that some theorists such as Benedict Anderson report as being connected to a ‘self sacrificing love’ (2006, 141), propelling some people to even die for the nation. This form of nationalism carries the attendant cultural expression found in poetry, music and other art forms. What is often crucial in how we imagine a nation and how we feel about it is who imagines and what is imagined. The construction of a national consciousness often reveals the social fault lines and divisions of how the nation is thought of, who belongs to it and who does not.

For Indigenous Australians the battle for national recognition, belonging and acceptance has been protracted and difficult. The Federal Government’s apology to the Stolen Generations in February 2008 was a powerful public act of recognition and contrition. Despite the widespread support for the apology,
the question of how Indigenous Australians belong and connect with the wider Australian community remains, to some extent, unresolved. Walter finds that the reality of the social attitudes of a significant proportion of non-Indigenous Australians to Aboriginal equality, cultural viability and restorative justice is at odds with self-conceptions of the nation as a tolerant and egalitarian society. This has significant implications for Australian society and the way Australia projects its national identity. Walter reports that despite signs of significant momentum and support for particular Indigenous issues there still exist levels of intolerance towards some aspects of Aboriginal equality associated with particular social factors such as gender, age, location and education levels. These factors help us relate the various social and cultural dimensions of how we imagine the nation with regards to the importance of race, and reveal a level of complexity that exists in defining national identity.

Alongside Indigenous Australians, migrants have battled a historical peripheral status in the struggle for recognition and belonging to the nation. While there has been significant official support overall for migrants and immigration with policy shifts such as multiculturalism, the Howard years were seen to compromise the increasing openness that Australia had demonstrated since the 1970s. A key aspect of identity for many migrants, and indeed for many non-migrant communities in Australia, is religion. Religious identity has had an increased impact on politics and national identity in recent years. Certainly it has become a feature of federal politics to the extent that Kevin Rudd was emphasising his Christian values and background before the 2007 election and espousing its role in Western traditions of social justice. Religion has re-emerged also as a factor in debates about the decline in values in Australia, the lingering problems of social and economic development (Hitchens 2007) and knowledge and being (Dawkins 2006). Despite Australia’s relatively exemplary record of religious harmony that has accompanied the waves of migration and religious settlement, the new century has seen some emergent divisions and challenges to this good record, reflected also in other countries. In particular, being Muslim in Western countries has aroused suspicion and challenged the notion of tolerance and adherence to cultural diversity. The 2007 AuSSA reports that feelings of closeness for Islamic countries are opposite those of how Australians feel for Australia, with about 95 per cent of the sample registering sentiments of ‘not very close’ or ‘not close at all’. European leaders such as German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, have recently questioned the merits and highlighted the perceived failings of multiculturalism in Germany (Weaver 2010); others have supported this sentiment in Europe with particular reference to Muslims. The recent focus on Muslims and Islam in Australia from many quarters of course largely owes its being to the events of 11 September 2001 and links global political tensions and fear with one of the nation’s marginal religious communities.
Chapter 4 substantively re-examines the place of religion in Australian society and identity after a long absence of general social scientific commentary by examining public opinion and attitudes about the relationships between various religious groups with the aid of social distance measures. Gary Bouma explores the extent of religious plurality and its implications for social cohesion in Australia. Given the discussion about the place and role of religion in society and particular religious groups, the chapter is timely in assessing how Australians feel about the faith dimension of multiculturalism, diversity and identity. Using specific indicators from the AuSSA, Bouma examines how Australians identify with religious groups in general and how religious Australians identify with other religious Australians whose religious identity is different from their own. Through Bouma’s analysis, we can see that Australia faces cultural and identity challenges through emergent religious change as new waves of immigrants arrive with different cultural and religious backgrounds. Of particular note is how Muslims are received by the wider community in Australia and what this means for Australian tolerance.

Beyond the more internal dimensions of identity and belonging, Australians are intimately bound up with the globalised processes of economic, political and cultural change and therefore attuned to identity questions with the accent on externality and internationality. Pietsch and Aarons (Chapter 3) consider this dimension of identity in relation to Asia and Asian Australians. Asia was once feared as a threat and its perceived threat loomed large in the Australian imagination, reinforcing a singular notion of ‘Australian-ness’ through racial, cultural, political and social action that served to solidify identity; however, has the variety of change commensurate with late modernity that has been wrought upon Australia made us more open, cosmopolitan and tolerant? Or has it served to reinforce a guarded, reserved and closed identity mind-set still? Here again, federal politics may be instructive of change since 2007. John Howard was seen as promoting a lesser emphasis on Asian engagement compared with his predecessor, Paul Keating, who considered Australia’s future lay in greater engagement with our regional neighbours. The Mandarin-speaking, Asian studies graduate Kevin Rudd was keen to re-establish Australia’s commitment with Asia. Asia in particular—geographically near but in other ways very distant—has been a key relational feature of Australian identity historically, so our contemporary attitudes towards it will reveal a great deal about our cosmopolitanism and openness and how Asia has perhaps influenced being Australian through our relations with the region.

While questions of engagement with other countries and cultures are usually answered with reference to the fields of international relations, foreign policy and trade, the analysis of Asian engagement in this volume seeks a more holistic rendering by assessing individual behaviours concerning travel, food,
business, friendship networks and involvement in Asian religions. This type of analysis of identity that emphasises less the governmental and considers more the everyday follows various forms of inquiry in the style of Campbell’s (2007) *The Easternization of the West*. In doing so it presents another way of linking identity with a changing nation and a changing world through the seemingly irrepressible network of cultural traffic facilitated by migration, changing cities, extensive communications, education and travel. While much theoretical work has identified the potential for large shifts and changes in relations with societies such as Asia’s, the empirical work on individual attitude and behaviour qualifies theorised changes with a closer look at how they are distributed through a population. Pietsch and Aarons claim that engagement with Asia is differentiated across a variety of social factors, most notably education. Recent studies of cosmopolitanism suggest that education is a key factor in being open to various influences and experiences (Woodward, Skrbis and Bean 2008).

Chapter 10 develops another aspect of identity through an analysis of how Australians attain jobs through various means. Work for most Australians is a major component of personal identity, conferring a range of related economic, social and cultural statuses. Work is also an avenue to personal dignity, a means of avoiding or climbing out of poverty, and, as Huang and Western inform us here, is strongly associated with a process of social connection. The lack of work, or the potential lack of work, creates of course a searing anxiety that translates into a fear that begins to impact beyond the individual and onto the broader society. How Australians attain work is, then, a crucial question associated with one of the most important aspects of the self. Notwithstanding the importance of how well an economy or a government is performing necessary for the provision of creating employment, getting a job has a pronounced non-structural and non-economic dimension. Huang and Western report that Australians rely on a variety of methods to secure a job. Prominent amongst them is the use of social networks. Social networks locate individuals within a greater universe of specific connection and identity links that actors use to derive particular benefits, employment being one of them. Beyond the formal market for employment, Huang and Western reveal the social network process that Australians use to get a job.

What it means to be Australian, how Australians relate to one another and how Australians relate to the broader international community are ongoing questions related to the vicissitudes of social and economic life. Australian identity is brought into sharp focus in late modernity wherein migration, the threat of terrorism, global trade and cultural traffic impact strongly on our sense of ourselves. These changes bring substantial political, social and ontological challenges with a variety of responses. Fear is a key response to change and challenge that threatens key aspects of Australian democracy and
community. Fear is, in certain contexts, closely related to identity in times of change. If identity is about specific feelings and ways of belonging, emotional engagement to an ‘imagined community’ and settled patterns associated with everyday life then fear is a negative response to change that is perceived to threaten such assurances. Since 2007 an increasing fear of, among other things, Muslims, asylum-seekers, terrorism, the financial and geographic elements of restorative justice for Aboriginal Australians, the future of multiculturalism and environmental challenges such as climate change can be detected in the popular mood through various media and the tenor of public debate. These are key areas of change linked to the ongoing debate over our identity and the nation.

Aside from the connections between fear, identity and change that challenge a nation, fear has strong correlations to authority, governance and social order. This kind of fear is related to direct threats of various kinds, but particularly threats of violence manifested in terrorism, crimes against the person or property and incivility. Again there are both local and global dimensions of this variation of fear for which public opinion was sought in the AuSSA 2007 and which are considered empirically in this volume at both a transnational level (Pietsch and McAllister in Chapter 6) and a communal level (Roberts and Indemaur Chapter 5).

Fear of terrorism had promoted security, liberty and identity issues in many Western nations to prominence before 9/11 and most assuredly after it. Fear with its specific genesis in terrorism has impacted significantly on Australian tolerance, governance and political philosophy to the extent that Australia’s commitments to immigration, asylum-seeking, multiculturalism, openness to differentiated religious identity and personal liberties have come under heavy scrutiny and review. In Chapter 6 Pietsch and McAllister take a closer look at perceptions of threat in the community by looking at whether Australians are fearful of a terrorist attack. Terrorism is still a major concern for a significant proportion of Australians. Pietsch and McAllister show widespread public concern about terrorism, with relatively little distinction being made between terrorist events occurring within Australia and within the Asian region. They argue that this may reflect the global reach of modern terrorism, but it is also a consequence of the Bali bombings, which occurred overseas but had major implications for public perceptions of terrorism and for national security policy. The reach of global or transnational terror operations impacts upon Australia through places like Bali that are popular holiday spots.

Besides the more global and transnational networks of threat that produce fear, fear is a theme for local communities and is associated with the everyday life worlds of individuals. Fear, considered more locally and communally, is usually associated with crime and the perception of crime. Fear is also associated with what many assume to be declining standards of everyday life, interaction and communal connections such as social capital. The consequences of communal
fear are not only individualist but also collective and have serious social and economic consequences for development and future growth. Antisocial behaviour, public incivility and law and order issues have attracted a lot of attention from all levels of government, policy experts and community groups. Smith, Phillips and King (2010) attest to the heightened interest in incivility and increased urgency associated with its consequences with their recent work. Chapter 5 considers communally based fear in the form of the relationship between perceived incivility and perceptions of crime. Roberts and Indermaur inform us that a number of studies point to the vast range of impacts that fear of crime has on individuals inclusive of mental and physical health, and economic consequences such as mobility costs. Their perspective here, however, explores how perceptions of decline in social order are key to how people feel about crime and threat. The core of their argument is that perceptions of incivilities produce fear of both place-based physical violence and identity-based crime that is non-spatial. This is an emergent direction for criminological research so establishing the empirical ground goes a long way to gaining insight into the nature of communities and crime. The chapter also makes a number of important methodological claims about the validity of measures and considers alternative ways of tapping key concepts of use to readers with an interest in this field.

For many, the management of fear, be it through threats of violence, incivility, identity change or other, is often seen as ultimately an issue of governance. Governance is a prominent issue for Australians and attitudes and opinions are a crucial ingredient in the relationship between the governors and the governed. Governance in this book covers the very role of governments, the relationship between the government and the people, and how governments impose or relax various restraints. One important aspect of the reality and the perception of terrorism in Western countries is the extent to which people in democracies are willing to have civil liberties compromised to control the threat of terrorism. How far a government should and can go in the restraint of individual and group rights to combat terrorism is an issue for governance associated with the level of trust a populace has in its government and a core concern for a functioning democracy such as Australia. How accepting a citizenry is of the demands of government can be determined by how well it is trusted and thought to be acting in the interests of the people, its level of corruption and its level of transparency. Many of these issues relate directly to the behaviour of politicians themselves and the political systems in which they serve and act. The actual role of government, commensurate with the nature of change in recent years, has also come under question in various quarters presently, in particular government expenditure. What areas of public life are important and are deemed worthy of funding? Are funding levels right? Are they in need of
increase or decrease in various sectors of public life? Of course these questions are related to policy, electoral promises and the will and wishes of citizens. This volume offers three chapters dealing with governance.

Clive Bean addresses trust and reliability issues in Chapter 7, exploring public opinion on issues of integrity, corruption, influence and trust in politics and politicians in Australia. While Australia is not known for the widespread institutional corruption prevalent in some nations, there has been no shortage of corrupt practices, which tend to occur more in the form of individual or personal corruption rather than in a systematic, institutionalised form. Research into citizen perceptions of honesty and integrity in Australian politics has found that, among other things, the public expects higher ethical standards from politicians than politicians expect from themselves. Bean finds that there is a good deal of concern about how fairly ordinary people are treated by public officials and about a perceived lack of external political efficacy.

In Chapter 8 Wilson, Meagher and Hermes examine public perceptions of the role of government and spending preferences more generally. Using a variety of survey data, their analyses of the role of government and spending preferences suggest that Australians do not seek a drastically reduced role for government, in terms of their willingness to pay more taxes and their desire to see more spending in some key policy areas. Wilson, Meagher and Hermes consider some key elements of the changing nation and its relation to governance up to the time of Rudd’s prime ministership. Specifically they consider social policy preferences in the context of the recent economic crisis, failing infrastructure and adverse climate change. Their findings indicate that Australians tend to want more spending on education, health care and the environment and suggest that perceptions of rundown education and health systems are major factors driving the strong spending preferences that have become a longer-term trend. The consequences of social policy choices through government spending have implications for the liberal model of governance.

As we began with the 2007 election so we shall conclude this introduction to the chapters in this volume with reference to it. Here we have another dimension to work and livelihood pertinent to governance, in contrast with Chapter 10 where work is related to identity. In Chapter 9, Goot and Watson examine governance through the state of industrial relations in Australia, which registered as an important concern for many voters in the 2007 election after a long campaign around changes to industrial relations called WorkChoices. In looking at WorkChoices, Goot and Watson also look at the nature of electoral cleavages in contemporary Australian politics and society. They note the significance of union membership and Labor partisanship as the most important determinants in structuring views about WorkChoices. The issue of the power of employees’ vis-a-vis employers will continue to be an important issue for many Australians.
in the future. In essence this chapter is about perceptions of power and the importance of attitudes to unions and management in explaining the strong views about governance of such an important area of national life. The chapter also highlights the increasing importance voters placed on the issue leading up to the 2007 election, and its evolution from an issue of little consideration to a key battleground. The election of Labor saw the legislation repealed.

The thematic backdrop here is a reflection on some of the key themes and issues facing Australians as measured by the 2007 AuSSA and as thought valuable and informative by the researchers and editors. Importantly the chapters in this book empirically assess and interpret the public response to the themes, allowing the provision of analysis and interpretation, and can therefore be adjudged alongside the topical claims related to identity, fear and governance made by various media sources. As the media is an overwhelmingly powerful informational device of varying quality, it is important to complement media-generated public perception and opinion with systematic social scientific analysis of public attitudes to offer public debate additional resources and varied interpretation. In addition to the reporting of public opinion and attitudes, and as a work of empirical social science, the report also seeks to reveal what social, cultural, economic and political influences are at the heart of the opinions and attitudes of Australians. In doing so we are able to ascertain the key lines of division and unity, difference and similarity, conservation and change demonstrated by Australians.

**About the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes**

The research in this book draws primarily from the third AuSSA completed in late 2007 and early 2008. The AuSSA is a product of the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research at The Australian National University in collaboration with researchers from other Australian and overseas universities. The AuSSA is also the official Australian contribution to the world’s two major social survey consortiums: the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), covering 41 countries, and the World Values Survey, covering more than 80 countries. Version A contains the ISSP 2006 Role of Government module and Version B contains the ISSP 2007 Leisure Time and Sports module.

The AuSSA takes the form of a mail questionnaire sent to more than 10 000 Australian citizens every two years. The survey itself was prepared by five Principal Investigators—Timothy Phillips, Bruce Tranter, Deborah Mitchell, Juliet Pietsch and Ken Reed—in cooperation with the AuSSA Advisory Panel, which met to draft the survey at The Australian National University at the end
of 2006. Core survey questions are reviewed every two years and new items—from a variety of national and international sources—are proposed by members of the team. Our aim is to ensure the AuSSA has comparability over time and with other national and international surveys, but also to ensure new topics relevant to Australia are surveyed, and that we contribute to developing survey methodology. Accordingly, AuSSA 2007 was distributed to a stratified systematic random sample of 10 000 Australians aged eighteen or over who were selected from an up-to-date version of the Australian Electoral Commission’s Electoral Roll. The sample reflects the State-by-State distribution of the Australian population. To view the AuSSA 2007 questionnaires, see the AuSSA website at: <http://aussa.anu.edu.au/questionnaires.html>

Along with a wealth of other opinion data, AuSSA 2007 results are available publicly through the Australian Data Archive’s online data analysis system, NESSTAR, at: <http://www.ada.edu.au> Access online is free (but you will need to register with a password). The data are also available through the ASSDA direct at: <assda@anu.edu.au>; they can also supply the data set in machine-readable formats as well as provide the AuSSA 2007 User’s Guide (Study No. 01088).

Acknowledgments

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes has consistently provided the scholarly community and the broader public with high quality data from which informed commentary and original scholarship has issued. This volume is the latest production to utilize this valuable resource with the aim of contributing to an increasingly informed and intelligent public debate around a number of key issues facing Australia. With this larger aim, and all the various smaller components involved in an edited work in mind, the editors would like to acknowledge the assistance and advice of a number of people in the preparations of this volume. In particular we sincerely thank Ann Evans, Deborah Mitchell, and Marian Sawer for their various efforts and guidance throughout the course of assembling this work. Thanks and acknowledgments also need to go to those involved in the design, construction, and administration of the 2007 wave of the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes; Timothy Phillips especially, and the AuSSA 2007 advisory committee including Gabrielle Meagher, Shaun Wilson, David Denemark, Mark Western, and Bruce Tranter. We also than Beth Battrick from ANU E Press and Jan Borrie for their editorial support. Finally, our recognition and thanks go to the team at the Australian Data Archive at The Australian National University.
References


