



# Values and visions

## Youth and the failure of modern Western culture<sup>1</sup>

In this age of dissatisfaction with our present, and unease about our future, science writer and strategic analyst Richard Eckersley challenges us to address the fundamental issue of 'how we are to live' – an issue he places beyond the quantifiable and policy-based matters and into the wider realm of culture or 'how we see the world and our place in it, in both a social and spiritual sense, and the values we uphold'.

by Richard Eckersley

**I**n 1992, Macquarie Primary School in Canberra published a collection of student poetry and other works called *The spinning tree*. The title poem reads:

*We are based upon one tree,  
all my friends and me.  
The wind is blowing strong,  
I'm not lasting long, the dying tree is red,  
it's spinning in my head.  
Time is going fast.  
I know I'll never last.*

Another poem is called 'ZED St':

*On the side of Z street, grey mould buildings on fire,  
children left on the bitumen cold,  
the trees as naked as a flower stripped of its beauty.  
Everyone is dying, everything is dying.  
On Z street, there's a crystal ball in a fortune teller's hold.*

Another, called 'Last ...', reads in part:

*I skim across the earth.  
I see nothing left,  
But one youth at birth.  
It was hope of what I'd seen  
in this infernal heat.  
The youth was just a dream.  
My dreams gone,  
I've gone in this infernal heat.  
Earth has lost its life,  
We have lost our chance.  
Earth has died so fast.  
Our first chance was our last.*

Not every vision is black; some are frivolous, light-hearted, bright. And some of the more serious still express hope. Nevertheless, fear of what the future holds for them is a common theme in the children's work.

*The spinning tree* was created by the students under the guidance of a young writer-in-residence, Craig Dent. He had asked them to close their eyes and imagine the year 2020; their poems and ideas could be as weird and wonderful as they wanted them to be. Dent (quoted in Liosatos 1992) says that what he found disturbing about the exercise was that the children wrote and worked on their own, but a lot of their imagery was the same:

What they're writing about is very apocalyptic. They're not sure about where they are going ... I hadn't really noticed it. I mean just in everyday things around the school, kids are kids – they're very happy – but I think this book will really shock a few people when they realise that this is really what the kids think ... I think a lot of them are really afraid of what's going to happen to the earth (Liosatos 1992, p.25).

*The spinning tree* poems are not an isolated example of this fear. Surveys of the outlook of children and adolescents have yielded graphic expressions of their concern for the world they expect to inherit.

Earlier studies tended to focus on concerns about nuclear war. However, more recent research shows that young people's sense of futurelessness has not lessened with the end of the Cold War. Rather the studies suggest a deepening concern not only about war, but also global environmental destruction, growing

violence and inequality, and an increasingly dehumanised, machine-dominated world (Eckersley 1987, 1988).

For example, in 1990 the *Sydney Morning Herald* conducted a survey in which about 120 eleven-year-old Sydney school children were asked to write down their perceptions of Australia's future and how their country would fare in the new millennium (Totaro 1990). The idea was to publish a cheerful view of Australia's future; the *Herald* chose bright, normal, healthy youngsters, young enough to be untarnished by cynicism. This is what the newspaper said of the results:

Yes, we expected a little economic pessimism, some gloom about the environment and job prospects and perhaps even a continuing fear of nuclear war. But nothing prepared us for the depth of the children's fear of the future, their despair about the state of our planet and their bleak predictions for their own nation, Australia (Totaro 1990, p.29).

Similar findings emerged from a survey of almost 650 NSW upper secondary school students (Hutchinson 1992). Many of the respondents experienced "a strong sense of negativity, helplessness, despondency and even anguish" about the anticipated problems facing our society and the world. They expressed concerns and feelings about relentless, mechanistic changes in which human feelings, self-esteem and aspirations are too readily sacrificed, about "a machine at the heart of the world". The great majority believed a "hard" or violent technological image of the future was likely or very likely.

For a majority, negative imagery of the future ranged from perceptions of intensifying pressure and competition in schools in the twenty-first century to worsening trends in physical violence and war, joblessness and poverty, destructive technology and environmental degradation (Hutchinson 1992).

Another survey, of 500 Sydney teenagers, conducted by Loud Advertising, found the average adolescent thought the world was "going down the gurgler" (Hutak & Borham 1994).

These visions are not a distant, science-fiction picture of the future, but are closely

The concerns of youth represent, I believe, the collapse of the central tenet of Western culture: the belief in material "progress".

related to what young people see happening around them today. A recent survey, carried out for ABC TV's youth program, *Attitude*, showed 57% of 14- to 24-year-olds felt their world was worse than the world their parents grew up in; less than a quarter believed their world was better (AGB McNair 1993).

## Cultural failings

What does such a world view or outlook on life among children, adolescents and young adults mean? In short, we don't know.

Some researchers argue that every generation of youth is confronted with problems and uncertainties as it crosses the threshold to adulthood; the issues just change (Harari 1993). They say that the nature of youth has always been contentious and perplexing for adults, and with each generation there is a rediscovery of young people as a problem or an issue; "moral panics" about youth have occurred before. Some question whether modern youth are as bleakly pessimistic as these surveys suggest. Others are also inclined to dismiss the survey findings as having little, if any, impact on young people's wellbeing, saying that their more personal experiences are what matter (Eckersley 1988).

Certainly, other surveys indicate young people are generally happy with their lives and remain optimistic about their personal futures, expecting – or hoping – to get what they want out of life. (The 1990–1991 recession, however, may have clouded even this personal optimism.) While they might express concerns about the future of Australian society, or the world, the evidence suggests they don't actively worry about it a lot, and that it is the more personal things – problems with friends, parents, school or work – that get them down (Eckersley 1988).

It is also true that some of the current comments echo those of reports on youth in the 1950s and 1960s (Harari 1993). I suspect that this shows, however, not that nothing much has changed, but that youth are vulnerable to the peculiar hazards of our uncertain times, and that what we are witnessing is not a new phenomenon, but a strengthening historical development, with each successive generation coming under greater stress.

It is easy to understand why youth today might feel overwhelmed by the challenges of adulthood: they live in a more rapidly changing and unstable personal and social environment and are confronted by much more information about more and graver problems – very real problems – at a much earlier age than previous generations.

I want to argue that the concerns of youth about the world and its future, together with other features of modern Western culture, are of profound significance to them and us, and to the future. My concern is that *The spinning tree* poems and the survey results reveal a fundamental failing of modern Western culture: the absence of a shared ideal or vision of our society and its future, a vision that nurtures and nourishes the individual and helps to hold a society together.

The concerns of youth represent, I believe, the collapse of the central tenet of Western culture: the belief in material "progress".

It is not just that the modern vision of the future is grim – life has always been hard for many people. It is that this negative vision belies our beliefs about the world; it does not fit the story of how things should be. Furthermore, this vision has emerged at a time when many people have lost a strong belief in anything that transcends the material world and that might sustain them in the face of its dangers and disappointments.

Related to this lack of faith in the future are two other flaws in modern Western culture that reinforce the tendency towards personal isolation and alienation, making the individual more vulnerable and society less cohesive. These are our value system and the rapid rate of change across so many aspects of our lives.

## Values

Modern Western culture is characterised by moral confusion and contradiction – even the promotion of inappropriate and antisocial values.

Part of the problem goes back at least as far as the 16th century and the Scientific Revolution, which changed so radically the way we see ourselves and our place in the world. Science's rational, objective, reductionist, mechanistic world view separated fact from value and

caused the magical, spiritual dimension of our lives to wither.

The evolution of Western culture has been marked by the erosion of religious and communal values and the elevation of individual, secular and material values. Especially over the decades since World War II, our belief in God, King and Country has been increasingly displaced by faith in progress, the belief that the life of each individual would always continue to get better: freer, wealthier, healthier, safer, more comfortable, more exciting.

Surveys show a high level of moral doubt and ambivalence among Australians. This is hardly surprising given that modern Western culture, especially as reflected in the mass media, makes virtues of what traditionally were vices – pride (self-centredness), avarice, lust, envy, anger – while many traditional virtues such as faith, hope, charity and fortitude, for example, are neglected. Most people may grasp what values matter but have difficulty living by those values because of a lack of cultural reinforcement and encouragement.

According to a 1989 study by social psychologist Hugh Mackay, young people believe moral values are declining and, unless they are religious, find it hard to identify an accepted moral code within society. Lacking a broader sense of “community”, Mackay says, many have difficulty in establishing an ethical framework that has any application beyond the boundaries of their own circle of friends.

In a 1992 report Mackay says that Australians’ conviction that Australian society has lost its bearings is deepening:

A recurring theme in contemporary discussion about beliefs is that Australians wish they had a more coherent set of beliefs; more clearly defined principles to guide their daily lives; a more established set of reference points for defining the values and ideals of the Australian way of life ... Australians are understandably reaching the point where they would like to feel that something is certain; that some rules still apply; that some values will turn out to be enduring (Mackay 1992, p.6).

The American anthropologist Donald Campbell (cited in Funkhouser 1989) reviewed a variety of cultures at many points in time and

found that some values are almost universal. Nearly all human cultures teach altruism, conformity, generosity, deference to authority and honesty; they preach against selfishness, pride, stinginess, greed, gluttony, envy, lust, theft, cowardice, nonconformity, disobedience and stubbornness.

Campbell saw these values as providing the necessary balance between the interests of the individual (which don’t need personal reinforcement) and the needs of the community (which do). Traditional values reflect, he believes, timeless wisdom about human interactions with one another and with the natural world. (I am arguing the general principle here; some of the virtues and vices are debatable in our present circumstances.)

## The pace of change

Another important dimension of our cultural crisis arises from the accelerating rate and nature of the changes – economic, social, cultural, technological – that have occurred since World War II. These changes have torn us from our past and from the cultural heritage that provided the moral framework to our lives.

I am not rejecting every aspect of Western culture, or claiming that the changes of the past decades have been all bad. There is a lot to be said for the more pluralist, tolerant and culturally diverse, and less conformist, parochial and sexist society we now live in. However, there is also a cost.

In his book, *Reinventing Australia*, Hugh Mackay (1993, pp.11-20) refers to our condition as the Last Straw Syndrome – where so much stress and anxiety is being experienced because of the unprecedented rate and extent of change and the radical redefinition in our way of life that even quite minor upsets can feel like the “last straw”:

... all over Australia, people feel themselves to be operating on a short fuse. Little things which might, in previous generations, have been quite easily tolerated and absorbed as part of the ups and downs of daily life, now seem to assume bigger proportions. The general level of anxiety in the community is such that it only requires a small spark to ignite feelings of irritation, helplessness, frustration, anger or violence (Mackay 1993, pp.11-20).

Mackay says that each change, taken separately, may be seen as enriching, enhancing or in other ways improving the lives of individual Australians. But, taken together, the scale and scope of the changes have been too much for most of us to take in our stride: "The story of Australia between the early seventies and the early nineties is the story of a society which has been trying to cope with too much change, too quickly, and on too many fronts" (Mackay 1993, pp.11-20).

## Consequences

The three features of modern Western culture that I have discussed – our chosen dominant values, the rate and complexity of change, and the lack of a shared vision of society and its future – all tend to isolate individuals from each other and from society, increasingly leaving people with only their own personal resources to deal with life. These flaws mean young people, who are establishing their identities, values and beliefs, lack a social and spiritual context, a set of clear reference points, to help them make sense of life and their place in the world. They have no ideal to believe in, nothing to convince them to subordinate their own personal interests to a higher common goal. Our culture offers little beyond self-interest to believe in and live for. For most people and for societies that is not enough.

Thus modern Western culture is increasingly failing to meet the basic requirements of any culture, which are to provide people with a sense of meaning, belonging and purpose and so a sense of personal identity, worth and security; a measure of confidence or certainty about what the future holds for them; and a framework of moral values to guide their conduct.

It is these basic qualities of culture that hold societies together and sustain their members through the trouble and strife of their personal lives. Without them, societies fracture and decline and individuals become alienated and less resilient; the threshold of resistance to despair or anger is lowered.

The consequence is not that people are utterly dejected and defeated, although an increasing minority are. If the issue were so obvious, we would do more about it. The threat

is more insidious, more subtly destructive – a slow poisoning of the spirit, the gradual decay of civic life.

Robbed of the broader, even transcendent, levels of meaning in our lives, many of us rely heavily on more personal levels of meaning, producing one of the hallmarks of the modern age: a desperate, even pathological, self-preoccupation with our looks, our careers, sex lives, personal relationships, personal development, health and fitness, our children (as extensions of ourselves) and so on. The risk is that this reliance makes us more vulnerable to a "collapse of meaning" when things go wrong in our personal lives.

One reason that the cost of our cultural failings is not more strikingly obvious is that humans are extraordinarily resilient and adaptable; as Dostoyevsky said, we are beings who will become accustomed to everything. Another consideration is that our culture, obviously, deeply influences our perceptions about life. It is not easy to see a culture's failings from the inside.

It may be true that most people continue to enjoy life, suppressing any sense of unease or emptiness by keeping themselves busy, amused, distracted. Even this statement, however, needs qualification. There is, I sense, a growing discrepancy between the public and private person, an element of pretence, even self-delusion, as well as adaptation. In *The beauty myth*, Naomi Wolf says of women (and I suspect it is as true of men): "Many, though publicly confident, are secretly feeling vulnerable, exhausted, overwhelmed and besieged" (cited in Grady 1991).

Most young people today seem happy enough and intent on enjoying and getting on with their lives, but as a generation they display cynicism, wariness, impatience and social passivity or disengagement that betray their concerns and apprehension about life. A recent (1993) survey of 20-year-olds, published by the Clemenger group of companies, identified "a group of uncertain young people without ambition, with few role models and without a clear vision for the future". They were a group in limbo.

They showed no passion for issues or for life itself ... Where one might have expected to find youthful idealism, there existed only materialism and selfishness ... These young people expressed an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and

consequently have disengaged themselves from the political process (Clemenger 1993).

The recent Loud Advertising agency survey of Sydney teenagers found they lacked idealism and any respect for authority, were materialistic, irreverent and cynical, and couldn't care less about politics (Hutak & Borham 1994). Savings are out, long-term planning is out. According to a director of Loud Advertising, young people are "thinking five minutes ahead – not five years ahead ... Life is a much more uncertain commodity. You therefore go for the short-term grab" (Hutak & Borham 1994).

A report on Sydney 18- to 29-year-olds by another agency, McCann-Erickson (1994), emphasises that this is a generation of individuals and that it is pointless to try to label it. Yet this tendency to proclaim their individuality could also be described as one of the qualities of modern youth, again showing that our culture offers little beyond the individual in terms of identity and meaning.

The McCann-Erickson report, like others, reveals young people's pessimism about the state of the world, their feeling of being powerless to do anything about it, their tendency to focus only on the things that affect them personally, the absence of heroes and role models, and their desire "to escape from reality" (McCann-Erickson 1994). The following are some of the reflections of several young people who helped with the report, including doing the field work:

*As a generation we walk into an uncertain future comfortable only in our individuality ...* (Tony).

*This generation is aware of the issues of today, namely AIDS, unemployment and the environment, [but] is not united enough to overcome these incredible hurdles ... [I]t is so individual in that every man and woman pursues their own goals, seeks their own satisfactions, and looks out for themselves. The people are not active in the issues that can and mostly do affect them ... They have the belief that their actions will not change things, or that things will not harm them ...* (Paul).

*They are three million Australians all with different experiences, different ideas and perceptions. Different styles and philoso-*

*phies. How can this group obtain a common foundation whereby all will become one?* (Kathy).

*People in this generation have no true heroes, we have idols* (Pantelis).

While most people may still be managing, even content, it is also the case that more are not. Our cultural failings are, I believe, contributing to much more tragic patterns in Western life. The report, *The progress of nations* (Adamson 1993), says that children in the industrial world are being devalued:

Many nations are witnessing a steady rise in school drop-out rates and underperformance, in reported cases of the physical and sexual abuse of children, in teenage violence and suicide, in eating disorders, alcoholism, crime and drug abuse, and in a harder-to-quantify disaffection, demoralisation, and disillusionment. These symptoms, increasingly breaking the surface of homes and communities which are not poor, tell of the stress on family life and family relationships (pp.43-45).

Some of the statistics are deeply disturbing. In Australia, suicide among males aged 15 to 24 has more than trebled in the last 40 years; among females in this age group it has doubled (Eckersley 1988, 1992a). Australia now has a rate of youth suicide among the highest in the industrial world. The extent to which suicide, which remains a very rare event, represents only the tip of a pyramid of personal pain and distress is demonstrated by epidemiological studies that have shown attempted suicide rates among high school students range up to 11% (Pearce & Martin 1993).

The mental health of Australian young people was further highlighted in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) (1993) report which stated that an estimated 15% of adolescents suffer from a recognisable psychiatric disorder, with about 5% suffering from serious disorders that warrant intervention. Major depressive illness, once regarded as a malady of the middle-aged and elderly, is becoming increasingly common among teenagers and young adults, with some evidence that rates have increased tenfold or more over the course of this century (Cross-

... our culture offers little beyond the individual in terms of identity and meaning.

I want to emphasise the importance of the more intangible aspects of our lives – of perceptions and beliefs.

national Collaborative Group 1992; Klerman & Weissman 1989).

## Explanations

The link between modern Western culture and some of the broader traits of modern youth is self-evident. My suggestion that there is also a link to the more serious problem of youth is more contentious, and perhaps warrants greater justification.

The psychological and social problems of youth are usually explained in personal, social and economic terms: high unemployment, especially the growth in long-term unemployment; peer relations; increasing education pressures; family dysfunction (including child abuse and neglect); increased inequality and poverty; and more youth homelessness.

While these factors are undeniably important, I have focused on culture in this paper because the socioeconomic issues are well-known and extensively discussed. Unemployment and changes in the family are, for example, the subjects of a great deal of public and political debate. The nature of our culture, in contrast, is usually overlooked, its impact hard to discern because it is so pervasive.

I want to show that what is happening to young people is more than the specific consequences of discrete personal and socioeconomic events, but is also a consequence of the fundamental cultural framework of Western civilisation. I want to emphasise the importance of the more intangible aspects of our lives – of perceptions and beliefs – as opposed to the often quantifiable changes in social and economic structures or physical circumstances, such as the growth of the single parent family, or in unemployment and poverty. Cultural change is a powerful force behind the structural changes taking place, but also affects people's wellbeing even in the absence of structural dislocations.

Research into the relationship between meaning in life and psychological wellbeing suggests, as common sense would indicate, a clear link between the two (Zika & Chamberlain 1992). A lack of meaning is associated with psychological illness; positive life meaning is related to strong religious beliefs, self-transcendent values, membership in groups,

dedication to a cause and clear life goals. A recent New Zealand study found "a substantial and consistent relation between meaning in life and psychological wellbeing" noting that while causation cannot be determined from this relationship, "theory would suggest that meaning in life has a broad and pervasive influence on wellbeing, and that people who lack meaning are likely to show detrimental effects in all aspects of their psychological functioning" (Zika & Chamberlain 1992, pp.133-45).

Qualities such as belonging or meaning may seem nebulous, but their importance to wellbeing is highlighted in an American study involving 36,000 high school students in Years 7 to 12 (Resnick, Harris & Blum 1993). The study sought to determine those factors which "protected" students from "acting out behaviours" (multiple drug use, absenteeism, risk of unintentional injury, pregnancy and delinquency) and "quietly disturbed behaviours" (poor body image, disordered eating, emotional stress and suicidal involvement). Some 80% of the students fell into a high-risk category for at least one of the behaviours; about 10% were at high risk for four or more.

The most powerful protective factors were found to be school connectedness (enjoyment, sense of belonging), family connectedness (sense of closeness, belonging, caring) and religious/spiritual connectedness (religious affiliation or observance). Low family stress and younger age were also protective factors. Contrary to popular belief, socioeconomic status was not a significant factor, while a two-parent family was found to be the weakest, though still significant, protective factor against acting out behaviour, but not quietly disturbed behaviour (Resnick, Harris & Blum 1993, p.29).

Other evidence of the role of culture in wellbeing comes from recent research into anorexia nervosa. While anorexia is often linked to the pressures, especially through the media, on women in Western societies to conform to idealised notions of beauty, sociologist Catherine Garrett (1992) argues its causes go deeper, and that anorexia nervosa represents "a crisis of meaning for both men and women ... an attempt to create meaning through control of the body", and "a spiritual search taking place in a secular society".

The reason why issues of control are so important in the lives of people with anorexia is that they have lost, or have never experienced, a sense of meaning. Most of the women in my study made it clear that their choice to fast was a way of creating a pattern to live ... Many of the women were conscious of this choice as part of a quest and explicitly named it a spiritual quest (Garrett, quoted in Newall 1993).

Evidence of a different kind for the importance of cultural factors in psychological adjustment comes from a major study in Hong Kong (Boyden 1987) which found that perceptions were important in determining how people responded to high population density: whether people *feel* crowded is likely to be by far the most important determinant of psychological maladjustment, more important than actual physical density.

Significantly, exposure to Western influence was associated with greater intolerance of crowding. It seems it is feeling deprived, rather than deprivation itself, that matters – an important point when modern Western culture is predicated on the principle of making people feel dissatisfied with who they are and what they have.

Suicide among young males has risen most and is now highest in the “new” industrial nations, including Australia, New Zealand and Canada – heterogeneous societies without the anchor of a long and shared cultural heritage (Eckersley 1993). It is less common (although probably under-reported) and has increased little in countries such as Spain and Italy, where family and religious ties remain strong. In Japan, where despite the persistent stories about high rates of youth suicide, the rates among both young men and women have dropped dramatically from what appeared to be the highest in the industrial world in the 1950s to among the lowest now. The Japanese see youth as a vigorous apprenticeship, with the emphasis on integration into society (Eckersley 1993).

Finally, some anecdotal evidence about the personalities of some of those young people who have taken their own lives supports a direct link between the deficiencies of modern Western culture and suicide. Jon and Sue Stebbins (1994), of The Compassionate Friends, a self-help group for parents and siblings of young people who have died, say their son, who committed suicide at 18, was a delightful, warm, intelligent and

gentle person, sensitive and caring of others. He showed an intense awareness of issues and imperfections in the world; a keen sense of right and wrong; an aversion to violence, war etc.; an awareness of environmental issues and a love of nature and animals; and a strong creative streak.

They suggest these qualities may be significant because “almost all parents of suicides describe similar characteristics and qualities in their own children”. Jon and Sue Stebbins also note their son’s “deep unhappiness and his lack of confidence about himself and a future”. There was a break-up in a relationship a few weeks before his death – again something reported by many parents. But their strongest feeling about their son’s life, they say, was “a deep concern for his inability to find a positive direction in life”.

## Remaking our culture

The harm modern Western culture is doing to our wellbeing provides reason enough to forge a new system of values and beliefs. However, the need is made even more critical by the relationship between modern Western culture and the other serious problems Australia and other Western societies face: the economic difficulties; the social decay; the environmental degradation.

Fundamentally, these are not problems of government policy, or some inevitable economic or technological evolution; they are problems of culture, of the beliefs and moral priorities of each one of us. In the absence of far-reaching shifts in our personal values and choices, these problems cannot be solved by the manipulation of policy levers alone.

Modern Western culture is the antithesis of what we need for an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable world. At a time when a long-term, holistic outlook is essential, our culture’s lack of a coherent and appealing vision for the future encourages short-term, fragmented action; when we need idealism and hope, our culture breeds cynicism and apathy; and when it is becoming increasingly necessary for people to “tread more lightly on the earth”, our values encourage us to tread more heavily – indulgence, not frugality, is our creed.

Addressing our problems requires vision, but also good management; good management requires clarity of direction and strength of



purpose. We cannot know what to do if we don't know, or can't agree on, what we believe and where we want to go.

Now, as never before, we have to set broad, long-term goals for our society – not just economic, social or environmental objectives, but goals that define, in broad terms, the totality of how we are to live – and manage change towards those ends. As the Commission for the Future's motto said: "First we have to imagine a better future, then we can build towards it" (Eckersley 1992b).

This ideal will have to be based on very different beliefs and values than those that have underpinned Western lifestyles, especially in recent decades. It will mean repudiating the moral priority given to the individual over the community; rights over responsibilities; the material over the spiritual; the present over the future; style over substance; the ephemeral over the enduring. It will mean abandoning the pursuit of an ever-rising material standard of living, at least as measured by increasing disposable income, in favour of a higher, sustainable quality of life.

This shift in values will have to be reflected in radical, long-term changes in our patterns of economic activity: a need to emphasise not just the creation of wealth but also its distribution and conservation; the creation of an economy driven less by personal consumption and much more by private and public investment in bringing about the far-reaching physical and social reconstruction necessary to create a society that is more economically competitive, more environmentally sustainable, more socially equitable and, most important of all, more human.

This objective is not incompatible with the need for continuing economic growth, at least for the foreseeable future. In the developed world, economic growth now depends more on the growth in knowledge, on innovation, than on the consumption of resources. It should be possible, if we are wise, to develop an economic system based on the frugal and efficient use of non-renewable resources, the substitution of plentiful resources for those that are scarce, and the sustainable use of renewable resources, with the growth component based essentially on the growth in knowledge, which really is a limitless resource.

Hopelessly naive? Perhaps. But there are precedents, even in our historical lineage. Here

is a description of life in Greece during the 6th century BC by the historian W. H. McNeill (cited in Boyden n.d.):

The measure of a good man and citizen came to be the modest life of an independent farmer, owning enough land to live decently, [and] ready to play his part manfully on the battle field. As this ideal won increasing acceptance, the amassing of private wealth lost much of its attractiveness; and by the close of the century, even wealthy aristocrats had begun to live and dress simply. Competitive conspicuous consumption which had been characteristic of the nobility in the seventh century was directed into new channels, as men of wealth began to take pride in financing public buildings and services with a munificence they no longer dared or cared to lavish upon themselves. Thus a lively spirit of egalitarianism and civic solidarity began to distinguish Greek from foreign ways of life.

## Conclusion

The predicament we face in Australia and other Western nations demands a personal response, but must go beyond the personal. It requires social activism, but must go beyond the usual goals of social justice.

Our situation does mean that each of us must look long and hard at our own values, choices and priorities; but personal changes are not in themselves enough. Similarly, specific injustices and disadvantages arising from inequalities between groups in our society require attention, but also are not in themselves enough.

What we must do is address the fundamental issue of how we are to live, which most importantly embraces matters of culture – how we see the world and our place in it, in both a social and spiritual sense, and the values we uphold.

It is a revolutionary task.

There is a growing awareness in at least some sections of the community of the need to make some radical shifts in our way of life – and growing frustration that this recognition is not reflected in mainstream public and political debate, which remains stuck in an old and increasingly dysfunctional cultural paradigm.

The brighter side of the rather bleak picture of cultural decline I have sketched is that before

a new order can emerge the old order must first fail. We are living in the turmoil of a profound transition in Western culture.

It is this hope in a new beginning, this excitement of the challenge, this imperative to look beyond our personal horizons that we must impress upon young people today.

## Notes

1. This paper was first published in *Youth Studies Australia* v.14, no.1, 1995 and has not undergone a peer-review process.

## References

- Adamson, P. (ed.) 1993, *The progress of nations: The nations of the world ranked according to their achievements in health, nutrition, education, family planning, and progress for women*, UNICEF House, NY, pp.43,45.
- AGB McNair 1993, *ABC: Report on attitudes of youth*, survey for ABC TV's Attitude program.
- Boyden, S. 1987, *Western civilisation in biological perspective – patterns in biohistory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp.273-78.
- n.d., 'The human aptitude for culture and its biological consequences', *Perspectives in Human Biology*, n.1, pp.29-108.
- Clemenger 1993, *20 twenty – A clearer view of today's twenty year olds*, report in conjunction with Beveridge and Cummings, Sydney.
- Cross-national Collaborative Group 1992, 'The changing rate of major depression', *Journal of the American Association*, v.268, pp.3098-105.
- Eckersley, R. 1987, *Australian attitudes to science and technology and the future*, The Australian Commission for the Future, Melbourne.
- 1988, *Casualties of change: The predicament of youth in Australia*, The Australian Commission for the Future, Melbourne.
- 1992a, 'Failing a generation: The impact of culture on the health and well-being of youth', paper presented to Australian Rotary Health Research Fund Fifth International Conference, *Adolescent health behaviour: Identifying vulnerability and resilience*, Canberra, November, pp.11-14.
- 1992b, *Youth and the challenge to change*, Australian Commission for the Future, *Apocalypse? No!*, essay series n.1, July.
- 1993, Submission to National Health and Medical Research Council Inquiry into Suicide Prevention.
- Funkhouser, G.R. 1989, 'Values changes necessary for a sustainable society', *Bulletin of Science Technology and Society*, v.9, n.1, pp.19-32.
- Garrett, C. 1992, 'Men and anorexia nervosa: A challenge to current theory', paper presented at the conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, Brisbane, 16 September.
- Grady, L. 1991, 'Battling the beauty myth', *Canberra Times*, 23 February, p.B8, (a review of Naomi Wolf's *The beauty myth*).
- Harari, F. 1993, 'The more things change ...', *The Australian*, 3 December, p.15.
- HREOC 1993, *Human rights and mental illness, Report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission National Inquiry into the Human Rights of People with Mental Illness*, v.2, AGPS, Canberra, p.604.
- Hutak, M. & Borham, S. 1994, 'Generation who?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 February, p.11.
- Hutchinson, F. 1992, 'Futures consciousness and the school', PhD thesis, University of New England, Armidale, NSW.
- Klerman, G. & Weissman, M. 1989, 'Increasing rates of depression', *Journal of the American Association*, v.261, n.15, pp.2229-35.
- Liosatos, T. 1992, 'Child poets think alike', *Canberra Times*, 19 July, p.25.
- Mackay, H. 1989, *Young Australians – a qualitative study of the attitudes and values of today's 10-18-year-olds*, Mackay Research, Sydney.
- 1992, 'What do I believe in?', *The Mackay report*, September.
- 1993, *Reinventing Australia – the mind and mood of Australia in the 90s*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, pp.11-20.
- Macquarie Primary School 1992, *The spinning tree*, Canberra.
- McCann Erickson 1994, *Generation 2000*, McCann Monitor, Sydney.
- Newall, M. 1993, 'Unbearable weight', *Canberra Times*, 1 June, p.13.
- Pearce, C. & Martin, G. 1993, 'Locus of control as an indicator of risk for suicidal behaviour among adolescents', *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, v.88, pp.409-14.
- Resnick, M.D., Harris, L.J. & Blum, R.W. 1993, 'The impact of caring and connectedness on adolescent health and well-being', *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 29, suppl.1, pp.S3-S9.
- Stebbins, J. & Stebbins, S. 1994, 'The suicide experience: From a self-help group and bereavement perspective', paper presented to Public Health Association of Australia National Conference, *Public health significance of suicide: Prevention strategies*, Canberra, 28 February to 1 March.
- Totaro, P. 1990, 'Children of the apocalypse', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 December, p.29.
- Zika, S. & Chamberlain, K. 1992, 'On the relation between meaning in life and psychological well-being', *British Journal of Psychology*, v.83, pp.133-45.

## AUTHOR

Richard Eckersley is a Visiting Fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University and a founding director of Australia 21, a public-interest research company.

Richard has a background in journalism and worked as a strategist with the CSIRO and The Commission for the Future. He is author of *Well & good: Morality, meaning and happiness* (Text Publishing 2005).