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Backs to the future: The psychosocial dynamics of the global emergency

Richard Eckersley

When it comes to the potential for mobilising Australians to act decisively on climate change and other global threats, it seems we are going backwards. Polls here and overseas suggest a retreat in recent years in levels of public concern about environmental issues, including climate change and resource depletion.

The reason may be, in part, to protect our own personal wellbeing. This state of affairs underscores the complexity of human subjectivity: what most concerns us is not necessarily a matter of the seriousness of the issues or our awareness of them.

The results of a 2012 GlobeScan poll across 22 countries, including Australia, show environmental concerns have fallen since 2009, reaching 20-year lows for 12 countries with data going back to 1992.¹ GlobeScan Chairman Doug Miller said scientists were reporting that evidence of environmental damage was stronger than ever—but the poll data showed that economic crisis and a lack of political leadership meant that the public was starting to tune out. ‘Those who care about mobilizing public opinion on the environment need to find new messages in order to reinvigorate a stalled debate.’

Australian surveys paint a similar picture. Ipsos Research has found that concern over environmental issues has fallen off the agenda over the past two years.² Even the extreme weather and related events of the past summer have not translated into a resurgence in concern. In their monthly surveys, the environment dropped in rank from fifth to ninth as one of the top three issues facing the nation between November 2010 and March 2013; among young Australians, it fell from fourth to eleventh.

Ipsos has also seen an erosion in concern over climate change in its annual climate change report: the proportion of Australians agreeing that climate change poses a serious threat to our way of life over the next 25 years declined from 59% to 49% between 2010 and 2012.^{3,4} Ipsos research manager Jen Brook says this could be partly due to people getting a bit fatigued with how ‘serious’ the issue is.⁴ ‘The public are told this is a really important issue that has huge implications, and yet life goes on and the everyday concerns are stronger.’

Specific factors like the global financial crisis, the failures of successive climate change conferences to agree on decisive action, and the influential lobbying against climate-change science, would have contributed to this fall in concern. However, there may be broader, deeper shifts in public mood that are feeding into these results.

The ‘push’ towards disengagement comes from the appeal of distancing ourselves from frightening global possibilities as we strive to maintain our own personal wellbeing and satisfaction with our lives. The ‘pull’ comes from a cultural shift towards personal lifestyle choices and the pursuit of personal goals and pleasure. Increasingly, the media have become social mechanisms of distraction and diversion, focused on celebrity gossip, sport, travel, cooking, political theatre, crime and comedy.

A Galaxy Poll in January 2013 on Australians' feelings about their lives and the future suggests that they are now more optimistic about the future of humanity than they used to be: 54% said they were optimistic or hopeful about humanity's future.⁵ In 2005 the figure was 47%, and in 1988 44%.

On a question about whether quality of life in Australia is getting better or worse, Australians are more pessimistic than optimistic: 24% said quality of life was getting better, 39% that it was getting worse, and 37% that it was staying the same. Global and national challenges might have been expected to produce a downward trend, but our views haven't changed much over more than 20 years.

In fact, responses to other questions suggest Australians appear to be feeling more at ease with their lot in life, or at least more accepting of it. We are less concerned today about life's hassles and problems than we were a decade or two ago, and more self-focused. That this shift in attitudes is a defensive strategy to try to maintain wellbeing is suggested by other Galaxy findings that Australians are less satisfied with their lives and less personally optimistic than they used to be.

The findings are consistent with other research showing that, constantly grappling with life's challenges and confronted with a world of serious social, economic and environmental problems, we are striving to adapt and to look on the bright side of life. Market researcher Neer Korn says that life is presented as a glass half empty, but Australians work hard to see it as half full.⁶ 'More and more Australians are determined to revel in the moment and reflect on what they have rather than what they don't have. It's not easy, however, and people say it takes effort and constant reminders.'

There are positives in the current situation. Deep down, Australians want transformational change; they want to live in a different way. In a 2005 survey, Australians were asked which of two *positive* scenarios of the future they expected and preferred: one focused on individual wealth, economic growth and efficiency, and enjoying 'the good life'; the other on community, family, equality and environmental sustainability. Almost three quarters (73%) expected the former; 93% preferred the latter.⁷

Political activism appears to be growing. In a few short years, AVAAZ, a global campaign network that 'works to ensure that the views and values of the world's people shape global decision-making' has attracted 20 million members (<http://www.avaaz.org/en/>). In Australia, GetUp!, an independent, not-for-profit, community campaigning group that aims 'to build a progressive Australia and bring participation back into our democracy', has gained 628,000 members (<http://www.getup.org.au/>).

The lessons from this analysis are that we need to pay more attention to the internal, psychosocial dynamics of our situation, not only to its external, biophysical and economic dimensions. To arouse and mobilise people, we need to relate the big, global and national threats and challenges more closely to our personal lives and concerns, perhaps especially to our children and grandchildren and their futures.

Our immediate, personal experiences count for more, psychologically, than abstract statistics and future uncertainties.⁸ People discount global threats for several reasons: a human bias towards optimism (we've overcome problems like this before), perceived uncertainty (there is a history of failed predictions of global collapse, experts disagree), and system justification (a tendency to believe in and justify the way things are, and to not want to change the familiar status quo).

It may be that we will have to wait for a growing accumulation of catastrophes and calamities to make more real and immediate the relationship between the global and the personal.⁹ Disasters can

be revelatory, and potentially revolutionary. They can bring out the best in us, and connect and empower us; they can also lay bare the social conditions and choices that often give rise to them, delivering a societal shock that makes change possible.

In the meantime, the best strategy may be to keep trying to bring the global emergency, quite literally, 'closer to home': to convince people that even their more personal and immediate anxieties have the same root sources and causes as the 'megacrises' confronting us. A tipping point will surely occur - and better sooner than later.

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