



A GREAT NEW REVITALISING IDEA?

Professor Donald Horne

Let's hope ... You never know ... that today we're about to see the beginning – or the beginnings of the beginning – or explorations of hints of the beginnings of a beginning - of the articulation of a revitalising idea that could lift the lives of many of our fellow Australians, whether as individuals or as communities. Since the idea is set in public policy, we have to talk the talk, as Jon Hawkes did so successfully in his seminal book on the role of culture in public planning. Then we can turn it into the kind of plain English he talks himself.

In jargon terms this revitalising idea means extending the concept of sustainability. At present in local councils there is wide, thoughtful and fruitful recognition of three 'pillars of sustainability' – a 'triple bottom line', as the words go, of economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and social sustainability. But something is missing. It's been there all the time. But it hasn't been talked about. It's cultural sustainability and we should see it as the fourth pillar of sustainability. This conference is going to have a go at that.

But before talking about culture let's consider how local public planning is finding some of its meaning in the places where we live and in the ways of life of which we are a part. With this it can strengthen a sense of belonging, although we must recognise that, in our diversity, there are many ways of belonging. To use even more extravagant language: this approach could be extended to add something to our imaginations with personal and social discoveries; it could give us a chance to engage more actively with the enlightenment of the arts and general intellectual life – and with liberal, tolerant, democratic life, and productive life as well. And all this as part of the active, creative Australia in which at least some people see not primarily as the lucky country, nor primarily as an information society – not that there's anything wrong with either luck or knowledge – but as an imaginative country, extending human potential.

You might think I'm overdoing it. I probably am. But there's another way of looking at it. For the moment in Australia, aren't we underdoing our potential? At a time when few are speaking boldly why not seek to put the word vision back into our normal vocabulary. Isn't there something wrong if we think it's overdoing it to imagine that we can be more engaged, resilient, strong and creative in our communities?

This sort of thing is being carried out by many of you anyway, but it needs putting together as a fully articulated idea. Essential to that idea is that its implementation be encouraged in localities in which there is practical interest in taking it up. In these different localities there would be different kinds of programs – depending on the kind of people who live in them, and on the specialties of local talent. There would be no tightly expressed attempt at national uniformity, except in a very broad and loose statement of the general operative idea. It would be the tactical how of a program that would make the difference and that would vary from one place to the other.

(However there would need to be some sharing of information about tryouts and experiences. And there could also be a more general cumulative effect. If an increase in local vitality increases, in its diversity, that can have overall effects on the general tone of the country.)

I said cultural. Let's clear the ground. Imagine I am about to perform a small but effective smoking-out ceremony about that word. I come in with my fire stick and I'm about to do an act of exorcism that will sort out ideas about what is meant by 'culture'. The word has two meanings. One is connected with the arts and intellectual life. We'll come back to that. The other has a much wider sense – a broad, social anthropological sense. That's the one we'll begin with. In this sense 'culture' is a list of habits. The habits of, say, an organisation or a neighbourhood or a community, although it can also be the habits of a family, or a profession, or a school class or a tennis club: there's no limit.

It's connected with what a group of people do and what they believe in. You can look at the group, whether as organisation, or neighbourhood or community or whatever and ask: what are its repertoires of being human? What are the ways its members do things, whether in their workplaces, in their homes, in how they do politics or sport, in all their varying ways of handling this and that? What are their varying conventions of knowledge and wisdom? What are their varying faiths, whether secular or religious? What are their values? How resilient and tolerant are they? What are the meanings they give to existence? Then you can come up a bit closer: What are their varying ways of life? How and what do they eat? How do they relax? How do they crack jokes? How do they dress? How do they talk to each other?

Now from this point of view, if you looking to apply public policy to an organisation or a neighbourhood or a community - if

you want to get something done - how can you see yourself as practical unless you face up to the people in that organisation or that neighbourhood or that community and see their actual ways of going on and how they see things? It's one thing to say what you think is desirable. But what happens won't just depend on what you want. It will also depend on what people make of it. And if you think about the realities of their life not only will your policies work better; they will also be liberating an existing cultural vitality, or a cultural vitality that for the moment is not encouraged at all.

After all, all social, economic and environmental policies are also cultural (whether or not you use the word 'culture'). How the policies will work will depend on the values people already have and on the ways they already do things now. That is the reason Jon Hawkes suggested a general 'cultural framework' approach that means considering what effects a policy may have on the ways of life and the hopes and habits of the people affected by it.

This might apply particularly, at its most concrete and every day, to questions of place management, urban design, heritage sites, urban renewal, but it can be extended wherever you see a workable chance. It may involve people's perceptions of where they live, or where they work or where their shopping centres and recreational centres are, or any other places where they follow their interests. It must mean taking into account the human diversity of a locality. (We should always remember that just because people may share the same space that doesn't mean they are all the same.) It must take into account the human need for sociability, conviviality and dialogue – for mixing with others, and having a talk, or dancing or singing or playing games – along with places of recreation and/or edification, including performance spaces, exhibition places where you can look attentively at things, places where you can read or talk. Coffee shops, restaurants, pubs, picnic grounds, can be (and have been historically) part of it.

Of course, this involves 'community consultation', and that can be done so boringly that the very thought of it might send people shuddering back to sleep. But consultation is only one way. Perhaps the planners should also be out there picking up new moods, articulating new possibilities that people haven't themselves clearly put together but that they may recognise and take over as their own.

That's what people have been doing over the last few years, for example, with neglected rural halls in small country towns or subsidiary hamlets. These buildings, usually of wood and tin, were once centres of community life. Then they became looked down on: they were often too shabby, too unpretentious, to seem true 'heritage'. Now they are being turned to new communal purposes. I remember a few years ago visiting a dozen or so of them scattered around Wagga Wagga. It was a lesson in change. Wagga is now a large regional centre, but these places are part of it – with more traditional inhabitants and with commuters to the regional centre, the old rural halls can now provide new communal uses to new, more diverse communities, and some of them also put on shows that can bring people out from the centre.

Or consider the North Richmond Housing Estate, where there has been strong Vietnamese and East Timorese settlement. Ten years ago some Vietnamese families put on a simple lantern procession around the local Health Centre at the time of the Moon Lantern Festival. It has now become a significant local celebration, with arts events and community discussions – and recently the East Timorese were blended in with themes from Timorese celebrations of the moon as well. Or consider how the City of Port Phillip took over the Vineyard restaurant (which started life as a boat shed but became a 'happening place with great food, where locals gather to eat, talk and listen to music'). Because it was run down they renovated it and leased it out as part of a planning project that deals with the uniqueness of the St Kilda Foreshore. Or consider how at Deloraine in north-west Tasmania, to give the town a bit of a move along, they started what was boldly named 'The Tasmanian Crafts Fair' which, a quarter of a century later, is now spread over 15 venues and, as well as bringing in a million dollars a year has replaced mutual indifference and isolation with a sense of district togetherness.

Now imagine what ordinary living would be like if cultural frameworks had been applied imaginatively to every new shopping mall or shopping plaza in the country.

I now want to speak more generally – of 'The abundant life' – and move into what, to some, may seem some more contentious approaches. Something to have a think about, anyway. When I first spoke on this at Port Phillip last year I recalled how, at the time Barry Jones was pushed out of the presidency of the ALP he said: 'My main preoccupation in public life, has been the promotion of the "abundant life": the conviction that the overwhelming majority of people are capable of responding to a far greater richness of experience than is commonly recognised.' Then he recalled an English radical pamphlet dating from 1821, which said: "The first indication of real wealth and prosperity is that people can work less. Wealth is liberty - liberty to seek recreation, liberty to enjoy life, liberty to improve the mind."

I'd like to repeat this faith in the abundant life. But when it comes to matters of the mind I don't want to stick simply with 'the arts' as narrowly defined. (Sometimes this phrase is used as if, when the gods invented the arts, they based them on the cultural

grants categories improvised in Australia in the late 1960s and early 1970s so that there would be appropriate forms to fill in.) We should spread out all over the whole range of imaginative life, and that includes speculative intellectual life as well as the more narrowly defined 'the arts'. Jon Hawkes has spoken of shocks of lateral connection, conceptual leaps, lightning strikes at illumination. He knows that these can include the conceptual leaps and lightning strikes at illumination of intellectual speculation. One can be concerned not with categories but with wonder, curiosity and the imagination.

I'll now link up with a device I used at the Port Phillip conference, when I imagined some strange posters that begin to appear all over Australia. (Although this year I'll use this device somewhat differently.) So now I'll tell a new story about the posters. It begins by imagining that some mysterious posters appear with a word, just one word, little used in Australia at present, where we seem to prefer to call ourselves 'consumers' or 'taxpayers'. That word is:

Citizens!

This strange word is an attention-getter. Why is such a funny word up there on posters? Some letter-boxed flyers arrive asking what use the strange word is in sustaining belongingness and cultural vitality?

The surprise answer is that if you want belongingness and cultural vitality you should start with a believable civic principle. What makes an Australian? Not social sameness and, certainly, not ethnic oneness. All that can effectively do it is acceptance of core civic beliefs. As it happens some of the words are there already – in the oath that is made at the ceremonies where people become Australian citizens.

I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people
Whose democratic beliefs I share,
Whose rights and liberties I respect,
Whose laws I will uphold and obey.

The letter box flyer asks why every Council in the land doesn't put those words up in its own buildings and encourage other organisations to put them up, too. Why not encourage people to have a talk about them? And when there are ceremonies why not use them there too? Another mysterious poster appears. It is:

Citizens! Tell Us Who You Are!

This time the flyers say that this is above all about finding out how people in a locality or a community group see themselves. They can hold forums about it or turn it into drama or satire or cabaret or puppet show or video. They can dance it out, or paint pictures of it, or make sculptures of it, or photograph it. They can sing it or turn its moods into instrumental music. They can argue about it in community-based media or on the net. They can use cultural tourism to say who they are.

They can present their locality, or group, in theme exhibitions, sometimes of art, sometimes of real things, sometimes of both of them together, preferably done by creating powerful images or demonstrating how an object can have different meanings. They might, at times, might bring some of their own stuff and show it off.

They can show it in the many forms of design. They can learn to 'read' heritage buildings and sites, perhaps recognising that any building, any site, has its heritage (or variety of heritages). They can make speeches about it or listen to others make speeches. They can do it in oral history. They can write or read about it, in verse, or in prose - as fiction, history, autobiography, social sketches, essays, bits of economic or political inquiry or general cultural critique, perhaps including popularisations of the physical sciences and natural sciences; and, whether they know it or not, there will always be a touch of philosophy about it too.

And on all these occasions, as Jon Hawkes has put it, they can 'describe the sensation of sharing, of belonging, of connectedness, of common cause'. When a group wishes to explain itself to itself, and to the world – in any of these ways - this sensation of common cause can be a great moment of cultural vitality.

But there's a danger in using the word 'community' too loosely. It should be distinguished, for example, from 'neighbourhood'. 'Neighbourhood' is easy. It's the locality where people live, or work, or whatever. 'Community' is related more exactly to groups, to people's beliefs and ways of life. A community can share a religious faith, or a secular faith, or a profession, or a passion for sport or the arts or some other enthusiasm, or a sense of ethnicity, or a sense of social class – one can extend the list almost indefinitely: but they don't necessarily live in the same area, and to make it even further complicated they may belong to several communities, in fact in a modern society they usually do.

Most people can see themselves as all belonging to a neighbourhood of differing communities, learning to live together, or perhaps not learning to live together. And this can be equally profound, although more complex. A subsidiary poster comes out for a season:

Citizens! Discuss Conflict, Learn the Tricks of Tolerance!

In the letter box flyers the point is made that true harmony comes not from suppression of difference, but from facing up to it, to negotiating it. These are the techniques – the tricks, if you like, of tolerance, essential to a harmonious society in which difference is accepted. People's beliefs and habits may not all be respected. It is their right to be different that is respected – although there are limits even to that. There are some beliefs and habits that can destroy a liberal-democratic society, as so much of European society was destroyed in the age of the dictatorships. Then another subsidiary poster comes out:

Citizens! Enlarge Your Horizons!

The flyers warn against the provincialisms of knowing nothing other than the here and now. Change is the key to our age, they say. You may not understand a locality if you know nothing other than the locality, or the present if you know nothing of the past. Knowing something of what's gone on before offers a chance to question how you see things now. It can make you a sharper observer. Knowledge of people who are different from what you are can give new perspectives on your own condition.

And past works of earlier intellectual and artistic imaginative endeavour are there to draw on. You can learn to use them. You don't have to sit for an exam in them. You can use them as you wish to make up your own views of existence. Then another subsidiary poster comes out:

Citizens! Engage Critically!

The flyers explain that 'engagement' doesn't just mean doing something yourself. It also means acts of critical engagement with what others present to you, and this, in itself is an act of imagination. It can be in itself a participatory and creative act. It is something, however, in which people may need some encouragement. Working out how to do this is one of the most important lead-ins to the abundant life. This theme is then developed in a wider poster campaign:

Citizens! Pursue Things For Their Own Sake!

This time flyers say that artistic and intellectual activities should not be used simply as an appendage to other programs, as if they had no value in themselves: their greatest value lies in the vagaries of the imagination and of the critical spirit. They may play a part in other programs but, even when they do, if there's no life and creativity in it they may not do the job convincingly. They are not simply a tool. (For one thing they can be a cutting tool: if you try to 'use' them too casually they can slip out of your hand and give you a nasty bite.)

Artists and intellectuals are not necessarily, or even usually, boosters. They can be, and often are, critics of the way things are.) We live in a nervous, bullying utilitarian age but we should recognise that to pursue things for their own sake can be one of the most creative parts of human beings and that the extent to which enterprise is spread throughout a society is one of the most important measures of that society's freedom.

We should recognise the transformative magic of the intellectual and artistic imaginations. By making things appear different – by presenting new worlds and possibilities – artists and intellectuals can give us new myths, new 'models' that open the way to things actually becoming different. They can be one of the most practical agents of change. Another poster appears ...

Citizens! See Yourselves As Producers!

I'll speak to this one myself. It reminds me of how when I was editing *The Bulletin* at the end of the 1960s I began to write about the liberations that might come with what was being called 'the post-industrial age'. The overwhelming bases of the labour market were becoming what were technically seen as the 'service industries': just as industrialism had reduced labour in the production of foodstuffs, fibres and minerals it was now reducing the labour involved in manufacturing. To some this was seen as an opportunity for an opening out in recreational and cultural activities, in general quality of life, in which people would have greater opportunities to create things for themselves. It began to revive aspirations towards a productive life, cooperative and self-reliant. But now the word 'aspiration', once given so many generous human connotations, can seem little more than a tightening of mortgage belts in a 'consumer society'.

We have been living through the greatest changes in the labour market since the industrial revolution. These changes are shaking old concepts to bits. They are destroying the idea of a lifetime career. They are fragmenting the idea of fulltime employment. They indicate a need for continuing education but this is not being met. Reactions to the changes show signs of panic in

emphasising narrow vocational training when this, as 'training for obsolescence', may be the opposite of the wide general education that is needed. There are new divisive stereotypes of fear – 'dole bludgers', 'geriatrics', 'working mothers', 'the elites'. For the lucky there are once unbelievable opportunities. For the unlucky there are junk jobs. There is 'down-sizing' – shovelling employees onto the rubbish heap, sometimes with bad economic consequences – and with the flood of affluence of the consumer societies there are also forecasts of floods of mental depression. But there is also 'downshifting', those people ready to swap some of their income for what they see as a better way of life – an act of treachery to prevailing standards.

Now I'm not too sure why I have thrown all that at you. What are you supposed to do with it? Well, I think it's worth thinking about replacing ideas of a narrow-based 'information society' with talking about an imaginative, knowledge-based productive society. So what do you do? I suggest you look not for problems but for opportunities. And perhaps you can seize back the word 'aspiration' from consumer society ambitions for McMansions on every suburban block and put aspiration where it used to be – the belief that the overwhelming majority of people are capable of responding to a far greater richness – in the prospects of an 'abundant life'.

*Professor Donald Horne is the writer of more than twenty books including the landmark *The Lucky Country* and has contributed to many journals and newspapers in Australia, Britain, Europe and the United States. As an academic, he became a professor at the University of New South Wales and subsequently Chancellor of the University of Canberra. He was twice editor of *The Bulletin* and also edited *The Observer* and *Quadrant*. He was contributing editor to *Newsweek International*. He has played an active part in a number of cultural organisations, including the Australia Council, which he chaired for six years.*

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