



Future Justice – Research Report

PROBLEMS FACED BY FUTURE GENERATIONS & WHAT TO DO

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A random sample of the Australian population, expressed a diverse array of concerns with respect to the health and well-being of future generations. Some, such as climate change and a potential, significant reduction in the standards of living were predictable. Others, such as ill-discipline and obesity were less so. The results suggest there are significant implications for the policies of existing and future governments.

INTRODUCTION

Future Justice recently commissioned independent polling about Australians' concerns for the next and future generations. The polling consisted of two questions posed as part of larger survey of Australians' attitudes to contemporary social issues and problems conducted by the independent think-tank, the Australia Institute.

The two questions posed were as follows:

- *What single issue or problem do you think will affect the future wellbeing of today's children? Please restrict your answer to only one issue or problem*
- *What action do you think could be taken to promote the future wellbeing of today's children? Please restrict your answer to only one type of action.*

1361 people, chosen randomly, responded to the survey. 19 provided no response. 20 suggested an issue but not an action. There were, therefore, more than 1300 relevant responses. Of these, approximately 50% provided brief or single issue answers. A further 40% gave more complex, nuanced or multiple issue answers. The remainder answered either that they 'didn't know', were 'unsure', or responded to one question only.

The top seven issues or problems identified are elaborated in this summary paper in order of their importance in survey responses. In the context of present political discussion, it was surprising that key issues such as economic growth and performance, population size and distribution, and immigration and refugee issues failed to attract significant concern. Responses tended instead to focus upon matters that were of personal concern. Health, education, the cost of living and worries about the environment were the most commonly cited matters. One unexpected result was the participants' concern

with ill-discipline amongst young people and a related concern about ineffective parenting. Another was the focus placed upon childhood obesity. Nevertheless, the survey results provide an informative snapshot of how Australians' project present worries into the future – and what they think should be done to address them.

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Participants in the Future Justice survey identified the protection of the environment and the problems presented by climate change as their primary concern, when thinking about future generations. This is hardly surprising. More general opinion polling has demonstrated consistently that the challenge presented by climate change is a matter of primary concern to Australians. The strength of feeling about this issue was demonstrated recently in a different way by the collapse in support for the Rudd Government following the abandonment of its commitment to introduce a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS). Survey respondents identified as a series of related environmental issues that worried them. These included rising sea levels, water shortages, drought, altered weather patterns and potential adverse impacts upon food production. Uncertainty with respect to oil supplies and increased dependence upon oil supplies from other less stable or less friendly countries also registered as a significant concern.

Participants seemed uncertain about solutions to these problems. This was to be expected given that sophisticated solutions necessarily depend on a considerable measure of scientific and economic knowledge. Nevertheless, a number of commonly discussed policy options were identified. These included concerted action to reduce carbon emissions; increased reliance on solar, wind and other sources of renewable energy; government regulation to clamp down on pollution; desalination and other methods of securing water supplies; and a progressive reduction in Australia's reliance on oil as an energy source. All these should be combined, in the words of one respondent, under the general heading of 'socially responsible and sustainable development'.

The policy implications of these concerns are clear. A first step, as one participant put it, would be to vote for a government that was committed to tackling the problem. Beyond this, serious consideration should again be given to the introduction either of a CPRS or to some form of carbon tax or pricing. There appears to be very strong support for the rapid development of renewable energy sources. Some respondents called for collaborative action by government *and* business to reduce carbon emissions. And those concerned with this problem appeared willing to take action individually and in local communities to make small but significant changes to lifestyles in the interests of atmospheric protection.

PARENTING AND DISCIPLINE

A somewhat surprising result of the survey was identification by a large number of respondents upon parenting and discipline as a significant issue in providing for the

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next generation. These respondents felt that young people lacked respect and needed to be dealt with firmly if they were to play a constructive role in the future. It was a view expressed more commonly in older rather than younger age groups. There appeared to be a number of different threads underlying the general concern.

Young people were criticized as not caring sufficiently for others, being lazy, lacking moral and ethical grounding, being irresponsible, eating the wrong things, spending too much time at the computer and taking drugs. What these criticisms had in common was the observation that young people were focused obsessively upon themselves rather than acting as contributors to family and society. Equally, however, parents were criticized for not raising their children properly. Here, the key issues included parents' heavy commitments to work rather than home, abdication of responsibility to teach right from wrong, parents acting as friends rather than guardians and a general lack of parenting education. No doubt, there is always a certain tension between parents and children - between one generation and the next. But the survey results suggest that there is more to problem perceived than just this.

The answers proposed to the problem were also revealing. Their unifying theme seemed to be a reimposition of standards and discipline. Some thought that corporal punishment should be reintroduced both at home and at school. Others thought that physical education should be mandatory. Compulsory education was rated a priority particularly in relation to drugs, alcohol, healthy foods and responsible behaviours. Children should be taught morals and values. Bad parents should also be treated punitively. So, for example, it was suggested that government benefits should be cut where parents behaved irresponsibly. Neglectful parents should be charged. Parents should take charge instead of leaving the rearing of their children to schools and the government. They should spend more time at home with the kids rather than going to work.

It is difficult simply on the basis of these survey results to define policy implications with any precision. Or even to accurately define the problem. However, several tentative observations can be made. The feeling underlying these responses appeared to be that parents had lost control. Consequently, young people's behaviour had deteriorated. Something needed to be done. The threat needed to be removed.

At one end of the spectrum the policy imperative, therefore, might be to do more to tackle drug and alcohol abuse and related violent behaviour. At the other end, education may provide a key. Ethics, civics, and inter-personal responsibility might constructively assume greater prominence in school curricula and parenting practice. In the middle, the responses clearly raise the problems associated with economic disadvantage. If both parents are forced to work to make a living, children may miss out on the love and care that they need and deserve. In that context, policies such as paid parental leave and high quality child care provision become ever more important.

COST OF LIVING

Consistent with the last observation, many respondents defined existing and increasing costs of living as a major challenge for this and future generations. Survey participants identified spiralling costs of education, health services and housing as pressing problems for the next generation. Of these, housing affordability was the most commonly cited. Many felt that if the price of housing continued to rise, the next generation would not be able to afford to buy their own homes. As to health, respondents felt that private health insurance was beyond the reach of many and that public health care, particularly hospital care, had declined in quality. Those who could not afford private health care had slipped and would slip further behind. Respondents believed that a similar gap had opened up between public and private education. These problems were exacerbated severely when unemployment struck. Although relatively low by international standards, unemployment was still cited as a major social problem. Unemployment and other related government benefits were inadequate to allow those affected to lead decent and productive lives. The underlying sense was that incomes were failing to keep pace with need and widespread financial stress had been the result.

The solutions suggested were many and varied. More accessible housing finance was commonly cited. Government policies to reduce house price inflation were similarly suggested. Private development of more affordable housing estates and the release of more land on which to build them were two other solutions supported. Government funding for better public health and education was frequently suggested. Interestingly, however, wider macro-economic solutions to the problem of financial distress, such as lower interest rates and fiscal stimulus to reduce unemployment, were infrequently mentioned perhaps reflecting a lack of relevant knowledge or expertise.

Here again, the policy implications are somewhat unclear. Plainly the pursuit and achievement of economic growth and fiscal sustainability are an important part of a solution to financial stress. But redistributive policies will also have their role to play. A widening gap between the quality of public and private educational and health provision is something which, if real, governments will need to tackle. And however obvious it may be, future generations will be more secure if the gap between the incomes of the rich and poor is progressively diminished, for example through progressive taxation. Workplace laws to protect the lowest paid would also make a significant contribution to the reduction of financial stress. The level and adequacy of pensions and benefits will need to be constantly reviewed particularly if either inflation or unemployment rises.

HEALTH AND AGEING POPULATION

A large proportion of participants in the survey were concerned with the accessibility and affordability health care. Amongst the major concerns cited in this respect were: long waiting lists for elective surgery in the public hospital system; the lack of appropriate support and care for those suffering from mental health disorders; the lack of availability of medical practitioners in outer suburban and regional areas; and the burden

an ageing population will place on future generations. Consistently with other findings of this survey research, the most significant health problems identified were obesity, mental illness and drug and alcohol addiction.

Unsurprisingly, the most frequently cited solution to the institutionally related problems was to increase funding for the public hospital system from the Federal, State and Territory governments. More specific solutions included government programs to actively promote healthier lifestyles, a greater emphasis in schools on health education and to improve community health services. It was suggested that more could be done to attract medical practitioners to the public health system, principally by increasing the salaries for doctors and increasing the number of general practitioners to ease the burden on hospital emergency centres.

The specific concerns that related to an ageing population were the economic burdens that will be placed on future generations if existing standards of health care are to be maintained and improved, and the critical necessity to ensure the future accessibility, affordability and quality of aged care facilities. Several respondents also suggested that greater attention be given to increased and targeted provision of health and welfare services in the home, such as mobile medical support teams, an increase in and better training of attendant carers, and the extension and improvement in the quality of meals-on-wheels and related services.

It is well beyond the scope of the present survey research to canvass reforms to the provision of public health services, particularly in the light of an upcoming crisis that may be generated by far larger numbers of elderly people requiring them. Two things, however, appear clear. First, governments at all levels will need to raise additional revenue if health services of quality and affordability are to be provided in the future. Serious consideration will, therefore, need to be given to increased taxation, whether through an increase in the Medicare levy or otherwise, in order to meet the already apparent and future need. Secondly, the existing overlaps and inefficiencies that result from the multi-level provision of health services at federal, state and local level need urgently to be addressed. In this regard, the commitment of both major political parties to a rationalization of service delivery in this respect and, perhaps, to the facilitation of a Commonwealth take-over of overall responsibility for health funding, is welcome and to be encouraged.

EDUCATION

If they are to face the challenges of the future, survey respondents believed strongly that the next generation needed to be better educated. The most frequently cited problems identified with respect to existing educational programs and standards were inadequacies in present-day schools, educational accessibility, lack of parental involvement and bullying.

Many respondents were concerned that existing educational provided in the public educational system was not of sufficient quality. The principal issues with which they

were concerned appeared to be that the education that children received was below par, particularly in poorer schools, and with respect to basic literacy and numeracy; that infrastructure and facilities in disadvantaged schools were plainly inadequate; that teachers were insufficiently trained, especially with respect to catering for the educational and personal needs of children with special needs; and more generally that insufficient resources were being devoted by federal and state governments to secondary education in particular.

Accessibility was also a priority issue. Here, survey participants cited the increasing costs associated with education even in public schools for incidental expenses; insufficient funding to provide for the successful integration of children with disabilities; and increased problems associated with gaining access to tertiary educational opportunities; and lack of equality and equity as between the public and private school systems.

Many participants believed either that parents were too often uninterested in making a contribution to their childrens' education by becoming more involved in their school community or that schools themselves provided too few opportunities for them to do so.

An unfortunately high proportion of respondents concerned about education cited the incidence of bullying and violence as a significant concern. The apparent inability of schools to contain the bullying problem was obviously a worry for parents with children presently in secondary education in particular.

This diverse array of problems generated a similarly diverse array of suggested solutions. The most constructive of these were to provide better incentives for bright students to take up teaching as a profession; to improve teacher education and training; to provide more teachers so that students could obtain more individual attention and to reduce class sizes; to introduce effective anti-bullying policies and harsher disciplinary measure for those engaging in bullying behaviours; to allocate a greater proportion of governmental budgets to education; and to increase participation rates in university education.

The policy responses to educational difficulties and inadequacies may be many and diverse. But here again, in the light of the needs of future generations, it is plain that for the sake of both individuals and the wider society, educational accessibility must increase; educational standards must improve; educational infrastructure must be adequate to the need; and a diverse array of educational institutions and qualifications must be made available so that students' individual capabilities may be best encouraged and brought to fruition.

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Participants in the Future Justice survey identified the use of alcohol and drugs as critical societal issues facing young people. The rising rates of underage and binge drinking and drink driving were specific concerns. The availability and toxicity of illicit drugs and the misuse of prescription pharmaceuticals were also significant issues.

The solutions proposed were varied. They focussed principally on drug and alcohol education and counselling in schools; tougher criminal sanctions for those who deal in drugs and those selling or supplying alcohol to under age people; reform of alcohol taxation; the regulation of the advertising of alcohol at sporting events; more government funding for anti-drug campaigns; the promotion of active and healthy lifestyles; more parental care and vigilance; and the maintenance of strong and supportive relationships between parents and children.

Alcohol and drug use is a serious problem. It contributes to significant illness, injury, violence and the breakdown of families and relationships. The estimated cost of drug abuse to the Australian community in 2004-5 was \$56.1 billion. Tobacco accounted for \$31.5 billion, alcohol accounted for \$15.3 billion and illicit drugs \$8.2 billion.

Drug and alcohol abuse are not problems that will be solved overnight. Still, they blight the lives of countless young people. This suggests that governments will need to adopt policies and promote programs that will discourage alcohol consumption and drug-taking in a measured yet firm way.

With alcohol, as with cigarettes, a combination of monetary disincentives, advertising restrictions and health education programs would seem to be one appropriate way forward. Any additional revenue raised through such measures could be ploughed back into alcohol rehabilitation and public education about the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption.

The drug problem is far more difficult. Existing policies have been of limited success and the use of illicit drugs appears still to be rising. Here governments may consider a combination of soft and hard measures. The use and possession of small quantities of less harmful drugs might be decriminalized and regulated, thus decreasing the attraction to young people of associated risk-taking behaviour and reducing the influence of criminal elements. At the same time, the imposition of harsher penalties for possession of and trafficking in hard drugs and an increase in resources devoted to breaking up criminal drug syndicates might be measures that might also be implemented successfully and in tandem.

OBESITY

Interestingly, the most common personal problem identified as facing future generations was obesity with over 130 respondents listing this as their answer. Obesity was also identified by 40 responses relating to individual health.

The solutions presented fell into three categories. Participants suggested that schools could play a greater role in combating child obesity. This could be achieved through a variety of measures including the banning of junk food from school canteens, creative cooking classes, growing kitchen gardens and teaching children to prepare home grown meals. It was suggested that there should be more emphasis on health and nutrition, particularly in primary schools, and an increase in the time given to physical education

in the school curriculum. Another solution put forward was the monitoring of school-aged children by visiting health professionals.

Respondents saw parents as having to play a leading role in addressing childhood obesity. In this respect their suggestions included encouraging children to adopt an active healthy lifestyle and to limit the use of computers, television and electronic games. Parents needed to spend more time with children after school and prepare healthy and nutritious meals together. A reduction in the consumption of takeaway was also identified as an important measure.

Similarly, greater government regulation of the fast food industry was frequently suggested as one initiative necessary to combat child obesity. Positive government interventions could include a higher rate of taxation of junk foods. Advertising restrictions, particularly during childrens' television programs were suggested. The sale of unhealthy foods could be restricted on supermarket shelves and sweets and snack foods could be removed from supermarket checkout points. Alerts could be placed on food products containing artificial sweeteners and additives and the insertion of such additives could be prohibited in foods directed for sale to children.

Recent research suggests that obese children have a 25 – 50% chance of becoming obese adults, while obese adolescents have a 78% chance of suffering from adult obesity. The two main factors are the decrease in the level of physical activity amongst all Australians and the decrease in the quality of diet. On average 72% of ads shown during children's television viewing hours promote non-nutritious foods rather than healthy foods, with confectionary being the most commonly advertised food, followed by fast food restaurants.

Overweight and obesity in childhood and adolescence is associated with a wide variety of serious health problems, and increases the likelihood of premature illness and death. The incidence of these complications and diseases is increasing in the younger age groups and include: Psychological problems, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, asthma and sleep apnoea.

The combination of growing rates of obesity and the ageing population raises considerable challenges for those formulating policy on health and ageing. Policies and programs should encourage inactive people to become active and to provide creative and extended opportunities for exercise. Existing programs aimed at encouraging healthy diets should be continued and extended. Advertising of unhealthy foods might productively be limited.

CONCLUSIONS

Survey respondents, a random sample of the Australian population, expressed a diverse array of concerns with respect to the health and well-being of future generations. Some, such as climate change and a potential, significant reduction in the standards of living were predictable. Others, such as ill-discipline and obesity were less so. When looking at

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the survey results as a whole, the most significant implications for the policies of existing and future governments appeared to be these:

- *Climate change must be recognized and acted upon. The first step in a comprehensive program of action would appear to be to place a price on carbon.*
- *For many Australians, increasing costs of living are posing a very substantial burden upon household budgets. The continuing pursuit of economic growth and fiscal sustainability is crucial to the reduction of the burden. But these macro-economic policies need to be complemented by micro-policies. In this regard, measures to make health, education and housing more affordable and to secure the adequacy of social security for those falling through the net appear crucial.*
- *Existing provision for public health and education is seen as inadequate. To meet future demand, public expenditure in these areas needs to increase significantly even at the cost of higher taxation. At the same time, inefficiencies resulting from duplication and overlap between federal, state and local governments must be removed, perhaps by centralizing administration at Commonwealth level.*
- *The increasing cost of living and the stress this produces within families requires recognition and amelioration. In many Australian households financial stress means that both parents must work and that children may not receive the care and attention they need. Governments perceiving this problem might constructively give more attention to such measures as more comprehensive financial counselling services, more extensive programs of parental education, the provision of counselling and welfare services to children at school and the extension of affordable, public child care facilities.*
- *A perceived deterioration in childrens' physical and mental health requires renewed governmental attention. Governments at all levels need to focus even more intensively than at present upon programs to reduce childhood obesity, encourage physical activity, tackle bullying in schools, educate children with respect to the abuse of drugs and alcohol, and provide for the earliest possible medical and psychological intervention at the first signs of mental instability.*
