Trust, Hope and Democracy Project

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A Note to the Reader

In December 2006 we sent out Progress Report No 1 containing some of our preliminary findings from our surveys over the past 5 years. Report No 2 focuses on our views of citizenship, the law and our obligations to each other and society. In the first report, we showed how trust in our local and immediate social network was strong, but weakened as groups and organizations became more distant from us. We trusted our family, friends and workmates, our local schools, police, hospitals and fire stations, but were less sure of the media, banks, insurance companies, the government and law courts. We see the same pattern when we look at what survey participants think it means to be a good citizen and when we should stand by moral standards. Australian participants openly express disappointment in government, but show strong allegiance to the ideals of a democratic society. Interestingly, we hold on to the principles that we should be law abiding and honest, even when government fails us and we fail each other.

1: Being a Good Citizen

Respondents showed a strong tendency to identify good citizenship with maintaining local and personal relationships rather being involved in national or political activities. For over 90% of Australians, being a good citizen means “giving a helping hand to others” (94%), “accepting that others have a right to be different” (95%), and “working hard and doing your fair share” (93%). In contrast, “becoming involved in your community” was a sign of good citizenship for only 63% of Australians and “taking an active interest in politics” for only 29%.

What does it mean to be a good citizen?
We hear much about people not having time to become involved in activities outside family and work these days, and in the last report we confirmed this to be the case. But our results suggest that something else is happening as well in Australian society. We are reluctant to do things that interfere with others’ lives. Those surveyed expressed a strong commitment to support and respect their fellow citizens. This was often expressed in terms of walking a line between a ‘live and let live’ attitude (81%) and being available to help others (94%). As one respondent put it: “Respect, help when needed. Don’t disturb others and always be ready to contribute when one can.”

In our last survey, we asked respondents to tell us, in their own words, what “you consider to be your responsibilities to fellow Australians?” Responses were grouped into the categories in the pie chart below. Most commonly mentioned responsibilities were being a good citizen, providing support to each other and showing each other respect. Next in importance was being honest with each other and treating each other justly and fairly.

### 2: Moral Standards

A ‘live and let live’ philosophy suggests that Australians may be less concerned about moral standards, adopting the view that anything goes. This does not appear to be the case. Survey participants are clear about the importance of moral courage. For example, 81% believed that being a good citizen means “standing up for what you think is right, even if others disagree.” When asked about the ways of behaving that they rely on as guiding principles in daily life, over 90% of Australians endorsed being “honest,” “conscientious” and “polite.” Equally important were principles relating to personal development and dignity such as “wisdom,” “self-improvement,” “knowledgeable,” and “self-respect.” Being
“cooperative” and “giving others a fair go” were also among the values that attracted support from over 90% of Australians. A substantial 91% of respondents said it was important to avoid acting in ways that made life difficult for others, 87% considered humility as being an important quality for everyone to have, and 86% considered it was important to be open to criticism from others. The surveys suggested that Australians valued the ways in which their lives were made better through their family, friends and acquaintances. Yet they were careful not to ‘rain on anyone else’s parade.’

The idyllic picture of Australians’ relationships with those close to them stood in sharp contrast to the value they placed on their relationships with society at large. The graph below shows that Australians are very prone to make excuses for wrongdoing that takes place outside their immediate circle. If trust is lacking outside our close networks, it may be that we are less prepared to accept responsibility for wrongdoing in this more unpredictable, chaotic environment. The upper three bars in the graph below show how survey participants respond to wrongdoing in their immediate circle. Most Australians think that there can be no justification for cheating a friend out of money (92%), taking something small from a friend and not telling them (84%), and not returning something on loan from a friend (76%). The bars lower down on the graph show a drop in judgements of moral correctness when strangers and institutions are involved.

Can you justify these actions?

- Cheat a friend of money
- Take things from friend
- Not return things loaned from friend
- Take things from workplace
- Park in ‘no parking’ area
- Cheat on tax
- Avoid fare on public transport
- Cheat on insurance claim

% say ‘Never Justified’
The percent of survey respondents who reported that it was “never justified” to break the rules tended to be low. Only 55% expressed the view that it was never justified to take something from the workplace without any intention of returning it, 52% to park a car in a ‘no parking’ area, 61% to cheat on tax, 66% to avoid a fare on public transport, and 69% to add items that were not lost or damaged to an insurance claim. We are prepared to allow circumstances to trump allegiance to moral standards in the broader community. A low 37% said it was never justified “to keep money that you found” and only 47% said it was never justified “to tell a lie in your own interest.” Moral standards can be put on the shelf in certain circumstances.

In the broader community, things are more competitive and individuals are at the mercy of bigger social forces. 85% thought the profit motive dominated all aspects of life and 82% thought that the rich had unlimited access to the legal system and could use it to achieve their own ends. About a third openly expressed the view that obeying rules could disadvantage you (34%) and 57% were of the view that “competition was the law of nature.” The absence of moral standards in the competitive market was foremost in the mind of 37% of respondents who said: “To make money, there are no right and wrong answers, only easy ways and hard ways.”

3: Democracy

3.1 Falling Short?

Survey participants reported that government was failing to meet their expectations, with only 21% agreeing that government is open and honest in its dealings with citizens and only 32% agreeing that the government is meeting its obligations to Australians. 52% said that they were always cynical of government processes. The reasons for the cynicism were apparent in comments at the end of the survey booklet. One participant expressed concerns in this way, wishing for:

“A more open & honest government. One that is not dictated to by big business & other foreign governments. One that shows compassion to other less fortunate people & is prepared to stand up to other governments & big industry lobby groups.”

Another survey participant expected government to show:

“honesty, openness, fair administration of government policies – fair & equitable laws & regulations – at all times consider the benefits of policies as they apply to all citizens.”

3.2 What Can Government Do?

The highest priorities that participants outlined for government were providing health care for the sick (98%), providing a good public
transport system for all (98%), imposing strict laws to protect the public from the dishonest conduct of corporate executives (97%), providing a good telecommunications system for all Australians (97%), creating apprenticeships and training opportunities (97%), providing a decent standard of living for the old (96%), imposing strict laws to make industry do less damage to the environment (95%), giving financial help to university students from low income families (92%), and providing industry with the help it needs to grow (91%).

When asked what government needs to do to win the trust of the community, the qualities that attracted the highest ratings (very important and essential) were be accountable for its actions (91%), treat taxpayers with respect (90%) be efficient in its operations (87%), keep citizens informed (85%), have an interest in the well-being of ordinary Australians (85%) and be consistent in decision making (83%).

### 3.3 Government’s Responsibility

When asked the question “what do you expect the Australian government to deliver to you,” survey respondents answered in their own terms, generally with the broad answer “good government,” but in a substantial proportion of cases with more detailed answers. From the pie chart below, the two responsibilities that dominated were providing justice and fairness to Australians and showing honesty in their dealings with Australians.

**Government’s responsibilities to us?**

![Pie chart showing government’s responsibilities]

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The fact that less mention was made of tolerance and freedom is interesting, given that tolerance and freedom featured significantly as values that shaped the way Australians dealt with each other.

One possible explanation is that increasingly we are seeing government as something that controls our activities rather than as something that enables us to have a better society. The enabling responsibility may now be seen as something that we, as citizens, have to deliver.

3.4 Citizens' Responsibility

Survey participants were also asked “what are your responsibilities to the Australian government?” Obeying the law was most frequently mentioned, along with honesty and being a good citizen (see pie chart below). As one respondent put it:

“[my responsibility to government is] to wake up in the morning and have a go. Be involved, honest and live within the rules of society”.

The answers that survey respondents gave voluntarily revealed a sense of obligation that clearly has not disappeared in spite of dissatisfaction with government’s performance. Mature democracies appear to have constituencies that may be willing to adapt to their circumstances (for example, compromise moral standards), but also hold on to the obligations that are necessary for good governance to occur. These findings suggest that Australians are surprisingly forgiving of the ways in which their governments disappoint them.

![Pie chart showing responsibilities owed to government]

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4: Acting on Responsibility

4.1 Holding On, Keeping the Faith

Despite disappointment in what governments deliver, 71% of respondents believe that, although imperfect, our form of democracy is better than any other alternative. Around two thirds of survey participants indicated that they felt a moral obligation to do what government asks of them with good will. The idea that citizens have to do the right thing for the democracy to work was poignantly expressed by one of the participants who summed up the sentiment in these terms:

“Do the right thing even if an imbecile is in charge.”

4.2 Being Law Abiding

In spite of distrust of big institutions and doubts about whether others do the right thing, the majority affirmed their commitment to law: 59% agreed that “it is never ok to break the law”; 74% said that “even if I had the chance to cheat with rules and regulations I wouldn’t do so, it is morally wrong”; 60% said “the idea of being caught puts me off doing anything wrong”; and 73% disagreed with the statement, “sometimes you need to ignore the law and do what you want”.

Some who read this report will feel uneasy that the percent who believe in the importance of being law abiding is not higher. We are currently exploring the reasons for why this is the case. In part we think people see a rapidly changing world in which they have to look after their own interests and take risks. In part we think it may be a reaction to laws that are not well conceived and implemented. This is not to suggest that governments are not trying to do the right thing. The reassuring message from our surveys is that there are a lot of good intentions and shared hopes for what Australian society should be. The challenge is in the implementation.

This report was prepared by Peter Maguire, Monika Reinhart, Malcolm Mearns and Valerie Braithwaite.