

# Chapter 4

## Grey power at the leading edge

*Concerned and interested older people are ideally placed to initiate the essential change in Australian culture that could usher in a new era of hope. Through the SEE-Change Centres they could build productive and strategic links with the younger generation whose future is at stake. Freed of the constraints imposed by earning a living and bringing up a family, retirement offers older people opportunities to contribute to social and cultural change that are denied to those more constrained by being in the paid workforce. Their wisdom, experience, networks and skills will help to provide the engine that will rapidly kick start the SEE-Change Movement.*

In June 2002 the proportion of the Australian population aged 65 years and over was 13%. If present trends continue, by 2050 the proportion will double to more than a quarter of the population. Profound lengthening of the human lifespan is a relatively recent phenomenon. With retirement from the workforce in the 60s, many thousands of Australians are moving into decades of good health, intellectual vigour and a capacity to choose their lifestyle, secure in the knowledge that they no longer need to prove anything to anyone or be concerned at what the boss might think or do.

Many of the current generation of older people are worried about the world that the coming generation will inherit. They are in a strong position to do something about it. Grey power is real and politicians realise it more than many of the older generation themselves. This chapter explores ways in which grey power in Australia could begin to change the political climate from one of denial to one of hope.

### **The wisdom of age and experience**

Those in their seventh decade lived through the second world war, the Marshall plan, the Keynesian welfare state, the fear of nuclear annihilation, the obsession with communism, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the rise and fall of Gough Whitlam, the dismantling and restructuring of Medicare, the floating of the Australian dollar, the “recession we had to have”, the advent of television and the Internet, the fall of the Berlin Wall and more recently disastrous events in the Middle East.

The older generation also have a strong collective understanding of what works and what doesn't in Australian society. They have held a wide range of positions in the workforce, in childrearing, education, health-care, industry, commerce, community service, policy development and senior administration. This spectrum of experience provides them with perspective and a form of wisdom that the younger generation can strive to understand but cannot share.

The fact that retirees are no longer in paid employment does not preclude them from influencing the way society is developed. On the contrary, lack of dependence on a salary liberates them now to apply their wisdom and experience to the challenges which confront their descendants.

### **Opportunity to explore beyond previous expertise**

Being free of the constraint imposed by earning an income and to holding a position in a company, organization or institution, frees us from what is sometimes referred to as a “silo mentality” and offers us the opportunity to apply our intellect and our experiences to new fields of endeavour and to new issues and problems.

Modern society requires specialisation and focus, so most employees tend to become expert at something in order to fill a niche or responsibility that is required by their employer. The danger is that many believe that their specialization is their only ability and that they see others as more expert in everything else. But society needs generalists who can see the way specialties fit into the whole. Corporations pay executive managers huge incomes for this.

Released from the silos of our employment, retirement offers the opportunity to change specialty or become generalists. I have found exhilaration in retirement in the freedom to exercise my mind in fields that I have not previously thought or read about.

Retired people are well placed to shine the light of their previous expertise on new fields of thought and action. And to contribute their generalist capacity in examining issues with which society as a whole is grappling.

### **The benefit of independence**

Now retired from my paid academic post, I realize how constrained I was by the system which now applies even to academic institutions such as the Australian National University.

As head of a new and innovative research centre whose role was to research fearlessly the Australian health-care system, I was nevertheless politically constrained by the availability of funds. When I and my fellow academics

testified to a Senate inquiry about what we believed to be a retrograde development within the health insurance system, the health minister's office warned me that I was running the risk of losing the centre's core grant.

Loyalty to your employer or your paymaster is a central tenet of employment both in the public service and in commerce. It takes great courage to be a whistle blower or even to speak out about things that you believe could be done better. For young people at the early phase of their employment, toeing the party line is essential to progress in the system. Economic security can be severely threatened for those who act or think independently about the way the world works or should work.

Retirees have the privilege of thinking and doing absolutely what they feel is right and important. And, for many of them, nothing is more important than the future for their children and grandchildren.

By world standards older Australians have had a pretty good life. But the storm clouds are gathering and I suggest that we now have a responsibility to exercise the benefits of our independence from the system which is contributing to, and increasing these clouds.

### **The power of numbers**

A paradigm changes when it becomes clear to a large number of people that it no longer serves the purpose for which it evolved. Those committed to changing the world will do so most effectively by discussing the case for change with strategically located colleagues, peers and opinion leaders.

In his book "The tipping point; how little things can make a big difference", Malcolm Gladwell (Gladwell) explores the fascinating social dynamics that cause rapid social change.

He engagingly tells the story of Paul Revere's midnight ride from Boston to Lexington on April 18th 1775 to mobilize a civilian army to resist the imminent British invasion. By making strategic contact with community leaders across the countryside, in a few hours, he began a word of mouth "epidemic" that spread like wildfire. By the morning of the 19th of April, the British met, to their utter astonishment, an organized and fierce resistance. Thus was born the war of the American Revolution.

Propagating an epidemic of new ideas and values clearly requires a minimum number of committed people. Gladwell says that the effective propagation of new ideas requires "connectors", "mavens" and "salespersons" to help move the idea around the community. Connectors, he says are people who know and

relate to lots of other people. Mavens are people who accumulate knowledge and understand its meaning and application. Salespersons are specialists in passing new ideas on to others. Paul Revere was a connector who was able to tap into networks that included mavens and sales persons who quickly got to work and mobilized their communities. Individuals who possess all three attributes are rare. But when a group of people who collectively possess all three get together on a project to which they are committed, they can rapidly effect a change in community attitudes.

Once an idea or concept has “tipped” into an idea epidemic, the numbers can very rapidly prompt a societal turning point.

In every Australian community there are many older people who are natural connectors, mavens and salespeople. Many are concerned about the issues I am discussing in this book. The task is to find ways of bringing them together so that their numbers can make a difference.

### **Having time to do what is important**

One of the luxuries of retirement is the opportunity to explore new ideas, new activities, and different ways of using one’s time. Having time to think about and apply to one’s special interests and projects is a privilege which many of us hankered for throughout our working lives.

Many retirees become so busy with new interests that they wonder how they ever had time to go to work. The purpose in writing this book is to encourage these busy people to commit some of their time and talent to activities that will build hope for their children and grandchildren and to persuade them that such activity is necessary and could be very satisfying.

Developing the momentum for a culture shift of the kind I am discussing in this book will require the time of committed and concerned people. People whose lives are controlled by the workplace and by the needs of a growing family are less able to find precious time to engage in activities of the kind that are now required.

### **Influence within families**

Older people are uniquely placed within their families to generate new thinking about values and the future. Not that our children hang onto our every word or are necessarily desperate for advice from their elders. Mine certainly aren’t!

But children and grandchildren are often open to discuss new insights and all have an interest in their future. Many are so caught up in day-to-day activities that they may not have thought about the predicament that we now face. The more the problems are discussed and understood by those whose future is at stake, the better. The more they recognize the legitimacy of the concern for their future the more likely will they be to raise issues within their own networks.

Simply encouraging the younger generation to explore certain Internet sites may be all that is needed to promote their interest in change.

### **Influence across networks**

Older people are strongly placed to promote discussion of the future among their own networks and acquaintances. These include clubs, churches, old work colleagues, sporting bodies, school support groups, Rotary clubs, Lions, Apex, U3A, and old school friends.

Clearly, the first task is to be well-informed about the extent of the problems ahead and the justification for a shift in values. This does not imply the need to become an evangelist or preacher. If you are convinced of the need to change direction, you can express it in terms of your own preferences and lifestyle. Your friends will quickly get the message and appreciate your reasoning.

The new challenge for grey power is, I suggest, to engage in exploration of the path to a sustainable and equitable future. It is a stimulating exploration and one which we are well equipped to make. The development of SEE-Change Centres is one way we can get engaged and make the connections with the younger generation whose future is at stake.