

Life, going forward?

Road maps, decisions, etc



The freewheelin'
Peter Geyer

Jargon seems to be one of the clearest pieces of evidence for the unconscious

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Someone wants to take you for a ride.

John Cale

Familiar reality ... where have I seen you before?

Dr John

Most people go out of their way to stay away from fire, but you should just throw me in.

Cathy Freeman

If I wasn't in show business, I don't know what I would have been—a wanderer or something.

Wilson Pickett

I don't have a lot of beliefs that stop me from doing things, I try to be open and follow the muse wherever it goes. Sometime you've got to rest. And sometimes you don't.

Neil Young

A virtuous man is a happy man.

Dion Di Mucci

It's not obligatory for a generation to have great men.

Jose Ortega y Gasset

The developing personality ... needs the motivating force of inner or outer fatalities

C G Jung

I like to drive, particularly on the open road: which is fortunate, because where I live and where I earn my money are several hours apart. Driving gives me a particular sort of reflection time, useful for what I do. I can mull over issues while travelling over some fairly interesting country. Clouds, fields, birds, lakes and so on.

I like to observe, to see what's going on, and try to understand why it's happening in that way. This can often be perplexing, such as councils watering grassy areas or flower beds in the middle of the day, rather than earlier in the day or towards evening. It scarcely seems an efficient use of water, but it might be an efficient use of *people*, for all I know. Farmers watering in the heat of the day also confuses me, but you see a few doing that, too.

On a part of the highway between Colac and Camperdown, an area known as the Stony Rises, several cable fences have been constructed. These are of the type complained about by motorcycle rider associations as being dangerous to their members and other motorbike users, but installed anyway by the authorities, who reject the associations' position without providing any reason, in the public media at least, as to why their concern should be so cursorily dismissed.

The fences are a little too close to the edge of the road for my liking, although I'm sure that claim can be easily dismissed as well. But what's really interesting is that they're placed wherever there is a drop in ground level of any size, which means they cover a large part of the sides of the road in this area.

I presume this action is the result of a risk assessment, as people who drive off the road, for whatever reason, may claim they were endangered by the variability in the natural surroundings. But I wonder if it might have been better to improve the road, which in some sections might catapult you into the fence against your will, regardless of your levels of alertness and skill. Different budget, I suppose, or the fences are more visual in terms of being seen to do something—who knows?

There are also the vehicles and shops that are providing 'solutions' to something or other: fixing the roads, for instance, but it can be anything remotely practical, or purporting to be. Sometimes the purpose of the business seems unclear, but the fact that it is a place for a 'solution' is confidently expressed. Nevertheless, whenever I see a business offering any kind of solution, I wonder whether they've asked the right questions (or *good* questions, at any rate) to be so confident about what they offer.

One of the curiosities of contemporary society is the words and phrases, such as *solution*, that come into general use, for no particular reason—or at least that's the way it seems to me. For a while last year, everyone in any sort of senior position—politicians, executives public and private, sportsmen and sportswomen—was *going forward*, often for no apparent reason or relevance to the topic on which they were commenting. *At the end of the day, going forward* seemed to be a favourite.

Perhaps they were *time-poor*, and making it up on the run. This is where obfuscatory jargon, or language in general, comes into its own, enabling someone to say something without saying anything at all—a prized ability these days, regardless of political or personal inclination.

'No comment' seems to have gone out of fashion, as well as the ability to be more prosaic about what you do. We're all *consultants* now (not necessarily a good thing), and there are *customer service managers* on planes, which strikes me as strange. Then again, the safety soundtrack says 'Subtly, every aeroplane is different', which is a very strange statement to make.

But the use of these phrases and verbal padding could also, in part, be because people in prominent positions are asked too many questions in the public arena. The Prime Minister these days is asked to comment on almost anything, regardless of relevance and expertise. One wonders how he does any work other than that of a public commentator, as there are a lot of complex questions to consider in what he does. And then there are various ways of appearing to say something while saying nothing at all.

Jargon and similar language seems to me to be one of the clearest pieces of available evidence for the unconscious. Using jargon (*type* jargon included) often means that I don't have to think about something, what it really means. I can also hide the meaning or implication of a problem, event or situation from myself simply by using such words. In fact, asking someone to explain what they've just said or recently stated seems to be a lost art. Usually it's *How do you feel about ...?* or *'But don't you think that...?'* Asking someone to explain what they mean or what they have done, whether in public or private, seems almost a revolutionary act.

Opinion, something mostly unconscious as well, seems to be all you need to justify anything. The beleaguered ex-ALP leader Mark Latham was recently excoriated in the press for aggressive behaviour towards a press photographer and his equipment.

One might think that a man with a reputation for such behaviour and in his current state of health would be given a wide berth by the press, but I suppose it's an easy story if you can live with the consequences. You'd get some volatile footage anyway, which must be good, on this sort of logic. Whether it's a good idea to encourage someone to get in involuntary touch with his inferior function and shadow, thus diminishing or humiliating him in the eyes of others, is another question.

At any rate, the newspaper concerned denied all liability for the ensuing events, declaring it almost its duty to engage in such activities—which included an hour or so hiding behind trees in some sort of stakeout. One witness commented that if such attention were foisted on her, she would probably do something similar (McDonald, 2005).

If the antics of reporters and cameramen camped outside courts and houses and other places are any guide, a swarming pursuit of suspected malefactors and celebrities (sometimes the same person) appears, to the pursuers, to be fair game, and not bullying or harassment, pushing for an explosion or injudicious comment. Must be like hunting foxes, I suppose, or bear baiting. One wonders whether people



Mark Latham: An easy story, if you can live with the consequences

will be camping outside Geoff Gallop's house, checking on his depression, and what would go on there. But perhaps not: the footage might not be all that dramatic.

Opinion also seems to call for *balance*, whatever that is. Such calls give the lie to there actually being a possibility of truth, rather than somebody else's opinion and my own view—the latter, curiously, being always right. In the end it's probably all about choice, as if principles and ideas are like items plucked from the supermarket shelf, suitably attached to a consumer's *lifestyle*. A *life* is obviously so *last century*, notwithstanding that it might point to something of substance.

When you're trying to make an important decision, an opinion that is just that—and nothing else—can make things difficult. Democrats Senator Lynne Allison, making a *thinking*, but also a *professional*, statement, recently bemoaned the content and quality of submissions to the Senate inquiry on the abortion pill RU486. She asserted that people giving opinion without evidence weren't helpful to the committee in its deliberations, as they needed *facts* more than anything else.

Allison was subsequently challenged by a group opposed to the pill, who asserted a democratic right for people to say that they didn't like something. This may be well and good, as it's a controversial issue, but one might think that a few facts would be helpful in any discussion in supporting a point of view.

I could be wrong, but I suspect there's a bit more to democracy than simply expressing an opinion, however formed. Perhaps this is about *sending a message*, which seems to me to be a fruitless, perhaps deluded, endeavour. It presumes that people are automatons who just plug into what's being sent to them through the ether. It's as if we're all unconscious and driven either by our emotions or our rational faculties at the appropriate times.

There are several studies that refute this idea, a brief report by Richard Fisher in *New Scientist* being the most recent (2005). These kind of data, however, don't seem to get anywhere, as we still get yelled at by people such as Gerry Harvey and sundry

car yards, as well as various other methods. And there are surveys that inquire of you whether you're loving someone's product, or your bank, expecting the results to provide useful data.

Indeed, there seems to be an unconscious collusion between people in public life to use this language and its associated methods. These days it's called *spin*, previously *corporate communications* or *public relations*—or just *advertising*. Whatever the methods are called, their aim is to avoid talking about what really happened or what might happen.

Although being 'grounded in reality might be seen to be an attribute more of sensing types than intuitives, it's more regular now to see S-preferring politicians promoting advertising campaigns. Industrial relations comes to mind, for instance, or the greatness of the state of Victoria, for which the beneficent incumbents in government are naturally responsible.

Now I don't read newspaper advertisements (or editorials) and I manage to avoid most television advertising. Mail advertising also fails to get me interested, and I don't know anything about text messaging and things like that, so I naturally miss out on what the everyday Australian (whoever that is) experiences. But I wonder what tangible effect all this stuff has.

One of the transparent effects is that this sort of thing seems to determine debate on the issue at hand, no matter its impact on the general public. So it was startling for me to see where the industrial relations debate went, which seemed to be mostly points-scoring and counterclaim.

No-one seemed to spend time examining what work breaks are about, for instance, and the consequent issues of long hours with respect to health and decision-making capacities, perhaps depression. In such matters, workers often need to be saved from themselves. I didn't hear anything about that, but I may not have been tuned to the right channel.

Some of the jargon terms in this debate—*productivity*, *efficiency*, *flexibility*, *benchmarking*, *competition*—were not addressed at all well, other than obviously being good



Danna Vale: Opinions on RU486 are unhelpful without evidence

things. Accordingly, as I suggested earlier, one can consider the use of such terms to be unconscious.

Benchmarking, for example, while theoretically a positive process, can and does lead to a decline in service standards and output when businesses discover that they are doing more than the minimum, or more than what others are doing. *Efficiency* cuts in, as it's about saving money. Standards of service are then redefined. This outcome is easy to pick up in statements by senior management when they defend themselves using the term.

Why isn't there more reflection and discussion on this process? Perhaps this is because we're all supposed to be *middle class* these days. The term *working class* has almost disappeared, notwithstanding the existence of substantial numbers of people who fit a consistent Australian version of that category. The comedy *Kath and Kim* is not middle class at all, but modern working class—sometimes identified as 'aspirational', as though in years past working-class people did not have ambition, and now they do. Maybe the public are unconscious themselves.

A way out of this melange is to educate yourself, and reflect on what people are saying, or not saying. But that might be a private task, away from the general means of public information.

Television news, for instance, seems to be more about style than substance. SBS and ABC news programs, which I frequent, are disturbingly similar in graphics. There's the incongruity of newsreaders wheeling around in their chairs from one camera to another: presumably this makes them serious. The desk is furnished with an unused computer keyboard and mouse, as though they're going to stop reading to you and pay attention to that instead.

Newsreading and general reporting also uses an afflicted language intended to be serious in some way, with no sentence structure. It's been around for a while; you can see a satirical approach to this style of communication in British comedy from the late 1960s, particularly *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. No-one speaks like this in

the street, because they wouldn't be understood. Some newsreaders have little idea how to make meaning out of it as well, with sentences broken up arrhythmically or lumped together with an inflection, upward or downward, depending on what they think they're doing. One wonders how they speak in their private lives, and whether they notice the difference between home and work on that basis.

Faux interviews to pass the time are also becoming more prevalent. There's a presumption that the person *on the spot* really knows something about what's going on now. This hope is not often realised, but it helps fill the time, as gathering news costs money and with fewer topics to report, presumably money will be saved. Mid-news interruptions now tell us what's been said already, which is more than faintly silly, whatever the reason.

In investigating the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and other events in the USA, Michael Massing (2005) writes of

professional practices and proclivities that inhibit reporting: a reliance on 'access', an excessive striving for 'balance', an uncritical fascination with celebrities.

Massing also notes the 'increasing isolation of much of the profession from disadvantaged Americans'. Similar comments have been made here with respect to state and national politics.

Leadership succession in the Liberal Party may not have much relevance beyond a select few, yet both sides comment on it regularly, as though it's a priority, and a cheating of the public if the Prime Minister doesn't set a retirement date. I'm no fan, but I don't see why the PM has to do this at all, nor confirm a successor—a process that, to my mind, is more than faintly anti-democratic. Surely there are other issues of more import. Then again, it could be down to access and sources.

Reportage of the recent death of magnate Kerry Packer brought out some interesting details, one of which was the suggestion to me that Packer preferred ISTP (privacy, practical bluntness, interest in chance and the physical, etc). Other things emerged,



Hanging round the House:
Peter Costello waits and
watches John Howard

too, such as the spectre of bullying and intimidation as part of Packer's upbringing and practice.

Packer's son and successor, James, seems to have been brought up in a tough school, as evidenced by reports pronouncing the well-known corporate change agent Al 'Chainsaw' Dunlap as the young Packer's mentor, predominantly without anybody proclaiming that this might not necessarily be a good thing. No mention was made of Dunlap's recent fall from grace, nor the exposure of his methods as fairly brutal and not all that effective. The public's view of the Packer conglomerate and its practices seems on the whole to be less rosy.

One wonders at the casual acceptance of this type of aggression as normal behaviour in particular parts of our society. Bullying and harassment is apparently rife in the Victorian public service, as well as, not surprisingly, stress (Tomazin, 2006).

One wonders, too, at the utility and influence of training and development programs, including those using the MBTI. I say this as someone who has trained people in that public service and taught courses in person. There's no doubt that the people attending gained something, at least in the training room: but where does it go?

What happens after a course or process involving the MBTI? If the sessions were successful, how has that impacted on organisational policy—or is that beyond the purpose of the session? Where is the point where type's notion of people being naturally different actually *means* something? It may be that promotion is based on attributes not spoken of in the training room, or in contradiction of the relevant policies. I've received examples of such activities from a variety of public organisations throughout Australia.

In some respects this can be the consequence of the use of *models* or *tools*, which psychologically enables people to see them as simply that, rather than as insights into the human condition, and opportunities to look beyond the general to the complexity of what people are really like. Of course, it may not be a career-enhancing move to say that at a session on leadership or teams in which type has been used.

But it's hard to know what to do otherwise. Policy on education and health, even mental illness in immigration centres, seems to be based on a lack of knowledge of the variety of human beings in the psychological sense. That may have something to do with the over-representation of certain types in management or other positions in these areas, but it may also be unconscious, a version of 'what goes on in the room stays in the room'.

The artist John Wolseley recently observed that the activist Michael Moore had 'said an interesting thing: *There is an incredible disconnect in most people's minds, i.e., you buy your Nikes but don't connect it to child labour. You buy a four-wheel drive and don't connect it to global warming*' (2006).

Another recent example of inattention to psychological differences between people is the industrial relations issue. Actually, the idea might be that we're all middle class, so therefore we can negotiate fruitfully with our managers. But policy in health and education fields, for instance, presumes one sort of person.

One might think that people making these decisions will have completed the MBTI at some stage (although Packer's world might be an exception). In recent years Victorian parliamentarians in the major parties have completed the MBTI, but to no apparent effect. Where is the point that something passes from a jumble of words to personal meaning, from unconscious to conscious? And what do you need to say to get people to start thinking and acting on this realisation?

There's a little bit of risk in all this. Road fencing is designed to eliminate risk, and not all of us want to jump in the fire, like Cathy Freeman, or on the edge a little, like the wandering Wilson Pickett or the resilient Neil Young.

It strikes me that in certain areas nothing much has changed except the language. Governments have been hedging their bets on expenditure since the dawn of civilisation, even at times of state insecurity and danger. No risk. And perhaps too much is expected of decision-makers in our society. The job's conscious requirements may be

for the exceptional, and people like that are not necessarily around. On the other hand, as Jung pointed out, becoming a personality involves risks of some sort in making the unconscious conscious (1991). And there's no measure of success.

It can be important and helpful to others to unpack empty words for them, and so enable them to be conscious about at least one part of the world we're in. ❖

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