



**BROTHERHOOD**  
of St LAURENCE

## Values and civic behaviour in Australia:

### Executive summary

*The National Engagement Project Trial*

#### **Project overview & method**

In 2001 the Brotherhood of St Laurence began the National Engagement Project Trial, an investigation that would provide an improved understanding of Australians' values, how values translate into a vision for Australia and the role of the individual in achieving social ideals.

The objectives of the National Engagement Project Trial were to:

- provide insight as to whether there are in fact common Australian values, or a diverse range of different value sets in different parts of the population;
- determine whether, and if so how, people's personal aspirations are different from their aspirations for the nation;
- review the types of policies that people believe are needed to achieve their aspirations for the nation; and
- point to ways of framing questions that will effectively identify Australians' value and policy positions.

It was envisaged that the Trial would explore the potential for a broader conversation with Australians about values in relation to society and future directions for Australia.

A three-part research program was undertaken in 2001-2002. A background paper exploring current knowledge of the 'value' concepts was developed concurrently with 16 in-depth interviews that explored values and personal and social aspirations. Following the paper and in-depth interviews, 14 focus group discussions were undertaken to investigate civic behaviour and engagement. This document summarises the key findings from the project. The project report and supplementary documents provide additional detail about the project.

#### **Key findings**

- The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews did not provide evidence of distinctive values sets associated with Australians with different socio-economic, educational or family characteristics. Though individuals often struggled to name their values, there were, in their examples of what they liked or wanted in Australia, recurrent underlying themes—for example, democracy, freedom, justice and care for others—which appeared to cut across age-groups, income groups and urban/rural settings. These findings are largely consistent with other research which points towards values which are widely shared rather than clusters of different values.
- The emphasis placed on various values and how these values impact on specific opinions and behaviours differed from participant to participant. For instance, many referred to family as a value priority, but some expressed this much more strongly than others.
- People had difficulty discussing 'values' at a personal level. This was partly because they had rarely reflected on the concept and how it related to them, partly because of differing interpretations of 'values' and partly because different words used in the discussions. The evidence suggests that there are considerable barriers to effective conversations convened around the issue of values.
- The research suggests that many Australians are influenced by an individualised and materialistic society. Compassion for others, participation in the community, assisting others and, to a slightly

lesser extent, civic contribution in a political sense are considered socially desirable but this view does not necessarily translate into personal action.

- Personal aspirations and aspirations for the nation appeared to be largely unrelated. Specifically, participants could not see how achieving or failing to achieve one's personal aspirations related to achieving one's aspirations for society.
- Few participants believed that Australia would become their ideal society. They had distanced themselves from this goal. Participants believed, however, that they could achieve their personal aspirations, as they felt powerful and motivated to make them happen.
- It can be inferred that agencies engaging the community in advocacy or social action will receive support from Australians if they are seen to be working in the areas of education and health, as these are considered valuable. Education in particular was seen to be important in terms of preventing problems later in life, while health care was a measure of a good and compassionate society.

### *Communication findings*

This project pointed to ways of maximising the prospects that a message will be heard and will encourage action. The biggest barrier to involvement with social issues was the tendency to manage (that is, control) one's emotional reactions to a problem rather than respond to the problem itself.

Communications approaches to overcome this and other barriers to action include:

- Communications must connect with the person by pointing to an impact on their life.
- Messages should invite people to see for themselves that poverty exists in or close to their own communities.
- Messages need to link to other areas of community concern, as 'poverty' is not well understood and is not seen to be such a problem in Australia as education and health.
- The term 'poverty' is generally seen as financial and material and so should not be used to refer to non-material situations of disadvantage such as isolation and loneliness.
- Messages need to provide opportunities for others to assess different perspectives on an issue to guard against being seen as biased.
- Messages should offer achievable solutions, to avoid people being overwhelmed by the problem.
- Specific projects would be the most promising means of attracting support and action from Australians because they seem manageable, do not require open-ended involvement and are likely to bring the satisfaction of a result.

### *Potential for National Engagement:*

- While people acknowledged in general terms that 'values' in relation to society are important, the trial did not suggest widespread readiness of individuals to engage with other Australians in exploration of these values and how they might shape Australian society in future.
- It may be more timely and productive to explore ways to contribute to cultural change so that discussion of values becomes more acceptable. For example, in view of the importance attached to family by many participants, initiatives involving young families may be worth exploring. Another avenue might be action-oriented projects in schools.

## **Conclusion**

This trial has offered some interesting insights into the lives of some Australians, their wishes and ambitions and how personal aspirations relate to social aspirations and involvement in Australian society. The general disconnection between the personal and the social has been a key message from this research. It links to the findings that people are aware, to greater or lesser degree, that they manage, or control, their reactions to social issues so they can maintain a comfortable and self-focused life. These insights are significant pointers for agencies eager to create community mobilisation and engagement about social issues.

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