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The 1995 Boyer Lectures

A TRULY CIVIL SOCIETY

By Eva Cox

Lecture 1:

BROADENING THE VIEWS

(Broadcast: Tuesday, 7th November 1995, 8.30am (Rpt. 8.00pm) on Radio National.)

Introduction

Diana Gribble:

Welcome to the 1995 Boyer Lectures. I'm Diana Gribble, Deputy Chair of the ABC Board. This series of radio lectures began in 1959 as the ABC Lectures. They were renamed in 1961 in honour of the late Sir Richard Boyer, during whose chairmanship of the ABC, the lectures were conceived. This year's speaker is Eva Cox, a forthright commentator on social policy. Her critique has influenced policy debate in the areas of social security, superannuation, economics, child care, migration, education, family law and women's affairs.

In these Boyer lectures, which she has called A TRULY CIVIL SOCIETY, Eva Cox will take a radical look at the collection of somewhat forgotten values - such as trust, co-operation and goodwill - that hold society together. She argues that we are losing that important social glue and that current debates about citizenship are narrowly focussed on citizens as competitive individuals rather than as social beings.

Eva Cox's adult life has been focussed on making a difference. She was a founder of the Women's Electoral Lobby in New South Wales in 1972, and co-founder of the Women's Economic Think Tank in 1990. Over the past 20 years, she has held senior positions in government and the community sector. She has been a Director of the NSW Council of Social Services, has worked on the staff of Federal and State politicians as well as in both public services and as a private consultant. She now teaches in Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney and was recognised this year with an AO for her service to disadvantaged groups. In keeping with her themes of co-operation and connection, Eva Cox will deliver her lectures in the presence of a small audience - whose reactions you may hear. The company includes those who have been part of the Boyer process: ABC people, and the friends

and colleagues of our speaker who have fed in ideas as the lectures developed. So, I'm pleased to introduce now the first lecture in this series with Eva Cox,

Broadening the Views

Eva Cox:

When Margaret Thatcher said 'There's no such thing as society', she lost the plot! Society is the myriad of ways people connect, linked by some common interests or characteristics. Over the next six weeks, I want to explore what holds society together, what may cause us to come apart and what constitutes a truly civil society in which we trust each other and face our futures optimistically.

In a civil society, we need to recognise the supreme importance of social connections which include plenty of robust goodwill to sustain difference and debate. This possibility exists within Australia today, but we risk squandering it in our search for illusory economic development. I want to question some too common assumptions, challenge many beliefs seen as truths, and recast some old ideas which have fallen out of fashion. I want to persuade those in high places to recognise that we are social beings.

I want to contribute to a new century optimism that will allow us to move co-operatively and not competitively towards a more civilised future. Part of this task involves looking for the missing links which connect the spheres of public and private; part involves raising questions and encouraging your participation in finding the answers.

If we are social beings rather than economic beings, then society is threatened by the presence of Economically Rational Man in public policy. This homo non sapiens is a constructed individual (not a social being), who maximises the short term advantage in most economic models. If he takes over, he will destroy society because social connections have no place in a world full of self-interested, competing individuals.

I want to talk about what binds us: the ties that we call society and community; the links which define how we see ourselves and how we act towards each other. Why these links are omitted from public debate raises the question of who sets the public policy agenda.

Maybe a clue can be found in past Boyer lectures. This series must sound different from most of the others because I am only the fourth woman in 37 years to deliver the whole six. The absence of women illustrates one of my core points: the public agenda is too narrow when it represents only those male voices which are seen as authoritative.

The previous lecturers had gravitas, prominent Australians all. Over half were professors, and there were two writers, two judges and some scientists. Most were Anglo-Celtic, and no women appeared until the Boyers were in their 17th year. I am

not critical of individual male lecturers because I agree with many of their ideas. Deeply, Tom Fitzgerald, Nugget Coombs and John Passmore and I disagreed with Helen Hughes who lectured in 1985.

So, I recognise that just adding the voices of a few women is not enough to change the agenda. Only a wide variety of voices can do this. To quote Virginia Woolf :

"It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men... for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the variety and vastness of the world, how should we manage with one only? For if an explorer should come back with words of other sexes looking through the branches of other trees at other skies, nothing should be of greater service to humanity."

I agree with her. We need new perspectives from many 'sexes'. We need many points from which to view the world if we want to re-create, to look at new ways of moving into the next millennium.

Women will bring different perspectives not because we're more warm and caring than men, naturally, but because we have different life experiences.

Women are more likely still to be allocated the roles of domestic managers and keepers of the social and emotional relationships and therefore we bring different points of view to setting the public agenda.

An advantage of being outside the power group is that you may learn more ways of seeing, both by choice and necessity. I remember an Aboriginal woman in a group in Adelaide explaining how she put on her 'white' persona somewhere between home and the office. Her description reminded me of how women learn to see through men's eyes what they see as important but we also see what is left out. It must be confusing for those men who see only their own reflections in the mirror.

This series is not about woman, any more than the other Boyers were about man. What I am offering is a feminist view of how we can broaden the public agenda to the benefit of all. We need the widest trawl of views to make the best decisions; the issue is not so much equity but effective public policy making.

For instance, we should look at quality of life and life satisfaction indicators, rather than economic indicators. If we did this, we would see that we are in trouble. The polls suggest that there are widespread anxieties in many industrialised countries, and this is not just because of economic problems. There are real concerns about loss of social cohesion and loss of faith in the possibilities of solving social problems.

Writing these lectures made me optimistic because I could see ways forward in my quest for understanding. They are political lectures with a small p because they are about change and about action. I believe that debating and exploring our differences raises the ante and being responsible for what happens increases our humanity.

I have serious concerns about the current dominant fashion of macho, competition-driven 'progress' and the intensity with which these economic frameworks are promoted. These frameworks are particularly dangerous because alternate views are

denied, ridiculed or ignored. The 'social' has been relegated to such a low priority that's it's almost completely off the agenda.

The dominant ideas of competition and deregulation of markets, and the attacks on the redistributive roles of government are not only dysfunctional but positively dangerous. They are part of an oversimplified dogma which can destroy a truly civil society in pursuit of the cashed-up individual.

It behoves me, therefore, as a passionate reformer, to use this gift of time to put forward some alternative frameworks; other ways of seeing the future which differ from the public loop of policy debates. Some of my keywords are trust, reciprocity, mutuality, co-operation, time, social fabric and social capital.

Preparing these lectures was a case in point. Many women gave me their time and support. Their enthusiasm reassured me in moments of doubt, helped me with some dilemmas and generated some lively debates and differences. Through this mutual trust and involvement, I experienced what a truly civil society could offer; an affirmation of self that comes from working with others in a group, the collective exploration of new ideas and the reworking of old ones. As I canvassed the possibilities of social trust and reciprocity in words, I experienced them in deeds.

Let me put my values on the table: I believe we are responsible for each other, as well as ourselves. I act for others so I can live with myself. This position runs counter to some of the prattling on about the politics of difference by postmodernists who seem to deny that we can identify injustice, or that we can act to prevent it. I believe it is up to us, all of us, to make up our minds about the world we want and to take some responsibility to make this world happen.

I am a product of my age and time. Born in Vienna, just before Hitler annexed Austria in 1938, I became a non person by Nazi decree because of my Jewish 'blood' before I was even weaned! My background is one of the causes of my constant quest for better ways of running the world. From this comes my questioning and need to understand why things happen the way they do and how we come to be the way we are. From this experience comes my passion for political betterment.

Over time, I have realised that many of the grand theories I studied as a sociologist fail to deal with the complexities of everyday living. Private lives are merely defined as 'family' - a mythic undergrowth which is used to justify much of what happens in the public sphere. Private lives are rarely at the centre of policies. We miss the social in pursuit of the economic. When was trust last an item in the Federal budget?

The makers of current political agendas focus on markets which exclude the social. This omission leaves space for the peddlers of social snake oil, like Newt Gingrich's 'Contract with America', who offer easy solutions to the emerging social problems .

Neither the communist push for central control nor the laissez-faire of market forces, can work on their own. Both these models fail because they are dramatically incomplete, one-eyed, and do not recognise that society is more than the public sphere and economics. We cannot do without some forms of collectivity. Nor can we run an

entire society by use of the collective will, but competing marketeers in head-on battle actually destroy society.

The limits of most grand theories is they leave out most of the social and private aspects because these are deemed to be women's spheres. A recent reviewer of Tom Paine's biography for instance said Paine had written on the Rights of Man and the only virtues he had recognised were manly ones.

There are relatively few grand theories by women. But one woman to whom I often return, is Hannah Arendt, a German Jewish philosopher who also fled Hitler. Her dissenting views, including those on the human condition were often ignored because they were different from the prevalent male writings of that time.

The metaphor of birth - and this is one of Arendt's key concepts - is about the possibility of finding new beginnings. In the possibility of change lies 'hope', the final figure from Pandora's box of troubles. Without 'hope', we are discouraged from trying.

Hannah Arendt's version of being fully human involves three types of human action. She sees family life and paid work as only two of three parts of the Human Condition. Part three is the *vita activa*, public life, in which we collectively create civil spheres. This makes us uniquely human as only human beings have the capacity for thought and collective debate and action. Loss of any of the three parts of the human condition or the overemphasis on any one, creates problems.

Do we live to work, or work to live? How do we allocate our time and other resources? If we take on board Arendt's three aspects of the human condition, including the *vita activa*, then we need to find time.

If we need time for public life, as well as family and work, then we need to look at public policies, social commitments and personal choices. Time relates to hours of work and the values we place on paid and unpaid work. This raises the issue of whether the present pressures on work and family militate against an active civil society.

Civil societies are also civic societies, that is, we as citizens must take some responsibility for changing what we do not like. There is a wide debate about citizenship underway. The term is being thrown around fairly indiscriminately by groups across the political spectrum. Much of what is written involves claims about the rights of individuals and even groups. But what happens when those rights conflict? Have we forgotten the inevitable tensions between rights and responsibilities and the search for individual freedoms? Can we retain social cohesion and the possibility of individual autonomy? These questions can only be answered by all of us as active participants in a civil society.

Starting with the proposition that our society is becoming increasingly uncivil, these lectures will trace the often forgotten but powerful forces that connect us as social beings. These forces - trust, reciprocity and mutuality - survive in our everyday lives but are not reflected in public policy and therefore are losing ground.

What drives me on and has overcome my self doubt in exposing my ideas so widely, is my anger at what I see around me. The constant news of warring groups and the break up of societies, the way we seem to move from optimism to pessimism.

There are too many of us who feel pessimistic about the future, who feel society, is gradually coming apart. The idea of the social is losing ground to the concepts of competition, and the money markets are replacing governments. The social aspects of humanity have somehow disappeared and we are left with a more atomised image of individuals competing in an endless process of distrust.

We have always lived in times of change. In the past, there was a sense that change was good - there was an optimism we were moving into better times. There are now signs of a widespread anxiety that we are moving backwards, and what we leave to our children may be no better than what we inherited from our parents. I hope this need not be so. Trust is essential for our social wellbeing. Without trusting the goodwill of others, we retreat into bureaucracy, rules and demands for more law and order. Trust is based on positive experiences with other people and it grows with use. We need to trust that others are going to be basically reasonable human beings. Trust leads to co-operation. I have a tea towel which shows a cartoon strip of individuals trying to climb out of a deep hole. Only when they do it together can they find their way out. We know that working together is preferable to working alone and yet the ethos of competition over-rides an ethic of care. The media are now full of tales of fresh disasters. Fear of crime is a major issue, even though the statistics report relatively few actual changes. We worry about our health and pollution, and suspect the water and food supplies. We demand that we be protected against almost every type of risk. Litigation is soaring. More and more people are locking themselves into their homes for fear of the outside world. Distrust starts from the top as well as the bottom. I have collected some survey results which show that trust in government and big business is low and probably reducing. A compilation of academic surveys from the ANU, showed half the population trusted government to do the right thing in 1969, but the proportion had dropped to one third by 1993.

The AMR Quantum Social Monitor's 1993 poll showed three quarters agreed that business is too concerned with profits; and over 90% agreed that without Government regulation, business would take advantage of consumers.

The same survey showed almost all respondents still think Australia is a fair country and it looks after those people who are not doing well. However the respondents felt equally strongly that they have to rely on their own skills to get ahead and to take control of their own lives.

In another survey, two economists, Glen Withers and David Throsby, find that we may even be prepared to pay more taxes to pay for the more civilised society.

There's a lack of consistency in these responses which can be explained by widespread cynicism. While Australians have always had a long tradition of larrikin responses to authority, now the framework has changed. Now it is governments themselves who seem to be cynical about their ability to merit our trust. Some seem actively hell-bent on confirming our levels of distrust and suggesting business can offer better services than can the public sector.

The rhetoric of distrusting government spending is common to all our current political parties, but some parties really mean it. Those politicians who believe in imported theories of market forces want us to trust business more and government less. If part of our sense of wellbeing is our faith in governments, the denigration of public services by governments themselves reduces our sense of comfort and trust. And the polls show that people do not trust business either.

Australia's social development has, from our convict beginnings, been closely linked with governments. Collective action created the working man's paradise, and our belief in egalitarian structures. So telling us not to trust government, spills into not trusting our neighbours or even not trusting ourselves.

We lose trust when we enter parliament house and most of our public institutions through security entrances, and we see private guards protecting public places. We lose trust when we are too scared to use public transport, to walk the streets, or talk to strangers.

We need to build a store of trust and goodwill as part of our social capital - a collective term for the ties that bind us and I'll flesh that out in the next lecture. Distrust can stress and fracture our bonding. An accumulation of social capital enhances our quality of life and provides the base for the development of financial and human capital. With an adequate level of social capital we can enjoy the benefits of a truly civil society.

Trust is also an prerequisite for healthy risk taking. This is not bungee jumping or drunk driving, but the confidence to suggest new ideas, to offer proposals outside the current loops. Sticking your neck out requires a level of social trust. The proponents must feel they are taken seriously and that there's an openness to good ideas. In an environment of distrust, people do not risk putting up new ideas unless there are exceptional rewards.

We need to encourage new ideas, dissident views, debates and critics. What we have had is a 'convergence' of views and a desire for the false certainty of consensus. Even those who argued, had to speak the same language and work from similar sets of assumptions to those in power. You can debate the government on the level of poverty but you're not heard if you question inequality.

Too many critics have been co-opted.

I am agnostic in politics and religion and deeply suspicious of simple solutions whether touted by academics or by fundamentalists. In Hannah Arendt's terms I am a pariah who chooses to stay on the outside because only from the margins can you see the whole field. This is not just a feminist position but one shared by others who by choice or circumstance become the outsider commentators, the ones who see the unclad emperors.

I have no recipe for a future magic pudding. The complexity of human society, I suspect, defies the easy answers. What I am looking for is a better process rather than a particular outcome.

I was struck some years ago with a concept promoted by Robert Lindblom, an American academic who described his theories of social change as 'Muddling Through'. Lindblom was promoting a gradual, small-steps approach because he recognised complex societies bred complex problems. He suggested small branch changes were more likely to be well informed and therefore to work than major root change.

If small steps fail, they don't do much damage, and you can have another go. If they succeed you can move on quickly. This small-steps approach has echoes of Fabius Cunctator - or Fabius the delayer - the Roman General who avoided pitched battles and wore down the enemy by engaging in smaller skirmishes. This was the model for the Fabian society, a 19th century British socialist movement which saw small eclectic social changes as being more effective than revolution.

So come ride with me through these lectures and hear some dissident views which don't fit the current fashions. I'll revisit some old ideas of civil society, and offer new ways of seeing the once separated spheres of public and private. I will explore whether Governments have reached a use by date, or whether we need to recast them. And I'll look at what we do and should do to grow children into citizens for a truly civil society.