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Still Lucky: Why you should feel optimistic about Australia and its people

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, Monday, May 29, 2017

An address by

Dr Rebecca Huntley

Social change researcher,
author and social change analyst

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About the address:

Rebecca has written numerous books, the latest of which, *Still Lucky: Why you should feel optimistic about Australia and its people*, forms the title for her Communities in Control keynote. In her presentation she'll tackle some of the biggest social questions facing Australia now: Why do we fear asylum seekers? Why are women still underpaid and overworked? Why do we over-parent? Why do we worry even though we are lucky?

Rebecca Huntley

Thank you so much for inviting me today; particularly thank you to Denis and Kathy. The last time I spoke at this conference, Joan Kirner introduced me, and I still think about her almost daily. She was a mentor and friend of mine for nearly 20 years. I wonder what she'd have to say about Donald Trump, although I could probably guess.

It's in the spirit of her commitment to empowering communities and community activists, like yourselves and her lifelong belief in fairness and equality for all, that I formulate and deliver my words today. Those words are largely based on what Kathy described as my [latest book](#); which is, coincidentally, available in the foyer after this to buy and I will sign it for you.

Anyway, the last 12 years, my main job has been as a social researcher. I've travelled this country listening to Australians of all backgrounds who talk about their lives.

I believe that some of the more perceptive analysts of our culture are recently-arrived migrants and asylum seekers. Sometimes in order to see the country you live in, clearly you have to see it through the eyes of a stranger.

It's like when you go overseas for a long time and then you return and you come back and you notice the quality of the air, the light, how clean everything is, how good the coffee is, that people think it's okay in summer to go to shops without shoes, the parochialism of our TV broadcasts and you remember why we love this country and what annoys you about it.



So my understanding of Australia has been enriched by talking to new Australians. And they have a unique and generally pretty positive perspective on this country and that's despite past trauma, current hardship and racism.

One particular comment sticks out in my mind. I was conducting an extensive piece of research for SBS, on the mind and mood of new Australians. And I was conducting a discussion group with Somali asylum seekers; men in their 40's. Along with asking them about their lives, we were also asking them about their media habits; what they were reading or watching on television. And there was a particular man there, he was a real fan of free to air commercial television and he watched it all the time; mainly to learn English.

We might need to tell some people in our government that asylum seekers are absolutely committed to learning English and they learn it extremely well, if given the opportunity. And they master it perhaps more than some of the other people in this country who have lived here all their lives. Anyway, he was watching a lot of free to air television, not only to learn English, but to educate himself about his new home. The only show he didn't really like was *Home and Away* and I asked him: "Oh, why don't you like Home and Away?" And he says, "I just don't understand it". He said "Why are all these blonde, rich people who live by the sea, so unhappy?"

And, I thought that was a pretty good question. So from an outsider's perspective, we are an extraordinarily affluent and lucky nation. We are certainly resilient and optimistic, and happy by international standards. And grateful for what we have.



We like to think of ourselves as generous, but I think as most people in this room know, we are generous *and* we're not. We could give more of our time and money and certainly our government could give more in international aid overseas. Let's set that aside.

What I *have* observed over the last decade, is while we remain optimistic, while we remain resilient, the population moving to agree, not with a widely understood distortion, of writer Donald Horne's famous thesis: "We are the lucky country run by second-rate people, that has coasted by on its luck". Rather, Australians now agree with Donald Horne's *true* thesis, that we are a country that is being complacent and can afford to do so no longer. And of course we still believe our leaders are second rate.

Look, I should probably pause here to make a comment about our political leaders. I mean, I opened this speech talking about Joan Kirner, who, while she started as a community activist, was a politician and remained committed to party politics all her life. And so I know ... I mean I feel like saying, "some of my best friends are politicians". We know that there are many people on all sides of politics in our national and state and local assemblies, who are there for the right reasons, who work tirelessly for the causes that matter for people in this room.

And of course, it's incredibly easy to criticise our politicians, to be cynical about their motives and decisions. And there has been, and I've noticed it getting worse over the last decade, a kind of group defamation of politicians. I don't think it's helpful, even though in part it has been justified.



For one, I wonder if it discourages people from getting more involved in formal party politics and God knows the only way to fix a political party is to open them up to more and more different kinds of people; including, I hope, some of the people in this room, some of the recipients, some of the young people that Kathy was talking about at the very start of this session.

We desperately need major party reform. Groups don't talk about this, Australians don't talk about this; political party reform isn't a big – what you call – barbecue stopper. But, the lack of trust in party politics and some of the rampant cynicism may be, in fact ... The only way we may be able to address that, really through changing our political parties, campaign finance reform; absolutely essential.

But we also need to develop further and develop more sophisticated ways for communities to engage with politics and policy, and the decisions that are made by representatives at all levels, that affect their lives.

I know this easy cynicism about politicians increases the sense of disconnect between voters and leaders, and that diminishes our politics. There was probably no harder time to be a politician. I'm sure that Malcolm Turnbull says that to himself as he goes to bed — so he can sleep properly. But anyway, voters actually recognise that there are enormous challenges in leading in this environment, there are no easy issues. There's the Twitter feed you've got to look at all the time.

We might need better leadership with more vision, courage, guile and eloquence, but we also need greater patience and focus from the electorate.



Better leadership is the prerequisite condition for greater patience from the electorate. Yet is very difficult to lead with an impatient, cranky, and cynical population.

For a long time, and I'll probably say in the early years of my time as a researcher, I believed Australians were caught between nostalgia for the past, and fear of the future. And nostalgia and fear are kind of interlocking emotions; so they're symptoms of fear of change, of tensions, confusions and frustrations. What's going to happen with my life, my children's life? Where is the nation going? And there's certainly a bit of nostalgia around, it's particularly the case when we talk about parenting; so we reflect on parenting and childhoods of big backyards, and roaming free in the neighbourhood, with less stress and more time.

Sometimes you see it ... particularly, not just amongst mums, whether they're working in the paid workforce or not, whether they're single parents or not, whether they're grandparents looking after kids. You see it in their stressful lives. When they say: "Perhaps it was a bit easier when we didn't have to be both the bread winner and the bread maker."

And you see it in our conversations about work and about housing in our communities in general. And in our conversation about politics, we tend to be quite nostalgic about the great leadership of the past. "Wasn't Paul Keating wonderful? Jeff Kennett had a point"; those kinds of things.

And then we also imagine that some fabulous new leader will come around the corner and save us. It's a little bit like the worst kind of stereotype about the single woman in her late 30s on Facebook, looking



up old boyfriends, “Oh, didn’t we get on really well? Oh, maybe Prince Charming’s around the corner”.

Both of them are delusional. You didn’t actually like the guy you used to date and Prince Charming may not be coming any time soon, certainly not if you’re on Tinder —is my personal experience anyway ...

So, there is some nostalgia and there is a lot of fear about the future. And there’s certainly more fear to go around than nostalgia, and a lot of those fears cannot be dismissed as irrational, and occasionally they are. What will happen to our economy, our industries, our jobs, our neighbourhoods, our education and health care systems, our health and well-being, and our still cherished values of egalitarianism and a fair go?

Even our fears about immigration — shot through as they are, with prejudice and historical amnesia — have some basis in rational and justified concerns. About the ability of our built and national environments, as well as our social structures, to support an increasing population.

Especially given our experience with the inability of past governments to invest in infrastructure, to fund the kinds of services necessary for a dramatic increase in population, particularly amongst communities that require assistance.

Now you can probably guess from the title of my book that I’m quite a naturally optimistic person.



I was making the final touches to my book when the United States was choosing its next President and my optimism in human nature was sorely tested on Wednesday the 9th of November, when the American people voted for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton.

And so I watched the results of that election unfold on ABC News 24 on that Wednesday afternoon and I immediately thought well I'd better write the conclusion to my book quickly, to perhaps fold in what does this American result tell us about what's happening in Australia? What are the implications?

So certainly in the months leading up to the election, I told a few friends over dinner and the occasional public audience, that I didn't think America could claim to be the great society anymore. You can't be a great society if it's easy to buy guns and hard to get health care.

Australia outranks America on a range of indices worth considering if you care about social and economic inequality. Unemployment is higher in the United States and poverty is worse, the gender pay gap is wider and the minimum wage is lower.

Health care and higher education are more affordable here, and Australians stay at school longer than Americans. And in fact, by OECD standards, Australian women are the most educated and involved in education, than any women in the world. Although when you look at the gender pay gap, it's much, much further down the ladder and that is a kind of a national shame, let's face it.

We live longer than Americans, and our infant mortality rate is lower, and we are arguably a more successful multicultural nation.



So in 2011, just 12% of Americans were born outside the United States, whereas more than one in five Australians were born overseas. And despite what you have to call insane housing costs, not just in Sydney and Melbourne and not just because of “avocado on toast”, but also in regional Australia and throughout other parts of the country, we do have really a housing crisis at all levels. But despite that, our cities routinely rank in the top ten of most livable cities around the world.

And there are plenty of other aspects of our culture that set us apart from America that work in our favour, and I believe will mean that we won't see the kind of massive spike in populism, particularly from the right, that we've seen in other comparable democracies.

Some of those aspects of our culture that I think protect us, certainly our attitudes to guns and government. We still believe government should play a role. We still look to government as a productive partner in solving the problems that face us. Our attitudes to religion and science, health care and child care, are just a few.

Donald Trump's message about “making his country great again” clearly had a visceral appeal to a large part of the population, with expectations of greatness, who were actually living with the reality of a post-GFC world, of high unemployment, defaulted mortgages, high education costs and low returns for hard work. Outside the Olympic swimming pool, Australians have never had any pretensions to be great, and I don't really think that's altogether a bad thing. I think we live in a great country anyway, without pretensions. But there's optimism, and there's complacency.



The thing that concerns me looking over the last ten years, is that there is a combination of forces and events that led to the rise of a Donald Trump presidency, that are clearly at play here. The people in this room know about those forces, probably better than anyone: rising social and economic inequality. That inequality is not just wage inequality, it's wealth inequality. Wage inequality driven by a whole range of things, casualisation of labour, but as you know, too, the gender gap. And wealth inequality, largely related to housing and the price of housing.

Party politics that is all about business as usual, complex anxieties about immigration, particularly Muslim immigration, a failing belief in the ideas of generational advancement amongst parts of the middle class, and a deep despair about the future from large parts of what was once called "the working class". While we did not see the expansion of a working poor, or dramatic increases in poverty rates, like we saw in other countries around the GFC, it's clear that that is an incredible issue. I was in Sydney last week, and was told by the providers of food in the middle of the city of Sydney, that they're now feeding people who actually have full time jobs. There are homeless people with full time jobs in the centre of Sydney – that's unbelievable really, to me.

I can't see a time when Australians would elect someone like Donald Trump, Prime Minister, and Pauline Hanson's no Donald Trump. We might have had our Donald Trump moment with Clive Palmer, but that's been and gone. But if his success is anything to go by, we are clearly globally, at a place where predictions and polls don't mean what they used to.



America and the world will need to live day by day and we are in fact living day by day, to see what a President Trump might do, but in the meantime looking at what's happening in America, it's made me appreciate what we have in this country and the vigilance we need to show what we need to do to protect it.

Thank you.

