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COMMUNITY ATTITUDES AND ACTIVISM ON SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE

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ABSTRACT

The social issues of most concern to the Australian public appear to be Taxes and Health Care, with Environmental issues being ranked as the first or second most important social issue in Australia by only around 15% of respondents to the 2005 *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes*. While citizens are making their views on social and environmental issues heard to some extent, they do so by indirect means rather than direct action. In addition, there is scepticism of big business among the community, particularly of banks and financial institutions who claim to be at the forefront of social reporting. In the current climate of increased awareness of global issues such as climate change and terrorism we might expect citizens to be more involved in, or vocal about, social and environmental concerns than this survey indicates.

INTRODUCTION

The major social issues of concern to the Australian public appear to be Taxes and Health Care, with Environmental issues being ranked as the first or second most important social issue in Australia by only around 15% of respondents to the 2005 *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (AuSSA)[1]. There is evidence in the Survey however, that citizens are making their views heard, albeit by more indirect than direct means, and this has not changed substantially in previous three years. Coupled with this, is evidence of scepticism of big business among the community, particularly banks and financial institutions, who are among those producing social reports. In the Survey over 75% of the respondents felt that big business goes unpunished when breaking the law (down slightly from 81% in 2003) and 61%

[1] Full information about AuSSA can be accessed via their website: http://aussa.anu.edu.au/.

consider that 'ordinary people' do not get a fair share of the nation's wealth.

THE SURVEY

The AuSSA[2] comprises a survey of 10,000 people over the age of 18, which resulted in a sample of approximately 4,000 people, with a sub-sample of around 2000 used for some questions (there are two versions of AuSSA, with each version containing core questions that are common to both, plus additional questions on specific issues - Version B contained questions on Citizenship, some of which are used in this paper. There were 1,914 respondents to Version B). The survey is conducted through the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University (King and Tilt, 2006).

Respondents to the survey were predominantly Australian born (75%) and live in the city or suburbs (62%). Their mean income is around $AU30,000 and the median around $AU25,000 per annum. Most respondents identified themselves as being either middle class (49.6%) or working class (41%). Approximately equal numbers of males and females responded, most finished at least year 10 of high school, with around half completing 12 years of secondary education. Around 40% had also completed either a trade or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualification. The average age is just over 50 years (King and Tilt, 2006). Some of the questions asked in 2005 were also asked in a similar 2003 survey (AuSSA, 2003) and in the following sections comparisons are made where possible.

ATTITUDES ABOUT INVOLVEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY

When discussing what it means to be a good citizen, most Australians consider the most important components to be complying with laws but also rank highly keeping watch on the government (53% rank it as very important) and helping the less privileged (41% very important). In terms of responses that could be termed some form of 'activism', being involved in social or political associations was ranked quite highly by around 67% of respondents when asked what it meant to be a good citizen (ranked 4 or above on a scale of 1 to 7). However, only around 10% of respondents belonged to an environmental, aid or lobby group of any kind. Community confidence in charities was rated as being high, with 60% reporting they have a lot or a great deal of confidence in these organisations.

Activism, however can be classified as a continuum from fairly indirect methods of attempting to influence others (be it Government policy, business and corporations, or community groups) to more direct forms such as demonstrations and protests, and includes support for NGOs or charities that undertake the 'activism' on behalf of their members.

ACTIVISM THROUGH INDIRECT MEANS

Indirect forms of Activism in this paper include signing petitions, fund raising for a particular cause or changing buying patterns of a particular product. These types of activity appeared to be used by a number of respondents – over 41% of the survey sample had signed a petition in the past 12 months and another 40% had done so in the more distant past. Similarly, 35% had boycotted products for political, environmental or ethical reasons in the past 12 months, with another 18% doing so some time before then. Of interest is that 27% said they might do so even though they have not done so in the past. Over 65% said they

have or might raise funds/donate money for a social or political activity.

part in a demonstration, and while 39% considered that they might, so far they never have. Similar results were shown in relation to attending a political meeting or political rally. Table 1 shows the relative responses to engaging in these types of direct activities in 2005.

that the indirect form of action includes consumer boycotts and women are more likely to be undertaking general shopping duties than men. The most marked difference appears between social classes, with the middle class being far more likely to undertake all forms of action than other classes.

The results of the 2005 survey indicate that

TABLE 1: PARTICIPATION IN DIRECT ACTIVISM (%)

(N = 2180)	Taken part in demonstration	Attended political rally	Contacted politician	Contacted media	Joined internet forum
Have done in the past year	4.8	5.1	13.8	5.0	1.7
Have done in more distant past	16.2	17.4	19.8	9.6	1.7
Have not done but might	39.1	37.8	44.7	42.4	27.9
Have not done and would never	38.1	38.1	20.5	41.6	66.1
Can't choose	1.8	1.7	1.3	1.5	2.7

SOURCE: AuSSA 2005

DIRECT ACTIVISM

Analysis of survey responses reveals that more direct forms of activism are less apparent. Direct activism includes taking part in organised demonstrations or rallies, contacting politicians, contacting the media about social issues, or joining an internet forum or discussion group set up around a social or political issue. The inclination to take part in a demonstration or political rally remained around the same in 2005 as it did in 2003 with only about 11% admitting to have taken part in a march, protest or rally in the last two years. Over a third (38%) of Australians stated they would never take Analysis of the survey results showed that women are more likely to engage in indirect action than men, but that gender makes no difference in their likelihood to engage in direct action. This is not surprising given

most people appear to prefer indirect methods of making their views known, whether that activism is aimed at governments or private enterprises. Methods used most include donations, petitions or changing consumption patterns. Such a preference for indirect action is supported by the fact that over 40% of respondents have never belonged to any voluntary association, and only 22% are actively involved in one. Around 88% have never belonged to a political party. These findings are consistent with research on environmental activist groups undertaken in 1994 and again in 2004, which found that even organised 'activists' favour an indirect approach when attempting to influence the behaviour of corporations (Tilt, 1994, 2004; Danastas and Gadenne, 2006). The least likely type of activism to be used is an

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internet forum, which is surprising given that 60% of the sample used the internet more than once a week, and 40% use it once a day or more.

It appears that many actions undertaken by citizens are aimed at influencing or changing the behaviour of private enterprises, such as large corporations, which infers a certain mistrust of those organisations. The AuSSA survey asked Australians about their views of big business, and these responses are considered in the sections below. In terms of their involvement with companies or business, less than half of the respondents owned shares in an Australian company, slightly fewer than did in 2003, with only 5% owning shares in more than ten companies.

Just over half those in the sample were employed during the week they were asked to respond to the survey.

CORPORATE POWER

Interestingly, most Australians answering the survey consider that big business should either have less power (34.5%) or a lot less power (29.2%) than they currently have (see Figure 1). The number of people suggesting business should have less power has increased since the previous survey undertaken in 2003 when only 14% considered they should have a lot less power. 57% of people considered that the Federal Government is either entirely or mostly run for a few big interests; a figure that has not changed since the 2003 survey. Yet, less than 20% of people in the 2005 survey considered addressing the gap between rich and poor as the first or second most important issue facing Australia today.

It might be thought that working class people are likely to be more sceptical of big business than the middle or upper classes, as those earning a higher wage are more likely to be in management or executive positions, have greater ties to big business, and thus be

less suspicious of their motives. However, the survey results suggest this is not the case. There is no statistical difference between middle class and working class responses to this question (p = 0.128). It can be seen from Figure 2, that in both categories, the majority of people consider that business should have less power.

Figure 1: Power big business should have by gender
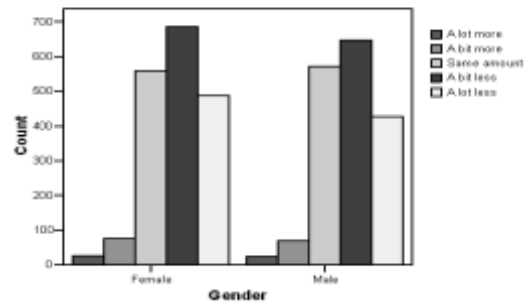
Source: AuSSA 2005

FIGURE 2: Power big business should have by social class
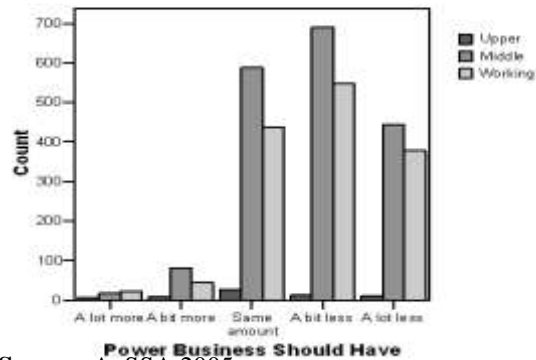
Source*:* AuSSA 2005

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN BUSINESS

In contrast with the apparent scepticism however, when asked how much confidence they have in major Australian corporations, 41% of the respondents stated they have a lot or a great deal of confidence, with 53% saying not very much or none. People appear slightly less confident in banks and financial institutions (28% a lot; 69% a little or none). There is evidence that banks in Australia (among other industries) are aware of these attitudes and their recent increase in

social and environmental reporting, as well as changes to some of their activities, may be an attempt to address this. Westpac, for example, produces annual Social Impact Reports. The poor perception towards business contrasts starkly with a high level of confidence in charities, 60% stating they have a lot or a great deal of confidence in charitable organisations.

When the results on public confidence are considered taking account of whether the respondents were employed, there does appear to be a difference (Figure 3). Employed respondents were almost equally split between having quite a lot and not very much confidence in business, while those not employed (which includes unemployed, retired and home duties) had less confidence ($p = 0.002$). This again has implications for social reporting – it is less likely that the unemployed will have access to annual reports or separate social and environmental reports.

CONSUMER INFLUENCE

In terms of how people might try to influence big business, the act of changing purchasing behaviour is, as discussed earlier, very common. Supporting this, there is some evidence that respondents feel there is tension between consumers and big business, with 58% stating there is a lot or some tension in existence. This is a slight decrease from 2003 when around 68% perceived there to be tension. In 2005, 35% of respondents had used consumer power to exert influence over business in the past 12 months, by boycotting products for political, environmental or ethical reasons. Another 18% had done so before then, and 27% saw it as a legitimate form of influence, saying they might do so even though they have not done so in the past.

CONCLUSION

It seems that many people are concerned with the amount of power afforded to big business in our society and confidence in those organisations is not particularly high. They are considered to have too much power, to have too much support from the Federal Government and to receive a disproportionate amount of the nation's wealth.

This contrasts however, with the low level of participation in community groups and political organisations, and the decision not to speak out on social and political issues through demonstrations or rallies.

FIGURE 3: CONFIDENCE IN BIG BUSINESS
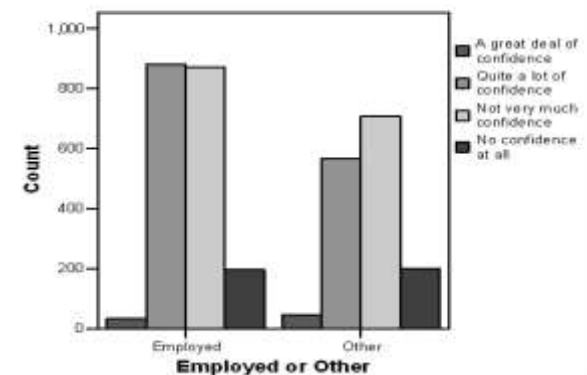
Source: AuSSA 2005

The contrast in attitudes leaves some important questions, such as whether it is simply a result of apathy within society, or whether citizens feel powerlessness and see no avenues for bringing about change – the comparatively high level of the use of consumer boycotts might indicate this is one area were society members feel they may be able to make a difference. Or, do citizens believe that organisations such as NGOs, governments and the media are already doing enough through their activities? These, and other questions, are important areas for future research.

In a world of increased awareness of global issues such as climate change and terrorism, we might expect citizens to begin to become more involved in, or vocal about, social and

environmental concerns. Evidence from Australia examined here indicates this should not be taken for granted.

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PHD COMPLETED – DR ANNA LEE ROWE

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Below is a brief outline of Dr Rowe's PhD entitled 'Greening Corporate Dragons' Management and Reporting in Shanghai'

INTRODUCTION

What was once the discernment of a 'green' social organisational fringe, Corporate Environmental Management (CEM) and Corporate Environmental Reporting (CER), have increasingly become a core business strategy (Gray, Owen and Adams, 1996; Mathews, 1997; World Bank, 2001; SustainAbility/UNEP, 2002; Schaltegger, Burritt and Petersen, 2003). Research studies in this arena have been centred predominantly on industrialised nations (e.g., Guthrie and Parker, 1990; Patten and Trompeter, 2003), and until recently, comparatively sparse focus on developing nations (Belal, 2000), particularly in empirical studies on CER in China (Chan and Welford, 2005).

The impetuous for undertaking this research in addressing the gaps in CEM and CER in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has never been more pressing. The challenge to

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