AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL ATTITUDES, THE FIRST REPORT

Edited by Shaun Wilson, Rachel Gibson, David Denemark and Mark Western.
Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005, 281pp, \$59.95 (paperback).

If you are interested in *what* Australians feel about specific social issues and *how* these views may change over time, then this book is for you. Attitudes to issues, groups, activities, policies and institutions such as the family, work, voluntary associations, political participation, engaged citizens, the welfare state, trust, crime and justice, economic reform, immigration, multiculturalism, national identity, genetic testing, mass media and globalisation are all covered in this report.

Unlike the United States of America, Britain, Europe, Africa and Asia, this is the first survey of its kind in Australia. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) was inaugurated in 2003 to see “what ordinary Australians feel about major social, economic and political issues of the day” (McAllister in Foreword). Key social and political commentators have contributed to this book - Deborah Mitchell, Ian, McAllister, Michael Pusey and Deborah Mitchell to name just a few.

The AuSSA is a product of the Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University in collaboration with researchers from Australia and overseas (page 6). It was a mail questionnaire sent to a stratified systematic random sample of 11,380 Australian aged 18 or over, who were selected from the 2002 updated version of the Australian Electoral Commission’s Electoral Roll (pages 6-7). Two versions of the survey were distributed between August and December 2003 where the overall net response rate was 44% (page 7). To view the 2003 questionnaires, see the AuSSA website <http://aussa.anu.edu.au/questionnaires.html> (page 7).

Survey results are also available through the Australian Social Science Data Archive's data analysis system, NESSTAR at <http://assda.anu.edu.au/analysis.html> (page 7). Most importantly, it is the official Australian contribution to the world's two leading social surveys: the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) covering 39 countries and the World Values Survey covering around 90 countries (page 6).

The editors believe that in addressing the twin challenges to contribute to public debate and to the social sciences, *Australian Social Attitudes* is a mixture of "public opinion research, social commentary and 'pure' academic research" (page 2).

As someone who has lots of involvement with so called 'ordinary Australians' through extensive community work and political activity, I was surprised by some of the information that was contained in this report. That was because I was either unaware that people thought that way or because it differed from how I thought! So I learnt a lot from *Australian Social Attitudes*. I did not always agree with, nor like, it but I enjoyed learning what Australians think and say about specific topics.

For most readers, one would not sit down to read this book from the front to the back cover – it would probably be used as an excellent reference for social attitudes on specific topics.

From a research point of view, sociologists and political scientists should be informed by this report before embarking on research projects or theses that include such topics as families, work, economic reform or multiculturalism. Students of social work and psychology will also learn from this book – it is a must for any university or TAFE

College library. *Australian Social Attitudes* should also be read by journalists, social commentators, policy makers, political powerbrokers, pollsters and politicians before they comment about, or formulate policies on, topics covered in this report. Whether one should steer, contradict or follow public opinion, is a different question entirely.

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