

Peter Cock about community

The following is a transcript of an interview with Peter Cock by the Age journalist Michael Short as part of the regular series known as The Zone. The interview was first published in the Age on 25th February 2011.

MICHAEL SHORT: Dr Peter Cock, welcome to The Zone. We met after one of my children a few years ago visited the village you were instrumental in establishing decades ago, Moora Moora near Healesville. We'll come back to Moora Moora later. My son Tom was inspired to see what you do and his enthusiasm spread to me and so I went to see what you've done and I saw that it works.

You're here to argue that were we to, in effect, embrace the community self-determination that is a key part of Moora Moora, life would improve for people. That's a big claim and a very important one. You also argue that technology has developed to the point where it can help this revitalisation of citizenship. Can you explain those ideas, please?

PETER COCK: We are social beings. We come out of a tribal village heritage. That's part of who we are and that's what grows us. It's also oppressed us. I think we've gone to the other extreme of individualism – that deprives us of the support and meaning that comes from being in a community.

And to think of just the family as a source of that when 20 per cent of households are only one person, the nuclear family has shrunk and become increasingly unstable, broken up, so we haven't got the social and intimate support in our personal environments we used to have and that we need. And all the substitutes that we've drawn on – the materialism – are not a substitute for that.

The question of what's the cause of our social ills in terms of drug addiction, you name it, suicide, mental illness, to me it comes back to the loss of community.

MS: Do you think, Peter, that there's been a trend and a causal link between those two? That's what you're suggesting, isn't it, that the breakdown in families, communities, neighbourhoods, is causally associated with a rise in these problems. Have you as an academic, as a sociologist, have you got stuff to back this?

PC: (French sociologist Emile) Durkheim said. He was a famous sociologist who said this about comparing people who lived in a strong, Catholic community versus those who didn't – their social problems were far greater. It's not an argument in social research.

MS: So we can take that as a premise.

PC: Yes, definitely, a major premise.

MS: And you're building from that premise to say we can get to a better place.

PC: I think we can, in a way which bypasses some of the oppressions of being locked into a village and a tribe. Why did we escape the tribe? Why did we give up community? Because we couldn't move without the next door neighbours saying dadadada. We wanted to get away from that extreme, and looking back it was an extreme. When you live in a physical and ecological environment where you are so vulnerable, as we were as tribes, and as villagers if the crop failed – it's not surprising that we were so dependent on our village and we were accountable to that and we gave over to it to survive...

MS: OK, so this revitalisation of citizenship that you talk about is now possible because...

PC: Because we have the opportunity to be part of a community - or communities, not just necessarily one – and at the same time be part of the larger society, which gives us a bet in both camps. But we have got to get away from this extreme of just relying on the individual as being the responsible one. I don't think we can be responsible as individuals; well very few of us can, without the support of an intimate community.

MS: But you're talking about an intimate community rather than big government being the source of change for the better?

PC: I wouldn't want to put all my eggs in one basket. The American democracy was trying to split power – power corrupts. Power corrupts at a local level as much as at a national level, so I wouldn't want to put all my eggs in one basket.

But presently we've put all our eggs in looking to government to solve our problems – and I think we need government to help solve our problems, but in partnership with empowered local communities. In that sense, I look to the right, which is sceptical of government. I'm sceptical of government too. But I think in our context luckily we're pretty privileged, and that's why we're apathetic about democracy. The Egyptians are celebrating; you can see the joy on their faces.

And we're so apathetic and take for granted (what we've got in our system). We're so pious and arrogant at our democracy. But in a sense we've also given up on it. We've stopped engaging in it. Part of it is because we've lost learning citizenship at a grass-roots level. A lot of people who become politicians start in local government. I think we need to start in the local street in terms of educating our citizens...

MS: OK, let's go from that vision, or bigger idea, to how you would see it happen specifically. You're talking about street level, community level. How would it happen?

PC: I think it's going to happen not because I advocate for it, but because circumstances are going to drive it. I think social ills on the one hand – putting doctors and a whole professionalised solution is not going to be enough, and it's going to blow the budget anyway. So, from a health point of view it's not working. And it's going to work from an ecological point of view – the cost of petrol, cost of transport, cost of moving is going to go up. We can not afford to have people moving so much every day. So one's local place begins to matter again, and, as we said in the seventies, think globally act locally, that idea is not obsolete. It's still relevant. So, I think circumstances will drive it as much as any ideological aspiration. But our biological history is very important, because we have it in our genes to be in a community. We've lost the specific skills and we're scared of it now.

MS: One might be tempted to say you're unrealistic or unduly utopian. You've dealt with those sort of things all through your life and evident riposte to that is that Moora was set up decades ago and it works. Can you talk a little bit, please, about the story of that?

PC: Well, I think we need to have aspirations for a better society. We in the West tend to think we've made it and we've arrived. Well, bullshit. We haven't arrived.

MS: That was the Francis Fukuyama thesis of the late 80s, wasn't it? The End of History...

PC: Ah, yes The End of History...

MS: Exactly what you're talking about. And it was widely condemned as stupid and arrogant.

PC: And maybe we've run out of ideas. Maybe part of the reason why we said the end of history is we've run out of ideas so all it was was about accumulating more. Having more. Wow. Having more is killing the planet, so we can't go that path. So what's the alternative path?

MS: Well, it's also killing us. As someone who's just been in The Zone, Daniel Akst a writer from America is saying we're no longer dealing with the problems of scarcity; we're suffering the problems of plenty.

PC: Yes, yes, excesses.

MS: And this has helped lead to something you talk about a fair bit in your writing – apathy...

PC: Apathy. Why do people have to be dragged to the polls? It's because they're not dumb. They know they don't have much of a say. They have a voter every three years and that's all. If we're really going to get past apathy and reactivate, you've got to give people real power and the only way to give people real power is to have real say over the real issues.

MS: Use Moora Moora to relate that to us, then. Real issues, how you've organised and how it works.

PC: We're on top of a mountain top. We're got 600 acres, we've got 30 houses. It's a co-operative community where people come together to decide about the things that matter in that community. It's not a commune, in the sense that not everything is shared. We dance with this thing about privacy and community.

We work with "well that's not my business, that's your business". We look at decision-making, how do we decide things. What do we decide, what don't we decide, how we deal with conflict – all the issues of community. They're all the same; they've never been different – they do vary, they do evolve, but fundamentally learning to live with each other and to what degree is a challenging process but it's amazingly growthful.

How are we going to grow powerful citizens? I went to a kibbutz and I was so impressed by how powerful each individual was, even though they lived in a community. Seemed like a contradiction. But it's not, because through the interactions and through the struggles of each personality, we learn to become more adept and capable ourselves.

MS: I'm fascinated by the neighbourhood thing and the isolation and apathy ideas. People are free to choose, right? You argue most, or a great many, neighbourhoods are not functioning all that well, that people are a bit disconnected. But aren't they just exercising their free will, living their lives the way they think will be best for themselves and their families?

PC: Ah, freedom, freedom, freedom. I think choice is important; choice matters – especially at the substantial level rather than the superficial level about which cheese I'll choose or butter I'll buy. I think we have limited choice, actually.

I don't want to be just in Moora Moora; I don't want to be locked into that psychology, that framework. I think it's important that Moora Moora is part of a larger universe of accountability. Fundamentally, the ultimate accountability is to the planet, and therefore I don't trust just community, my community Moora Moora, to do the best thing, or the right thing. It needs to have external reference points.

So, we need choice and that; the beauty of now – we can be living in one place, one community. Like, for example you: you travel to a community in France, you have a community here. Not being completely locked in is important. At the same time, going to where I live in my street and there's no one at home during the day, and within three years just about the whole population has turned over, the kids aren't safe to go outside the front door, there's no sense of having any power beyond one's own little block, there's nothing shared between people so they have a reason to interact

Maybe they have an annual party, but there's some substantial stuff – so, for example, they say it takes a village to raise a kid. Kids shouldn't be so shaped just by their parents. They need to be able to see and interact with other kids and other parents. And that's part of the potentiality that exists in a street, but how are we going to facilitate that? I think it begins with local governments being prepared to say righto we'll give you some powers over things.

Even if it's for five years – we'll give you management of street flows. You can have an alternative so you can use your rates and taxes to set up a park or run a childcare centre or something the community shares. Or to grow a community garden. I don't care, really, so long as people have a substantial reason to interact and know their neighbours and engage with their neighbours and take account of each other.

When shit happens, you can draw on them at least to some extent, but not exclusively. Because as we know in Queensland, we need the federal government to come in. We can't just rely on local communities. It's a mix and balance issue, not one or the other.

MS: Mechanism. Technology, you're saying, has evolved to a point where with it can be quite useful in bringing this sort of thing about?

PC: The internet facilitates communication – globally, obviously, nationally – but it also facilitates locally. Let's say the fires are coming, it's great to have the internet. We were having Black Saturday fires coming straight for us; it's good for communication, even at a very local level. And the beauty of the local level is you're got a mix between the technology and the face-to-face. So you have the face-to-face relationship and then you have the technology as an adjunct, as a back up.

MS: A bit like a community intranet.

PC: Very good! Yes. Whereas when you talk nationally and globally you have the face-face in terms of the screen, but you don't have the blood and flesh, and that matters.

MS: Now, there are some places you look at where these ideas coalesce around a greater participation in democracy – specifically, you mention California and Switzerland. What appeals to you about that?

PC: I'm not just interested in the local street. It's important to regenerate at that level. But how do we bring life back into democracy or citizenship, so that people really feel capable and desirous of engaging in looking after our society, looking after the planet. There's too few taking responsibility. Why? Because they don't have the social infrastructure, the social capital to do so.

MS: That captures your big point, doesn't it? There are too few taking responsibility because they're locked out – or locked into something else.

PC: Well, they're locked out. I think the citizens are locked out – you get asked to vote every three years and that's it. Whereas, with the internet, people can vote for other things – the top ten starts or who's the best at this or that.

We can vote for that. But we don't get to vote on how much we spend on defence or how much we spend on the environment or whether we have a climate tax or whatever. The reason why we elected professionals to do it for us is because we couldn't do it any other way. Direct democracy happened for a very few in Greece, the aristocracy, but to make it so for the whole populace we need a new technology. We've now got it.

The problem is, our governance is dominated by a professional few, and that needs to be liberated, and we're scared of that because of the gap between the knowledge of the professionals and the "hip-pocket" narrow interest of the citizens.

MS: You believe the collective wisdom of the citizenry is sufficient to offset the lack of specialised knowledge in areas like spending and taxing, like defence?

PC: It's not one or the other. It's a partnership. We still need our professional politicians but in a partnership process where people have a direct vote. I'm not suggesting we just suddenly turn it all over. It's got to be a gradual process. First of all we've got to see the need for a

transformation of democracy, and the opportunity. Having seen that, then let's have a gradual process of evolution that would bring the citizens more directly into the process.

MS: By using technology to allow votes?

PC: Yes, a vote.

MS: And how would that work.

PC: For example, you can have a referendum on the republic – we all vote for that, and if it gets through, that's the decision.

MS: Just a complete plebiscite?

PC: Why can't we do that on a number of issues? The reason why this is important is also to educate. Once people engage, they learn. If they're not engaged, they don't learn. So, how are we going to educate the citizens to take on that collective responsibility? We need to not for their own sense of well-being, but because each one of us has a significant ecological footprint, and each one is contributing to the life or death of this planet. People need to think more broadly about what's in their interests.

MS: A lot of people, Peter, might say "I'm really engaged through the taxation system; I have a busy life, I'm trying to look after my family, trying to keep my head above water etc" – so it's not the apathy thing, it's just not a priority because I believe that through the system we've got and my payment of taxes, it's kind of OK.

PC: Yeah, well it is kind of OK. We're not in Iran. Yeah, it's kind of OK, but is it good enough and can we do better given what we're now facing. What's coming up in relation to ecological catastrophe and gradual erosion of our own well-being from the disintegration of social cohesion and social capital...

MS: So, there should be enlightened self-interest operating here? We actually have a lot more skin in the game, as they in financial markets, than we perhaps realise?

PC: Yes, yes – and potential power to do something about it.

MS: Do you believe in equality of opportunity or equality of outcome? How do these things fit into this? You talk about, for example, the monopolisation of power by a professional elite. Is that relating to concerns you have about equality of opportunity, or the outcomes?

PC: More about the outcomes. I think equality is a dream that's not particularly helpful. If you look around the world, inequality is getting more extreme, and that's a dangerous trend and it's a real problem. The problem therefore, from an environmental point of view, is the ecological footprint of everyone becoming wealthier. So, I'm concerned about the extremes of inequality, but beyond that, whether we have a Holden or a Mercedes, well, who cares, at one level? I think we can be too concerned about making everybody the same. The Chinese tried to do that and we're not the same, we're all different and there's that creative process that comes from difference.

MS: And the monopolisation of power by a professional elite?

PC: The professions are suppressive of citizens taking responsibility with various aspects of their life. Whether it be plumbing or whether it be the media, or health. For example, we know that if you rely on your doctor exclusively, your life could end up being sicker. If you take on some responsibility in terms of prevention and educating yourself about your own physical well-being, you're going to need the doctor less. Our therapeutic interventions need to have a preventative component. And that's why the doctor has a responsibility to not only treat you but to educate you.

MS: There's that nice system, I think, in China where you pay the doctor when you're well...

PC: Yes, and applies across the board as far as I'm concerned. But that's not the system. Everybody's invested in you being sick so you've got a professional who's going to look after you. Which keeps you sick.

MS: We're running out of time and I want to have a look at you.

PC: Sorry.

MS: No, no, it's not your fault. Why do you do what you do? Why do you think what you think?

PC: Well, my mother was a counsellor and a chaplain. She set up her own personal growth centre. My father was a naturopath, a conscientious objector in the Second World War. He was a healer and he said I am not going to go to war if I'm a healer. And that was pretty hard – to be a conscientious objector. I was a conscientious objector against the Vietnam War. That was easy in comparison.

So, why do I do this? Well, I protested in Washington against the Vietnam War, and then in Bourke Street. I basically said to myself, well that's all very well – I'm asking government to do the changes, and I'm sick of protesting. But what am I going to do? What's my contribution? What can I do constructively? How am I taking the power to myself?

So, out of that, and training as a sociologist – doing a masters in governance and so forth, I thought, well, Ok I'll set up a community which at least begins to address some of these issues at a micro level. So, that was really the impulse. I lived in a student apartment in the United States for a couple of year and that was a terrific sense of community. I'd been involved in the human potential movement – encounter groups.

And I thought that's OK, that's great for a week, but can I make it a lifestyle? My father being a naturopath in the 40s and 50s was pretty deviant then, so I've always been a thinker like him. I've got those roots, which I honour.

MS: So, there's a lineage but there's also an experience element to it. How important is it that we give our children that sort of belief in the possible?

PC: A lot of people who come to Moora Moora come for the sake of their kids, because they know living in a community is going to be great for their kids' socialisation. It is tremendous, in terms of growing strong children who can mix it with society and have been forced to reflect on who they are, and how they're different and how they're the same.

And it's not just about being in a community. It's about being the forest and the farm, being in nature. And for me, I got chronic fatigue and out of that I realised I'd been putting too many of my eggs in community and then I looked to the forest and to nature to balance that. I found nature, wild places, a great to help recharge and provide an alternative source of energy. Community can drain your batteries as well as stimulate them.

MS: And to clarify with Moora Moora – it's not a hippy commune; as you say, the kids are going to school in the community and people who live there get up in the morning and go off to the universities and places where they work elsewhere and come back at night.

PC: Yes, although some work on the community, but yes, correct.

MS: What's the hardest things you've ever had to do, Peter?

PC: I think setting up Moora Moora – well, nobody creates a community by themselves. Being involved in the creation of an intentional community and being there for 37 years from start to now has been a very big challenge because I've had to share power, I've had to share influence, I've had to tolerate sometimes the intolerable and to suffer my own limitations being presented to me all the time. Someone told me some time ago, Peter it's all very well to give you feedback, but do you ever change? So, change and learning to not give up on my own

personal growth has been great but it's been hard. It's not easy living in a community, but it's more meaningful than a lot of other things.

MS: Are you going to stay there?

PC: Yes, yes, yes. They'll bury me there. One of my little political processes is to get the legal right to bury my body there under a gum tree somewhere. Yeah, definitely.

MS: May that be a long way off, and thank you very much for your time today.