

# BOOK REVIEW

## The Big Shift

by Bernard Salt

Review by Neil Head and Peter Arnold, Development Group, Emergency Management Australia (EMA).

In a lively and entertaining account, Bernard Salt charts the course of Australian society since European settlement, correlating the shifts in population and demographic distribution with cultural changes, and making some astute observations about the likely future for this country.

In *The Big Shift*, Salt postulates “The push from the bush”, a rural population decline occurring at the same time as the growth of suburbia during the 20th century, followed by the emergence of a shift to provincial coastal communities—largely by lifestyle-seeking baby boomers, now occurring in the 21st century. There have thus been three cultures in Australian history: first the bush, then suburbia and the third culture of the beach, which has emerged over the last 20-odd years and will continue to develop.

Salt’s hypothesis examines two key factors behind demographic change – population and culture – drawing on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data.

The population of Australia reached 19 million in 2001 and is expected to increase to 25 million by 2051, before stabilising around that number for the rest of the 21st century. The reason for the stabilisation is due to a combination of a drop in the number of children per family and the decrease in the older age “hump” through natural attrition. The significance of the big shift however, is not how big the

population will be, but what will be the distribution of people and that will reflect the Australian culture.

Though Australia has always had a large urban population, the relative rural population (rural to urban) was high (52% in 1901). Then throughout the 20th century, the capital city suburbs grew strongly. The trend to suburbia peaked in the 1980s, when the concept of urban sprawl rose, then a trend to high density inner city living developed (though not enough to over-ride suburbia as a cultural force). However, together city-dwellers dominate the Australian culture and the rural culture – the image of the bush – is now marginalised.

Over the last 20-odd years, Salt has identified a third Australian culture, that of the beach. Of 642 local government areas (LGA) in Australia, 157 have some sort of beach frontage. The population of these LGAs was 6.7 million in 2000. In many cases this is nothing new; 34 of these LGAs are also city suburbs. However, 123 are provincial coastal communities with a 2000 population of 3.6 million, an increase of 1.4 million over the last quarter of the 20th century.

Salt correlates the shifts in Australian culture to the three acknowledged “generations”. The “baby boomers” are those born between 1946 and 1961, in the expansion years after World War Two. Then there is “Generation X” (born between 1961 and 1976), in the years of rapid technological development and a degree of social dissolution. Finally there is “Generation Y”, also called “Generation Dotcom”, born between



1976 and 1991, to whom the computer and the Internet are a natural part of life. The third culture largely (but not uniquely) rests with the baby boomers, who are looking for a certain lifestyle in the latter years of their working life and in retirement.

This correlation of generation to culture, as well as Salt’s examination of “quirky Australia” are the heart of his hypothesis and naturally lead to his thoughts for the future. He sees the shift to the coast as continuing, but suburbia will still determine the “national Mood” and while the bush will grow slightly in real terms it will decline relatively and remain marginalised.

The Bernard Salt Report, *The Big Shift*, has its focus on business. Where should business people focus their energy and finance in the likely future Australia? For these people, *The Big Shift* has some very strong insights.



### Emergency Management

However, what are the implications of The Big Shift for emergency management? A number of issues are apparent. For the inner city environment, the trend to high density living has obvious ramifications, especially with respect to fire or structural collapse (urban search and rescue). For the urban-rural fringe, which continues to border bushland or push into flood-plain areas, the problems of

fire or flood are self-evident. The move to the coastal settlement is significant, since that is a move to a naturally hazardous area. The coast is subject to severe storms (the East Coast Lows), including problems such as hail and flash flooding, and many of the provincial settlements are on flood plains and have problems with coastal erosion, while the northern coastal areas are in the cyclone belt.

Then there are the people issues. Many of the people shifting to the rural-urban fringe or to the coast bring with them an urban mentality; they have little or no experience of natural hazards, they are used to and expect provision of services (including, perhaps especially, emergency services) and they have little concept of personal responsibility for safety and sustainability. Raising community awareness with this population will be a major challenge.

Emergency management in Australia is totally reliant on volunteers. The implications of The Big Shift are apparent: the aging population, the decline in the rural population and the shift of the population to the coast will all affect volunteering. How can the young be attracted to volunteer – and will Dotcomers have appropriate skill sets? While the boomers in the provincial coastal communities may find it “fashionable” to volunteer, will they be willing and/or capable to do the “dirty” and physical work that is the part of the emergency service volunteer.

All these issues, and more, will need to be addressed by emergency managers as part of The Big Shift. As part of this assessment, EMA plans to conduct, in association with State & Territory agencies, some scoping exercises on this subject in 2003/4, so readers please feel free to make contact if you have an opinion or want to participate, contact Neil Head on [neil.head@ema.gov.au](mailto:neil.head@ema.gov.au)

Bernard Salt. *The Big Shift—Welcome to the Third Australian Culture*. Second Edition. Hardie Grant Books, South Yarra, Melbourne, 2003 (ISBN 1-74066-076-5). The book is available in the Emergency Management Australia (EMA) Information Centre at 304.60996SAL or at bookstores for about \$35.00. Bernard Salt was also a Keynote Speaker at the recent triennial ‘Australian Disaster Conference 2003’, hosted by EMA in Canberra, on the theme, “Community Safety is Everybody’s Business”. His presentation from that event is available on the EMA Website at [www.ema.gov.au](http://www.ema.gov.au) and he provides a public website at [www.thebigshift.com](http://www.thebigshift.com).