

Andrew Leigh review for *Canberra Times*

Andrew Leigh, *Disconnected*, New South, 2010, viii + 208pp, RRP \$34.95

By Don Aitkin

The media release for this book describes its author as ‘one of our most exciting young thinkers’, and I would agree with that judgment, since I have read much of what he has written on Australia in the last few years. He picks interesting things to write about, and he writes well, too. Andrew Leigh is also the new MP for the ACT seat of Fraser, and before that was a professor at the ANU. He has packed a lot into his 38 years, and I predict a productive and enjoyable career for him, in politics or elsewhere.

His book is a study of the change over the years in what some call Australia’s ‘social capital’ — the extent to which we are prepared to trust and help one another, not just those we know well, but neighbours and complete strangers. He confesses to a guilty secret — that he collects pieces of data — and since that is also one of my failings I was happy to read on, if only to see what he had collected.

This short book is full of his collected data, but they never overwhelm the author. He takes us quickly through the domains of what I would call ‘belonging’, then religion, politics, work, friends and neighbours, trust and honesty and the like, to see what has happened to Australian society since the end of the second world war. He makes good use of membership data from long-established community organisations. As anyone my age knows, such membership is declining.

The book’s title provides Leigh’s conclusion, which is that we are in danger of falling apart as a society, for reasons that include technology, the changing roles of women, the diversity of our origins, the dominance of the motor car, and the place of television in our lives.

But, like me, he is an optimist. So the final chapter offers ten things that you and I could do to improve social capital, like donating, holding a street party, shopping locally, giving time and — I liked this one — contacting two politicians. The book is full of interesting little factoids, like Canberra’s No. 1 rating for social capital among Australian cities.

So I liked the book, and recommend it. And yet ... I was probably asked to review Andrew Leigh’s book because my last book, five years ago, covered very similar territory. In it I looked at what had happened to my high school Leaving class of 1953, the great majority of whose members are still alive, and who met for a 50-year anniversary in 2003. One of the chapters in that book was entitled ‘From We to Me’, and you can guess what it covered.

I used some of the same data, and came to much the same general conclusions as Andrew Leigh. But, unlike him, I lived through the whole period. I remember the Canberra celebration of VJ-day in 1945, and the wary separation of Protestants and Catholics in Armidale in the 1950s. I remember standing outside shops when television first came in the later 1950s just to see what it looked like, and the

extraordinarily widespread feeling in 1972 that Australia was turning a most important corner with the election of the first Labor government since 1949.

I remember, too, how insular and conservative the Australia I lived in was when I was young, and how education for everyone, everywhere, has changed people's perception of what is possible. So I finished my book with a most positive feeling that, taking everything into account, today's Australia is an awful lot better than the one I grew up in. Andrew Leigh feels much the same, but nonetheless the possible decay of the social fabric worries him.

I am less worried than he is because I see a lot of these things as peculiar to a particular time and place. When I was young, Australian society had emerged from a war and before that a terrible economic depression, troubles that united people in a most powerful way. From about 1950 onwards the general values of our society moved away from solidarity to the view that it was the individual who really mattered. I think Andrew Leigh would have found the 1950s a somewhat oppressive time, in terms of his capacity to say and write what he wanted to, let alone in finding a publisher for it.

Leigh worries that the Internet is leading us to neglect our friendship circles. I hope that even if he is right (and I don't think he is, at least for those of us who formed our friendship circles before the arrival of the Internet) our new capacity to reach out across the world could be the basis for an international understanding that has never existed in the past.

As I see it, there is no 'right' texture for our social fabric, just as there is no 'right' climate (from which things can only get worse), or 'right' way for a university to operate. Things are always changing, as people have said since Heraclitus, and each new technology, each new set of arrivals to our country, each new possibility, brings a new colour to the texture of our society. This Australia is a lot better than the one I grew up in, but it could be better still, and here Andrew Leigh and I agree.

I have no objection to his wanting us to get out there and mend the social fabric. He may be right. I guess I would put my efforts more into ensuring that every child is well educated and, in particular, is encouraged to develop the creativity that lies in us all. But if you're interested at all in how to make a good country even better, Leigh's book is an excellent place to start.

Don Aitkin's *What Was It All For? The Reshaping of Australia* was published in 2005 by Allen & Unwin