Book Review

Preventing Violence in Australia: Policy, Practice and Solutions
Edited by Andrew Day and Ephrem Fernandez[1]
Review by the Hon Peter Dowding SC

Is 'The Lucky Country' beset by violence? Recent media campaigns directed at reducing violence in our community are testament to the public's concern about this question. Horrific one-punch deaths, methamphetamine-fuelled psychotic killings and an increased public debate about domestic and family violence fill the news media and social networks. Yet there are more fundamental questions that can be posed. Why is there so much violence? Are we different from other societies? Are there reduction strategies? Is there a 'one size fits all' mechanism to reduce this phenomenon? Indeed, is violence in Australia a phenomenon or just the ordinary course of a society?

Knowing I had to review this book on my return from a holiday overseas, I reflected on these issues as I sat under a shady tree in a square in Brussels as hundreds of people drank and talked the evening away without the slightest hint of alcohol-fuelled aggression - not even raised voices. Perhaps there is a view of violence in Australia that comes from the old image of the ordinary bloke settling an argument out the back of the pub, or from some belief in male aggression being a sign of manhood. Certainly, some of our politicians adopt the pugnacious, verbal approach to disagreement - the determination to 'shirt front' the leader of the one of the world's most powerful nations does have a ring of the macho about it![2]

And the current debate and demonstrations about racism also create a very contemporary reason to contemplate what gives rise to community violence.

From a practical viewpoint, the questions that confront us are, of course, whether we care sufficiently to want to do something about the level of violence in Australia and, if we are to take the issue seriously, from where does the violence spring and what avoidance methods are appropriate: are they educational, spiritual or political; or are the solutions punitive and legal? Do we need to have an understanding of what levels of violence we experience in the community, how this violence affects our community and what solutions might enable us to build a truly civil society?

A recent book, *Preventing Violence in Australia: Policy, Practice and Solutions,* published by Federation Press and edited by Professors Andrew Day and Ephrem Fernandez, challenges our understanding of violence and underpins an important conversation about many areas in which violence impacts our community.

Sixteen separate contributors provide in-depth analyses of areas in which violence is endemic; examining the issue from the point of view of perpetrators and victims and tackling areas such as the effects of drug use and mental health problems, crime, bullying at school and in the workplace as well as the issue of domestic violence.

Importantly, instead of simply repeating the appalling statistics of violence, there are chapters in which the authors search for solutions and identify areas in which evidence demonstrates successful violence avoidance strategies. Many in the legal profession will be familiar with the issue of violence - whether in family, criminal or compensation law - and chapters addressing legal responses to violence will be of particular interest.

One contributor (who is from Anglicare Victoria's Policy Research and Innovation Unit) provides a fascinating analysis of violence in Australia and its relationship to masculinity and age and examines some policy recommendations as to how to move forward on this issue.

The authors propose that "rates of violence are not only relatively high in Australian youth, but have increased over recent decades", that a close association exists between alcohol and violence and that in order to design prevention strategies, one needs to understand violence and the nature of the stimulants and community mores that lead to this violence. This book asks: is there the possibility of fundamental social change that could remove the 'cultural supports' underpinning violence in Australia?

As one who has watched the deterioration of family and community safety within indigenous communities over recent years, I am utterly in agreement with the editors' views that violence in these communities is one of the most "pressing social issues in contemporary Australia".

This book is an important contribution to informing all of those who ought to be concerned about issues of violence (and that really is most of us) and while the political debate at present seems to be more about how best to provide lower or higher taxation regimes rather than building a better society, this book provides some signposts for those involved in policy determination.

This is not a book for the bedside reading table, but rather is an important addition to the library of anyone involved in a multitude of legal issues from licensing policy to social development in indigenous communities. This book is highly recommended.

NOTES

1.   The Federation Press 2015. Paperback/272pp ISBN 9781862879942 Australian RRP $69.90.

2.   Tony Abbott vows to 'shirtfront' Vladimir Putin over MH17 tragedy. Sydney Morning Herald 13 October 13 2014: http://www.smh.eom au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-vows-to-shirtfront-vladimir-putin-over-rnh17-tragedy-20141013-115cm3.html#ixzz3jExc7rCO.