A coincidence occurred when I was preparing this article for the Australian Institute of Family Studies. I was perusing the Council on the Ageing archives and chose a ten-year-old batch of newspaper clippings on the subject of ageing. The very first one was a review of Alice Day’s book *We Can Manage*, published by the Institute in 1985. I read this and other clippings to determine if I could identify any shift in the way the society of journalists writes about ageing. More of that later.

I find that articles on ageing have a formula start – the totally unconnected articles written ten years apart that I read started with ‘Australia’s population is ageing’. First there is a little bit of demographics and then the ‘buts’ and ‘yets’ which try to retrieve the positives about an ageing population. By the time the reader has reached the ‘buts’ and ‘yets’ they are already swept into a mind set that portrays an ageing population as a negative. Later positive protestations are lost because the author has delivered a body blow to the image of ageing before the article has run one paragraph.

A second theme I detected in the ten-year-old articles was grey power. There were two elements to these articles. Abolishing mandatory retirement was all the go and, second, the politicians should watch out because older people would use their voting power to make governments listen. The subject matter has not changed dramatically over ten years although the debates have become more intense. In this article I discuss employment, politics, safety, health, financial security, media, and positive ageing.

**Employment**

Abolishing mandatory retirement has been achieved throughout Australia with the Commonwealth Government being the last to legislate this year. There was a flurry of activity in the late 1980s on age discrimination in employment. While legislation was put in place, the hearts and minds of employers have not followed. We have seen a drift to older unemployment. People have been encouraged to retire early which is quite contrary to the much talked about shift in retirement incomes policy. On one hand, redundancies have focused on the over-50s. On the other, successive federal governments have said Australia cannot afford to continue paying pensions to all retirees.

**Valuing older Australians**

DENYS CORRELL is the National Executive Director of the Council on the Ageing – an independent national organisation for older people that exists to protect and promote the interests of older people.

This article presents his views on how the images and interests of older people influence public policy.
It is hard to know how governments can expect anyone on less than a luxurious salary to squirrel away savings on which to live for another 30 years. Legislation forbids age discrimination, but employers lay off older workers. Government policy is to encourage people to build nest eggs for retirement, but there is not one federal program to enhance work opportunities for over-50s.

My conclusion is that over ten years, in terms of public policy, little has moved on the employment front. Hidden from view has been the impact of having the over-50s generation losing, or in fear of losing, their employment. The over-50s generation still have dependent children. They are unlikely to have other sources of income. No wonder one of the major intergenerational shifts of wealth is to this generation from their parents.

Where to then for employment? This International Year of Older Persons is an opportunity to present a new image of the generation that has reached 50 and have another 30 years to live. It is not a case of being benevolent. This society cannot afford to lose employees’ skills. Governments will find it difficult to support the long-term sequence of older unemployment. The ramifications of premature retirement include loss of assets, deterioration of health, reliance on government pensions, and a diminished ability to provide intergenerational financial transfers. Not a pretty picture for the 21st century.

Older people and politics

Interest in older people as a political force has diminished. Older lobbies have been active but not in the way originally presented by grey power. The interests of older people have become more diversified. The age range of such groups has extended to include academics, industry and finance sector, not to mention social policy activists. The component of fear that pervades individuals in the older community. This fear reflects feelings of vulnerability – a theme which was present in the 1980s and remains today.

The Council on the Ageing has maintained its focus on public policy and is adamant in its party-political neutrality, older lobbies have nevertheless been identified with political parties, and do influence government. Sitting quietly in the corridors and offices of state and federal parliaments, the media is used when access to policy makers cannot be achieved. Families have added a major cross-generational component to the power of older lobbies. This was most apparent at the height of the aged care reforms’ debate of 1996–1998. The sudden and dramatic changes to user payments in aged care impacted heavily across generations. The over-70s generation was distressed at the real attack on their major asset – the family home.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the public policy, there were fundamental errors in the Government approach. Hostels had, for years, expected older people to realise the value of the home to contribute to their new residence. Usually this was a considered process over time. In extending the accommodation bond to nursing homes, the Government overlooked the different trajectory into that type of residence. Nursing home admission is likely to occur after a health crisis. Much has been written on the technicalities, but the point for this article is the distress that older people felt, which, in turn, was felt by their children and grandchildren. Suggestions that this was related to the next generation’s greed and desire to plunder their parents’ assets were widely resented. The distress was real and was translated to the Council on the Ageing through thousands of phone calls from all generations.

All political parties realised that policies for older people need to be more carefully considered. For too long all parties have taken this section of the community for granted. Some traditional trend-setters in social, economic and fiscal policy have been slow to realise that there are a number of new or reconstituted older groups that are actively influencing government policy at all levels. There is a vast array of talent coming from a retired population of academics, industry and the finance sector, not to mention social policy activists. The age range of such groups has extended with increasing numbers of over-50s but under-65s becoming involved in policy agendas – a true cross-generational mix.

Safety and security

In contrast to the discussion on political influence is the component of fear that pervades individuals in the older community. This fear takes many forms. Predominant is the concern regarding security in the home. Yet, this is despite older people being low on the index of victims of crime. The fear reflects feelings of vulnerability – a theme which was present in the 1980s and remains today.

The fear has many dimensions. Our society creates vulnerability by an antagonistic environment that does not accommodate physical frailty, diminishing vision and loss of hearing. Buildings with poor access make frail people or people with disabilities depend on others for assistance. The frail person becomes an object of pity or victim of intolerance. As a society, we tolerate buildings with steps, impossible doors, poor colour contrast, disorientating designs and ever-present unnecessary noise.
Health

Older people fear that if they have deteriorating health they will not be able to gain access to health care. They then take out expensive private health insurance with medical copayments if they seek treatment. The public hospital system is not portrayed as maintaining timely universal access. In a random study of Council on the Ageing members, 57 per cent declared they have the pension as their only income.

Public statistics indicate 77 per cent rely on the pension as their main source of income. Contrast this with the astounding 52 per cent of members of the Council on the Ageing who have private health insurance. What sacrifices in daily living expenses are being made to buy access to health care? Anecdotal information suggests that many families pay their parent’s private health insurance.

Financial security

Financial security worries older people but over the last ten years federal governments have stabilised the society security system. We now have a fairer assessment of wealth through the deemng system. Remember the outcry when the Labor Government tried to test eligibility for the pension by measuring unrealised capital growth on shares? It was a nightmare for the older person. Never have Senate Committee hearings been so well attended and the audience participation by older people was unprecedented. The result was the move to the deeming system where a rate of return is calculated and applied for a set period regardless of market fluctuations. This reduced the fear of unpredictability of the next fortnight’s pension!

Fear does remain for those who rely on the pension as their only source of income. They do not have the resources to pay for one-off major expenses, including the replacement of white goods or home repairs. The Council on the Ageing has proposed to the Government that those who rely on a full pension receive an occasional supplement to assist in one-off expenses.

The media

International Year of Older Persons is an opportunity to improve the media portrayal of age. The journalist image of ageing is unsurprising. This profession is largely very young – under thirty. So a ‘67-year-old pedestrian’ becomes a ‘67-year-old elderly pedestrian’. What image does ‘elderly’ convey? By implication, the journalist is suggesting a negative stereotype of tottering old age.

A journalist, recently returned from the United States, commented on the fixation by Australian TV of having young presenters. This was not the case in the States. In her recent visit to Australia, film star Gina Lollobrigida was heard to say to her minder during an interview: ‘What is this Australian obsession with my age? In Italy I am Gina Lollobrigida!’

Australian Coalition 99, the non-Government activity for the International Year, has employed a journalist who is working with all forms of media to improve the presentation and representation of older people.

Positive ageing

It is often as though Australians have multiple and unconnected brains when they think of the older members of society. This is epitomised by the story of a child asked to draw a picture of an older person. The child drew an older woman in a wheelchair with the inevitable crocheted lap rug. When asked by the teacher whether this was her grandmother, the girl replied, ‘Oh no, granny is on a trek in the Himalayas’!

The public policy debate on an ageing society is a matter for all generations. Whether the issue be income, employment, security, health or long-term care, we need to create a sustainable future.

First, we must establish the type of society we would want to live in. Second, we must look at how this can best be paid for. There has been almost a panic created by our fiscal fundamentalist policy makers who foresee the federal budget being bankrupted by an ageing population. Fully funded insurance schemes have been touted for meeting the costs of ageing. The Superannuation Guarantee Charge is in place and policy leaders are advocating parallel fully funded schemes in long-term care and health care.

This is a public policy debate that needs more airing. Do we really want a raft of private and public earmarked taxes to pay for an ageing society? Perhaps some of our policy leaders should reflect on the messages they convey when they advocate yet another penalty on ageing.

This is a good year for policy development, but let us look to a vigorous longer-term debate before we set directions that will impact on, at least, three generations.

Council on the Ageing

Council on the Ageing (Australia) is a key national organisation of older people that exists to protect and promote the wellbeing of all older people. It works as an advocate for older Australians by providing information, publications, policy analysis, consultation, representation, referral and advisory services.

The Australian Government recognises the Council through an annual grant which assists Council in representing the interests of older people to the parliament and public service.

The major policy issues addressed by the Council are retirement incomes and taxation, health, community services, housing, employment and residential care.

The National Executive Director of the Council on the Ageing (Australia) is Denys Correll. Membership of the Council consists of individuals, consumer organisations, service provider organisations, professional and industry associations, corporate organisations and local government authorities. There are 1,500 member organisations and 40,000 individual members throughout Australia.

The Council is active internationally through its membership of the International Federation on Ageing. It is a member of HelpAge International – the only international aid agency specialising in older people in developing countries.

Website www.cota.org.au

Level 2, 3 Bowen Crescent, Melbourne, Victoria 3004
Phone (03) 9820 2655 Fax (03) 9820 9886

Australian Coalition 99, the non-Government activity for the International Year, has employed a journalist who is working with all forms of media to improve the presentation and representation of older people.