Organisations – and How to Survive Them

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POPIG Seminar

Alastair Bain

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I want to begin by offering a dream I had two nights ago. When I woke up it was connected in my mind to this evening and our topic. In the dream I was going to be cooking dinner, I think for my family and a group of people. The setting was vaguely Chinese. I had a fish I was to be cooking. When I turned around to look at the fish I got a surprise as it was enormous. It had a large reddish head that was a cross between a sea horse shape and a dragon, and a body that was a roundish prawn shape and 14 feet long. It reminds me of the sort of fish or creatures that live very deep in the ocean. I didn't know how to cook this fish, but somebody did, and I was told it would be delicious. I then had a bowl of this fish soup with pieces of the fish in it. It was a thick brown soup, the fish was white like a shell fish, and it tasted delicious. It was a taste I had never tasted before. That's the dream. I would like the dream to be there as I talk as a possible associative template for us in this exploration of *Organisations - and how to Survive Them*.

My first response when Coral Brown suggested the topic of "Organisations and how to Survive Them" was "Ha. I know nothing about this", and it led me to think of some personal, and painful, organisational experiences. When I thought more about the subject it occurred to me that there are actually two aspects to it – being *inside* an organisation, that is working within an organisation and surviving or not, which is probably the first meaning people give to the subject, but also secondly, being *outside* organisations, which we all are, and surviving what these organisations do to us. I would like to offer some ideas for discussion this evening about this second aspect: that is survival from the point of view of being *outside* organisations and the consequences for our identity as human beings and our growth.

What I will be talking about may seem dismal, but I don't think it is as dismal as the position we have reached through using economics, once called the "dismal" science, as the main measurement of a human being. I found when writing this paper that the subject has mobilised my University training and experience as a Political Scientist, but perhaps not as the kind of Political Scientist I was as a teacher at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. The observations and analysis I wish to share with you is partly based on my work as a socio-analyst, and organisational consultant. These observations which derive from working as a consultant to organisations, as an action researcher, and as group relations consultant point to the need to take this a step further, to explore the possible ramifications for society as a whole, and how political realities are constituted. The observations I make later are to be taken as imaginative conjectures, rather than fact. I am offering these conjectures as an aid to our thinking about the issues.

My preference during the Seminar is to pause as we go along for questions and discussion.

Some of you will have read, or heard, part of what I will be talking about as it is based on observations and analysis first made in 1994 during an AISA Seminar[1], and developed for a Presentation at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies in Canberra[2], in February this year. I apologise for this. However I need this analysis as the backbone for taking these ideas into the societal, and political, arena.

Humans are social animals. We need to form connections with each other for different purposes in order to survive and grow. Organisation is simply the expression of these connections around a particular task. If we are social animals this should come easily to us, but often it doesn't. And it is some of these difficulties that I want to focus on this evening.

There are two concepts I will be frequently using; the first is the concept of Primary Task, and the second is the concept of Basic Assumption Me. Before going on to develop some hypotheses about the impact of organisations on our lives I will first describe these concepts.

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[1] **Social Dreaming and Organisations: The Potential**. AISA Seminar Day Presentation, 2 July, 1994.

[2] **Just Another Large Organisation?** Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies Presentation, 24 February, 2005.

The concept of *primary task* has been of central significance in socio-analytic thinking, consultancy, and action research since its formulation by Ken Rice in 1958. At the time Rice was on the staff of the Tavistock Institute in London, and was working in India as a Consultant to an organisation that owned Calico mills in Ahmedabad. In the 1960s Eric Miller and Ken Rice wrote: "We postulate that at any given time an enterprise has a primary task - the task that it must perform if it is to survive." (Miller and Rice, 1967, p.25). Primary task is the essential aspect of what an organisation does, and needs to keep doing if it is going to continue to exist in its current form. An example: "The primary task of XYZ motor car company is to research, manufacture and sell XYZ motor cars at a given rate of return on capital" .

The original concept has spawned valuable ideas and elaborations. For example, Isabel Menzies Lyth's concept of 'anti task' behaviour (Menzies Lyth, 1988, p.222); Gordon Lawrence's extension of the concept to include three aspects of primary task: 'normative', 'phenomenal', and 'existential' (Lawrence, 1986, p.59); and Jane Chapman's exploration of 'hatred and corruption' of primary task (Chapman, 1999).

The use of the concept of primary task has almost exclusively been confined to single industry organisations of one kind or another: Banks, Insurance Companies, Schools, Hospitals, I.T. and communications companies, Universities, Clinics, Retail stores, Airlines and so on. This is perhaps because socio-analysts who use the concept have been paid to work as consultants or researchers with particular organisations. My view is that the concept needs to be taken a lot further than the single organisation, or single industry domains. And that one needs to use the concept in considering higher order systems within which these organisations should have their place.

Thus what is the primary task of the Public Service, the Liberal Party, Labour Party, the High Court, the Government at State and Federal levels? What is the primary task of Victoria? What is the primary task of Australia? Is there a World primary task and if so how does Australia's primary task fit into that? What is my primary task as a citizen of Australia, and how do I take up that task? These may be clumsy questions, possibly because they haven't been asked quite in this way. But I believe that what they are pointing to is vital for our survival within this contemporary globalised society. I will come back to the notion of higher order primary tasks later in this seminar.

The second concept I want to outline for you is *Basic Assumption Me.* Most of you I imagine are probably familiar with Wilfred Bion's three basic

assumptions that he describes in *Experiences in Groups*. Bion observed that when a group comes together for a task its behaviour indicates that there is both a Work Group present – W group - as well as an underlying group which he called a Basic Assumption group, that operates unconsciously.

He identified three Basic Assumption Groups:
1. Basic Assumption Dependency
2. Basic Assumption Fight/Flight
3. Basic Assumption Pairing

When a group is under the sway of Basic Assumption Dependency it acts as though there is a need for nurturance and succorance from a Leader, and it is only the Leader that seems to be able in fantasy to meet these needs.

A group with Basic Assumption Fight / Flight in the ascendancy acts as though there is an enemy, whether real or imagined, and there are two possibilities for the group, to fight or to flee. The Leader of the fight /flight group needs to be able to articulate the danger, real or imagined, to the members of the group so that it is believed to exist, and mobilize the corresponding fight/flight response. This mode of leadership has been offered very successfully by John Howard over the last few years with the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, Tampa and the refugees, and most recently the 'war on terror'. In groups where Fight / Flight is dominant there is a hatred of thinking, introspection, and reflection. Perhaps sedition laws come naturally to this group.

If a group is meeting and there is a particular kind of hope apparent, spring is here, for example, and maybe the group is absorbed in what two members of the group are doing, Bion postulated that the group is one where Basic Assumption Pairing is dominant. In Basic Assumption Pairing there is the hope of something new being born, and in its extreme form, an unconscious wish for the Messiah to be born.

All three basic assumptions can be thought of as necessary for the survival of the human group ; giving birth (pairing), nurturance (dependency), and keeping the group safe from an enemy (fight /flight).

About 15 years ago a colleague, Gordon Lawrence, and I noticed a new phenomenon in small and large study groups we were working with, and in groups that are formed to study institutional behaviour with respect to the exercise of leadership and authority. This was first noticed in a Group Relations Conference in Perth for leaders and managers. The new

phenomenon was powerful, and did not accord with Bion's three basic assumptions of dependency, fight / flight, and pairing.

What we noticed was that people were behaving not as though they wanted to be dependent on the Staff, nor did they want to fight or flee from an enemy, nor act as though they wanted to have sex and give birth to something. They behaved as though there was not a group present. There was a retreat from an "I" state where people are potentially able to relate to other "I" s and form a group, to a passive "Me" state. We called this state Basic Assumption Me, and *defined it as operating when members of a group are behaving as though there is not a group present.* [3]

Within the passive "Me" state in a Conference, or a group, one splits oneself from being a person with thoughts and feelings to spectating, and speculating what these might be if one had them. Thus in the "Perth" conference it was noticeable that people had great difficulty talking about their feelings in a small and large group settings, and this led on a number of occasions to people saying things such as : "If I were to feel angry, I would say X".

In Basic Assumption Me "Like links with Like". It is not possible to explore issues about authority, as differences of role for task are submerged in a pseudo democratic egalitarianism. There is a lack of capacity to link with others for learning, and what learning may take place is a secretive process that must be kept to oneself. There is a premium on comfort and safety.

At the same time that I was observing the operation of Basic Assumption Me in the micro cultural settings of Group Relations Conferences, and Study Groups, I was also becoming aware of its operation in response to the behaviour of large scale organisations, through organisational consultancy projects, and the supervision of action research projects.

I have taken some time to describe these concepts of primary task, and Basic Assumption Me, as they are necessary for the hypotheses and argument that follows. I wish to put what I want to say in the form of observations and hypotheses. Hypotheses 1, 2 and 4 were first made in 1994.

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[3] See W. Gordon Lawrence, Alastair Bain, Laurence Gould *"The Fifth Basic Assumption",* **Free Associations,** Vol. 6, Part 1, No.37, 1996.

1. Loss of Primary Task

My first hypothesis is that many organisations have lost sight of their Primary Task and have replaced it with the task of making money.

This is despite the numerous mission and vision statements which have been generated over the last 20 years.

To give an example of this loss of sight of primary task.

Some years ago I and another consultant were working with the CEO and Senior Executive Group of a large billion dollar turnover corporation on primary task analysis. This group in defining the primary task of the organisation talked about it exclusively in terms of making money, or to be precise return on capital (ROC). In a 20 page Mission statement, that had been prepared over many months, not once did they mention the product they were making. They had lost sight collectively of what they were doing, and what most members of the group were directly accountable for, which was to research, develop, manufacture and sell steel in Australia and overseas. Not surprisingly they were losing money. After considerable work they introduced what they were doing into the primary task. And for a period became profitable again.

While this is perhaps an extreme example of the loss of primary task, and I am sure many CEOs would know exactly what their core business was, nevertheless there is a strong trend in the consciousness of organisations to focus on making money as the primary reason they are there. And this is backed up in corporate law which I will come to, in a moment.

In my view the only organisation in our society that has a primary task 'to make money' is the Mint! I am not arguing that making money is not important for private sector organisations, of course it is, what I am arguing is that it is an *outcome* of successfully carrying out the primary task. To put 'making money' or 'saving money' as the primary task is to put the cart before the horse. It also does not distinguish one organisation from another. The *activity* is the engine.

To give another example of the loss of primary task, this time in the public sector. I was working with the CEO and senior managers of a large Melbourne teaching hospital, and it seemed for this group the primary task of the hospital was to 'save money'. To think of the treatment and care of patients as being important was to be regarded as naïve - that was the job of

Doctors and Nurses. This is a good example of the primary task being split within an organisation: Doctors are responsible for treatment, the more high tech the better, the nurses for the care of the patient, and the senior executive group the money. No one part of the organisation holds the organisation in mind as a whole. In a sense what you have is Basic Assumption Me operating institutionally through these three segments – "My" part of the organisation.

2. A Pervasive Provider /Customer Relationship

My second hypothesis is that the loss of sight of Primary Task, its replacement in many cases by the emphasis on making money or saving money, has resulted in the conversion of specific role relationships derived from Primary Task into a pervasive provider/customer relationship.

This was evident when I first wrote about it in 1994. It is even more evident today.

Thus organisations like Universities and Hospitals are now selling products, and the students and the patients are the customers and consumers of these products. What is significant in terms of a role relationship e.g. Doctor and Patient, Teacher and Student, is lost and homogenised into a provider/customer relationship.

The words provider / customer derive from a retail setting at least in so far as individual consumers are concerned. But when they supplant the meaning that is in a relationship like teacher and student, or doctor and patient, our thinking is dulled, and forced into an economic mould of homogenization.

The loss of a sense of primary task, and the replacement of a specific task by a task of making money, which every corporation has in common with other corporations, and the corresponding degradation of role differences into a pervasive provider /customer relationship, stimulates, and is stimulated by the global MBA system, which encapsulates a belief that all organisations are much the same, and all one needs is a toolkit of a generic MBA, and one can manage anything – the Army, BHP Billiton, a University, a Teaching Hospital, Telstra. Where there is a loss of a sense of primary task, and a consumer model of homogenized roles, managing violence on behalf of a society, making chocolate biscuits, and selling shampoo all become much the same and require much the same managerial skills.

3. Corporate Profit Imperatives

My third hypothesis is that the loss of sight of primary task, and a loss of role relationships, is in part due to Corporate concentration on short term profit making for shareholders.

To make money in the short term in order to satisfy shareholders, particularly large institutional shareholders, becomes the aim in itself, rather than the goods and services that the corporation provides. The cart, the making money, is put before the horse, the activity the corporation is engaged with.

This imperative to secure the greatest possible financial return to shareholders is built into corporation law in the U.S. as Bakan indicates in his book "The Corporation"[4]. I imagine this is probably also true in Australia.

4. Basic Assumption Me as a Survival Mechanism

My fourth hypothesis is that Basic Assumption Me is playing an increasingly important part as a survival mechanism for individuals in large organisations.

Within a group Basic Assumption Me is marked by members of a group behaving as though the group is not present, within an organisation Basic Assumption Me is marked by members of the organisation behaving as though the organisation is not there. In other words individuals dissociate themselves from an emotional investment in the organisation, and for protection retreat into Basic Assumption Me behaviour. This is reinforced by the wider culture where the concept of 'my' satisfaction takes precedence over other values.

The links staff form with other staff in an organisation are likely to be brittle in a BaM culture, and quite possibly manipulative, or there are links through 'liking'. Personal power for the ends of the individual become more important than personal power used through the authority of a role to carry out an organisational task.

I would suggest that the growing ascendance of Basic Assumption Me within society, and within organisations is mainly to do with the behaviour of

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[4] Joel Bakan, **The Corporation: The pathological pursuit of power and profit**, Free press, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2004.

organisations, first, as employers, and secondly, through the marketing of their products to consumers generally.

At a social level I am sure Basic Assumption Me is familiar to you all in advertisements on television, in newspapers, and glossy magazines, that extol "Me" or "My" – and the way "me" gets emphasized in names, such as the name of an Insurance company, or the "Me" in Melbourne which is current at the moment. As a society BaM reduces relationships, and meaning to those of being a consumer of products and services that bolster my sense of a young, never ageing, wrinkle free, pampered me. "You deserve it". The "body" is the identification of the all.

5. Corporate marketing and Economic Rationalism are drivers of a mass BaM culture.

My fifth hypothesis is that the emergence of Basic Assumption Me as a dominant culture in the Western global system is underpinned by:
1. **corporate marketing, and**
2. **the economic rationalist view, and theory, that human beings are here to maximize their personal wealth, and consumption activities, and will make decisions on these supposedly rational grounds**.

The notion of a group, a family, a community, a culture, a society that is linked in other ways, with other values, e.g. through obligations, psychological and social ties, responsibilities, morality, spiritual and religious beliefs, has no part in this world model.

To recapitulate; the five hypotheses I have offered about organisational life today are:

1. Many organisations have lost sight of their Primary Task and have replaced it with the task of making money.

2. There has been a conversion of specific role relationships derived from Primary Task into a pervasive provider/customer relationship.

3. The loss of sight of Primary Task, and a loss of role relationships, is in part due to Corporate concentration on short term profit making for shareholders.

4. Basic Assumption Me is playing an increasingly important part as a survival mechanism for individuals in large organisations.

5. The emergence of Basic Assumption Me as a dominant culture in the Western global system is underpinned by:
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Narrow Corporate Primary Tasks

I want now to return to the primary tasks of organisations in our society. Most, if not all, corporations that are in business to make a profit have quite narrow and circumscribed primary tasks such as making biscuits, motor cars, steel, selling retail goods, lending money, buying property, selling broadband services, selling mobile phones and so on. While the jobs they offer may require high level managerial, financial, and business capacities, and specific skills derived from their primary tasks yet these capacities are operating within a very narrow and specific vertex of the particular primary task. Thus you may have thousands of very able employees who are there to make and sell perfume. It is their task to make a profit from this vertex, and that is why they are there. I am not arguing they should not be there and our society should do without perfume, or chocolate biscuits, or steel, just that the competence of the corporation, and the people within it, is around a particular narrow primary task not higher order societal activities.

Many of the organisations that have quite narrow and circumscribed primary tasks of the kind I am talking about are very large, have huge assets, some have turnovers larger than most economies in the world, they are influential and powerful politically worldwide. They exercise this influence in order to benefit their shareholders. They are not able to act because of the way they are constituted with the disinterested notion of what is good or right for society or the community, despite the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility.

Indeed the largest organisations frequently act in ways that are malign for societies, the world, and people generally. Take for example, the efforts of the tobacco industry over many years to deny the link between smoking and lung cancer, and their responsibilities. Or the think tanks, and research, sponsored by energy companies to deny the fact of global warming, and the links to burning fossil fuels. These activities can be justified on the grounds

of preserving profits, or continuing to make profits, for shareholders. They cannot be justified on the grounds of the health and well being of people generally, or the world as an ecosystem.

Within economic rationalism there is an assumption that we are economic beings here to maximize our wealth and material well being. This assumption goes along with the belief that the way to do this is through the market place of capitalism where needs for goods and services, and providers of these goods and services, will be identified. It is as though there is an unconscious belief, perhaps it is even conscious, that the summation of the goods and services, or the primary tasks of these corporations, adds up to the needs of a human being, and human beings generally. While the belief is false it continues to underpin our views of what human beings are, and what society is.

As a socio-analyst to me it is extraordinary that Western societies have allowed this deterministic economic view of human nature to predominate. I would imagine if psychologists were asked whether the economic rationalist view was correct about human nature most would answer 'No' without much hesitation. And yet the view continues to masquerade as psychological reality and has great power politically.

The primary tasks of corporations do not add up to the needs of a human being, let alone a community, or society, or the world as a whole. But I would suggest that organisations and professions with their narrow primary tasks, and economic self interests, occupy the political and social space where decisions about the future of our society are taken. What seems missing is the space for citizens to reflect together on what is going on in society and to turn, if need be, that reflection into effective action.

Indeed the very word citizen has a quaint ring to it these days, which is perhaps another indication of the erosion of this space and its occupation by groups with particular economic interests.

Political Representation
It might be argued that we elect people to represent us in parliament, and be our government, in order to provide just this perspective. In theory this may sound good. But in practice what is our political involvement, and what is the world of politics our representatives enter?

I think the experience that most of us have with political involvement is an election every couple of years where you cast a vote. In between times there

is passivity on a massive scale, linked with politics being a spectator sport, which in turn by the way is perhaps linked with an important dynamic of BaM, that one is not involved emotionally, and one spectates on things around one. As such one gives over to these so called representatives, either political or corporate, one's capacities for thinking and acting as a citizen and human being. It is dependency as described by Bion on a very large scale.

At the same time what is the world of politics our representatives enter? I would like to suggest to you that the political arena of Western democracies, Australia, the United States, and the U.K. included, is marked by massive splitting and projection between the major political parties. Question time in Parliament is a good indication of this. One is entering the "paranoid schizoid" world that Melanie Klein described for individuals, but in this case it operates as a major social modality in all democracies. "Our Party is good and has these virtues. The other Party is bad and has these failings". It is a child's world not an adult world that our representatives are entering. A capacity to offer Fight / Flight leadership in this world to one's fellows in the same party, and to the country as a whole, is a decided advantage, and is likely to secure political advancement.

At the same time it is a world, and a profession, for which there is no designated education or training. This is also extraordinary when you think about it – all other occupations and professions have some form of training except being a politician. To have been for example, a primary school teacher, a lawyer, or a trade union official, is apparently enough.

In the absence of effective citizenship, and the occupation of political space by corporations and professions with their narrow primary tasks and economic self interests, it would not surprise me at all if I asked John Howard what was the primary task of Australia and he replied after due consideration "To increase the wealth of the country, and to ensure citizens can enjoy this wealth free from concerns about refugees and terrorists". I can almost hear him say it! If I am right, or close to being right about this, it represents the triumph of the material view of the world. In a world devoted to constantly increasing wealth what are the limits to the growth of wealth, and where is the balance? For it is balance that seems to be missing in the narrow economic imperatives of corporations, or this view of Australia. And that brings me to a consideration of what can provide this balance.

Higher Order Primary Tasks and the Role of Citizen
What I have so far been saying about identity is that as a member of society currently I have an identity as a consumer, and I am part of a culture marked

by Basic Assumption Me. Beyond this I have identities based on family and work, and other social, sporting, spiritual activities I may be engaged with. I am unlikely to have an identity based on the notion of being a citizen, and for the most part I view politics as a spectator sport and get on with my life.

If we are to live socially, and work from the strength of connection with others, rather than as separated individual consumers motivated by greed and fear, we need spaces to explore and grow this capacity. Unless we do this the primary task of Australia will continue to be thought of as the amassing of wealth, which mimics at a societal level the task of corporations as written into Corporations law. If the amassing of wealth remains the primary task we may all get richer while wondering why we are so dissatisfied and unhappy in our lives. Which I gather from the media is what is happening today.

The capacities I have in mind would draw on our abilities to reflect and think with others about what is occurring in society from the perspective of being human and connected with others, not just as an economic animal there to maximize consumer satisfaction.

Perhaps one of the ways ahead is to begin to conceptualize the nature, scope and interconnection of the different primary tasks that our organisations and institutions have, not just as up until now single industries, and industry domains, but to take in political parties, government departments at local, state and federal levels; the Defence Forces; Parliament; the Courts and legal system; regulatory bodies such as ASIC; the States, and the Commonwealth of Australia.

We assume without giving much thought to it that there are system levels in any organisation, whether living like our bodies, or man made like say the Army where there are system levels of platoon, company, battalion, Division up to the highest level of Army.

Similarly I am suggesting that the primary tasks of corporations should be considered to be part of a higher order system involving a broader primary task, a different focus, and values that unite rather than divide. As I see it thinking at this level should involve citizens using their experience and awareness of what it means to be human in reflecting on, and making decisions for the good of society not for the good of a particular interest group or corporation. I put it to you that this higher order primary task needs to be discovered through a process of reflection and exploration. I don't know how it night be framed. Perhaps we can think about it together?

It seems to me that the primary tasks some of us are engaged with are not narrow like most corporate primary tasks. For example the primary task of a psycho-analyst in exploring the nature of mind as generated in psycho-analysis is large in scope and would take in the whole life of the analysand. I imagine that as psychologists you may at times also be working with this breadth of primary task. It seems to me that professions or occupations that have wide primary tasks may be equipped to provide leadership in the reflection and discussion of issues that go to being connected with others as full human beings, not simply bundles of economic motives.

While leadership may be offered in this area by groups with broad primary tasks my view is that the practice of citizenship needs to involve everybody that is able to be involved, as it is "everybody's" experience that makes the process legitimate, and it is "everybody's" experience that is necessary for the expression of the broadest possible primary task. The process is also one of making a community, or lots of communities, and that needs to involve everyone that can be involved.

Bion once related a story which I may have the details wrong, but the essential meaning I think I have right. There was a General who needed some ships made out of a certain kind of wood. There was no wood of this kind available and he was told it would take the trees 80 years to grow. The General remarked that there was no time to be lost. I feel this way about what I have been saying. Possibly it might take hundreds of years to change our society in the way I am suggesting we think about. There is no time to be lost!

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64 Carlton Street
Carlton
Victoria 3053
Australia

Telephone: +61 3 9347 2053
Email: alastair.bain@acsa.net.au