

**[WHO]** Teacher, innovator, nurse, mother Louise Howland  
**[WHAT]** Relationships flounder and life is poorer when we fail to communicate properly  
**[HOW]** Learn, practise and cherish the art of conversation

**[HOT BUTTON]**



Last week's guest, former prime minister Malcolm Fraser, argued that our current political leaders are a disgrace for demonising asylum seekers, patronising indigenous people and failing to promote Australia's independence in our region. He also argued we'd get better public policies were people with experience, independence and principle to enter Parliament, rather than apparatchiks. Below are excerpts of his live chat session.

■ While I admire Fraser coming out in his retirement and it all sounds good, there is surely a bigger picture to be told of who is behind most of the suffering in this world. Fraser should be in a position to know the answer to that, as it is the rich and powerful, and no, not just Rinehart or Palmer. Come on, Malcolm, blow that whistle and herald the trumpets, otherwise it is just more tail chasing. Still, credit where it is due in the narrower sense.  
**Peter G, NSW**  
**MALCOLM FRASER'S RESPONSE:** One of the great challenges of democracy, a challenge which it has not met effectively, is to stop too much power going to the rich and the powerful. It is an issue which has corroded American politics and we are following on the same track.  
 ■ Malcolm Fraser is saying what many of us have been thinking for years. The party system of politics is now failing to represent the needs and wishes of the people. The American alliance, the cornerstone of our foreign policy has long since ceased to serve our interests. To continue with it will lead us only into future wars of no benefit at all to us. No party has the guts to dump it. What this country needs is a parliament composed entirely of independents.  
**Bob32, Melbourne**

**MF:** A parliament of independents is unlikely. What needs to happen is to break the power of the party machines, destroy their control over preselection process. I would introduce a primary system for the selection of candidates. For a federal election if a political party wanted to field a candidate in a seat, it would need to have 5000 members voting. At least it would break the power of the factions and more independent people would be elected.  
 ■ What a refreshing article to read (but sad at the same time). If (and it's a big IF) the general media in Australia could bring itself to be non-party, non-political, non-self interested etc and start telling the Australian public the complete TRUTH about policies being debated and passed in the Fed. Parliament, things would improve. Correctly informed voters will be able to make better judgments when voting in elections.  
**Fred of Currumbindi**  
 ■ Agree. Our media serves us very ill indeed. They are focused exclusively on the trivial, especially the trivial that smears one side and lauds the other. It is way beyond childish, for most children have a clearer sense of fairness.  
**Kavik, ballina**

**MF:** The quality of the Australian press has fallen greatly. There used to be six or seven proprietors, now one or two and one is foreign owned. We need more ways of getting information out; new media, the internet can play a role but they do not yet have the influence that is needed. I would like to see truth being publicised about all policies but people probably have no more confidence in newspapers than they do in politicians.  
 ■ What I would like to know is why Malcolm Fraser held the right-wing policies he did when he was prime minister. Has he actually changed or was he constrained by his party and/or other vested interests?  
**wotnext**  
 ■ He grew up. It is also apparent that if you were to insert the old Fraser into Australian politics right now, he would make the current crop (other than the Greens) all look right-wing and uncompassionate. Fraser is right that most Australians are not racist. . . Whether there are 1000 or 5000 boat arrivals is, for rational people, trivial in comparison to what our broader economic, environmental, and social policies are. But to stupid racist people, it becomes all-important.  
**Luke, Melbourne**

**MF:** My right-wing reputation began after the downfall of the Gorton government. In the days of the Cold War when the Soviet Union was outward-looking and aggressive, I felt the West needed to show a strong and united front. Since the Cold War ended, it is different. As prime minister, I opposed apartheid, I supported land rights for Aborigines, the Human Rights Commission was established, the Ombudsman and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal were working effectively, the first freedom of information was passed, the Galbally Report on post-arrival services for migrants was established and our policy in relation to refugees was humanitarian and generous. My government also passed the first legislation providing family allowances directly to mothers for support of their children. I don't believe my policies in these areas were right-wing.

**ONLINE**  
 ▶ The full session is at [theage.com.au/opinion/the-zone](http://theage.com.au/opinion/the-zone)



Let's talk

Communication has become a crumbling art in this high-tech age, but change could be on the cards, writes **Michael Short**.

**P**ERHAPS the most reliable route to meaning and joy, to plunging below the surface and seeking more than the superficiality of material ambition, is connection with people, places, ideas and issues. Of these, the most important are people and relationships. And the most reliable route to relationships is conversation.

It is said the least stimulating people tend to speak most about other people. More interesting are those who discuss events. Most engaging are those who focus on ideas and concepts. Conversation is an art, natural in some, acquired in others, but ultimately available to all. The main thing, though, is to actually have a go at connecting verbally, at speaking thoughtfully and listening attentively.

This art has been distilled into a marvellous resource that is helping families, individuals and educators lead richer lives. Louise Howland and her friend of 30 years, '70s glam rock legend Keith Lamb, have created a thing called The Art of Conversation (TAOC). It comes in the form of a boxed set of cards and a guidebook. There are several versions, some of which are now available as applications for smartphones and tablet computers, covering a range of topics.

It is inadequate to describe TAOC as a game, as Howland explains in our interview, the full transcript of which, as well as a short video, is at [theage.com.au/opinion/the-zone](http://theage.com.au/opinion/the-zone). "It's a gift if it's in a gift shop. It's a book if it's in a bookshop. It's a game if it's in a toy shop. If it's in education or health or corporate, it's a resource."

TAOC's genesis was a personal need identified by Lamb, a songwriter and singer who fronted a glittering, raunchy band called Hush. "He breathed fairly

rarified air for a while there," Howland says. "But when that slowed down, he found it a little difficult to get in touch with the rest of the world, because he was used to being interviewed or fawned over, complimented, but not really connecting in a real way.

"So one day he came to me and he said: 'It's a game, but it's not a quiz and it's called TAOC, The Art of Conversation, and it's going to help me connect with people again. Now you do the rest.' The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was a fantastic concept."

Many seem to agree with Howland. Hundreds of thousands of copies have been sold, with the all-ages and children's versions proving the most popular.

Howland and Lamb developed the idea back in the 1980s, and HarperCollins wanted to publish it as a book, but the retail price was going to be too high. So they changed it to the card format, and in 2006 the first one, an all-ages general version, came out. Several other versions have been developed, covering food, young people's topics, literature, travel and the philosophy of religion. Some have been translated into a few other languages, and the all-ages and children's versions are the ones out as apps.

TAOC is not at all like the competitive game Trivial Pursuit. It is not about winning, but about communicating.

So how is TAOC actually used? Like many great ideas, it's simple. It is a series of questions that people sit down and ask each other. It starts discussions. The kitchen table is the perfect setting.

"Communication and relationships is everything and the breakdown of that is what has led to a lot of tragic things in our current society — homelessness and marriage breakdown, even early school dropouts, substance abuse. Things come about because there is no communication, or poor communication; and people don't feel heard, they don't feel understood," Howland says. "If you understand why somebody is behaving the way they do, you're more likely to be sympathetic. And that understanding really only comes from talking and perhaps even, more importantly, listening.

"Let's hear from some of the quiet people — and as a talker, it can be nice to sit back and take a break. So one of my pieces of, for want of a better word, advice is to say if you're a talker, next time you are in a group have a practice at being a listener, and if you are a quiet person, have a go at talking."

TAOC may have started as a resource for families, but it soon became evident it had value in other settings. Schools use it to promote general language and social skills. They also use it to buttress English as a Second Language programs and to combat bullying.

"It's being used in anti-bullying and mentoring courses because if you understand why somebody is doing something

and if you have got a genuine relationship then you are less likely to bully . . ."

Howland says "It's also being used in some gifted children's programs because gifted children often are fantastic at talking and they will give you a couple of hours on railway line gauges or specific doorknobs or the Kennedy assassination etc.

"But if these gifted children are going to fit into workplaces they need social skills and communications skills and they need to know when to be quiet and turn to another person and get their perspective."

Howland cites a US survey of high achievers that found the only common denominator was they had all spent a lot of time having conversations around the family dinner table.

**It is not about winning, but about communicating.**

She has a deeply personal and profound motivation for her championing of genuine communication. Some years ago, she and her husband adopted a daughter from India.

"Before she came I thought about how I wanted our family to be and I decided that I really wanted to make sure that we were open with each other and knew as much as we possibly could about each other, so that we really shared. "And this is why it amazes me that we

don't formally teach children communication skills, because out of everything in life, probably the main thing for a satisfying and fulfilling life is the relationships that you have and what sort of fulfillment you give and you get. Yet we kind of leave that to chance."

TAOC provides families with a chance to get along better. In some cases, it has saved families. Howland recounts the tale of a woman poised to quit her home, so weary and demoralised was she by the failure of her husband and three sons to talk of anything but sport. This desperate wife and mother introduced TAOC to the family, sparking such a range of discussions she decided to stay.

"She talked about what candidness and understanding it had brought about in their family."

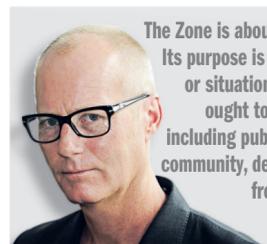
The rate and level of conversation in many families has been shackled by technology. Screens can be great, and do facilitate many wonderful things, but they do not promote conversation. In so many homes, it is not uncommon to find each member of the family interacting with a screen, rather than each other. TAOC can help moderate this and restore some balance.

"The techno, always-connected communication is great in itself and for its purpose, and I use it too . . . but whether it is deep enough to keep relationships together and to maintain the lines of really solid relationships between friends and families, I don't know. In these media you can really be whoever you want to be. The veneer is very thin."

TAOC might just also be able to help people get through some of those family gatherings that can be awkward — and sometimes catastrophic.

"TAOC crosses the generations. Christmas is a great time to see that, because you get all the generations together and all the dysfunctional family members come together and they want to have a good time, but it just doesn't always happen, does it?, which is sad."

**LINKS**  
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**FACEBOOK** <http://www.facebook.com/michaelj.short>  
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**CHAT** Louise Howland will be online for an hour from noon today.  
**NEXT WEEK** Entrepreneur and engineer Ernest Rodeck reflects on a long lifetime of experience.

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