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This is the web diary of Andrew Bartlett, a Democrat Senator from Queensland and member of the Australian Parliament since 1997. It aims to make politics more accessible, and provide some insights into the views and life of a federal politician. It also encourages reader's feedback and comment.

Sat 11 Mar 2006

[Can you hear me? Will iPods cause a hearing loss epidemic?](#)

Posted by Andrew Bartlett under [General](#), [Music/Books/Film/TV/Theatre](#), [Health](#)

This article is about two discrete (but no longer discreet) aspects of my life which may be connected.

When I'm using the computer at home for any length of time, I often also listen to music on headphones.

When I'm in committee hearings or meetings, I often find myself cupping my hand to my ear trying to understand what people are saying. (At the risk of forever more being stuck in the 'old fogey' camp, I always thought putting your hand to your ear was just a symbolic way of asking someone to speak up, until I instinctively tried it once a few years ago when I had trouble hearing someone – it works really well let me tell you)

As I:

- (a) am currently working on my computer while listening to music on headphones, and
- (b) spent half of last week in Committee hearings with my hand cupped to my ear trying to understand what people were saying;

I thought I might write a piece on hearing loss.

The issue (and the reality) of hearing loss has been niggling at me for some time. As with (I assume) most people, it creeps up gradually and one can usually get by in most circumstances. It is for this very reason that the extent and impact of hearing impairment is under-recognised.

As [this piece says](#)

“I hear fine, but everyone is mumbling” is a common response for someone experiencing noise-induced hearing loss. One of the first manifestations of loss is an inability to hear sounds with clarity. Because the person experiencing this may still have a normal perception of loudness, the change may not be recognized as hearing loss. An affected individual will typically have difficulty conversing in a crowded room, because of the presence of background noise.

In my various travels around the internet (often accompanied by music played through headphones), I have found a few websites and blogs by a number of well known musicians. The best I have found is by ex-Talking Heads vocalist David Byrne (although he doesn't have a comment facility). By coincidence

David Byrne happens to be in Australia at the moment – [go here to read his views and experiences](#) – or at least go to the end of this post to see some excerpts. (I love his comment about ‘milk flavoured milk’ and am strangely proud to read his view on our potato chips). A few other muso blogs I’ve found are by [Melissa Auf der Maur, best known as the former bass player in Hole](#), and [Aussie singer/guitarist Ben Lee](#).

One other I have looked at now and then is by [guitarist for The Who, Pete Townshend](#). A couple of months ago I saw [a piece he wrote about his own hearing loss](#), which also got picked up in some mainstream media.

Many people may wonder why such a simple thing as recording a demo should take so long. I’ve spoken about the problem of cracking the right kind of material for The Who - but there is something else going on.

I have hearing trouble.

I have backed away from saying anything to medical or music journalists about my hearing. I think I am lucky, my case is not typical. I stopped touring and rock recording early enough to prevent the damage advancing too fast.

Although I spent a fair bit of time playing in and seeing bands perform in my earlier years, I am not trying to gain some sort of cred or coolness by associating myself with Pete Townshend and hearing loss. As [this article shows](#), it isn’t just headbangers and rock music aficionados who can be affected. Classical musicians and listeners are affected too.

A 1981 study at Sweden’s Concert Hall and Lyric Theatre in Gothenberg revealed that 59 out of 139 orchestra musicians (42%) had hearing losses greater than that expected for their ages.

My father had less than perfect hearing, which he used as a way of encouraging his offspring to enunciate more clearly and loudly (something I failed dismally at then and now), so I suspect such problems as I have are genetic as much as anything. I am also rarely inconvenienced by it to an infuriating degree. However, I am only just over 40 and have had enough tests to confirm a problem, so I suspect much greater infuriation may appear for me sometime down the track.

I am writing all this because I suspect that hearing problems will be (or maybe already are) a hidden but major problem in our society. I have received representations about this from some constituents, particularly about the lack of awareness and acknowledgement of the impacts and widespread nature of hearing problems in our community.

I also find myself regularly wondering about whether this under-acknowledged situation is likely to get much worse in the near future, given the prevalence of iPods and other similar highly portable devices being used more heavily than ever these days. As Pete Townshend says, “earphones do the most damage”

Earphones these days are much lighter and portable than when I was a lad. According to [this article](#), the ‘ear bud’ headphones are “*more likely to cause hearing loss than the muff-type earphones that were used on Walkman and portable CD players*” that old fogeys like me used to use last century (and that I’m using now). “*We’re seeing the kind of hearing loss in younger people that’s typically found in aging adults,*” according to an audiologist at Northwestern University in Illinois.

Apart from having less than pristine hearing, another thing I notice as I get older is my growing aversion to so called 'nanny state' approaches to current or potential future social problems. However, I think we could at least do much better at making people aware of the potential hearing damage that can occur from the regular use of earpieces to listen to music, even when used at volumes much lower than your average heavy metal headbanger craves. It may also be worth looking at volume limiting devices, which are used in many car stereos these days (although more to preserve the life of the speakers than the hearing of the listener). Of course, as hearing declines there is also a risk of a vicious circle (or feedback loop) where bad hearing makes you turn it up louder, which causes further damage, etc.

Given that iPods are now so ubiquitous that [jeans are being sold with "a built-in docking cradle for an iPod and retractable headphones"](#), I think this is something that should be looked at now, rather than just waiting for the inevitable demands in twenty years time for governments to provide a massive spending increase on hearing aids.

PS - TRIVIA CONTEST

- \$100 will go to the charity/non-profit organisation nominated by the first person to guess what song I was listening to on my headphones when I decided I would write a piece about this issue. A few hints – the song is Australian and is not too obscure, having featured on the Top 40 charts at the time of release. The title of the tune is not totally inappropriate for this post (and many other posts on this blog). For the 1% of people that care about drummers, the drummer who played on the original version of the song was gone from the group not long after, (and probably doesn't get a cent of royalties from the frequent playings of the song on radio and elsewhere that have occurred over the ensuing years).

PPS - [Excerpt 1 from David Byrne blog](#) -

Aussie cuisine:

Pie Floater — a meat pie "floating" in sea of mushy pea soup, with a squirt of tomato sauce on top. To be eaten when drunk.

Flavored milks. Saw a large strawberry milk at the venue lunch counter. Milk here comes in a variety of flavors, such as apple, banana, caramel, chocolate, cookies 'n cream, lime, malt, mango, papaya, strawberry, tropical fruits and vanilla, with a few more exotic flavors available.

NZ features many more flavors — spearmint and...peanut butter flavored milk! Woolworth's in Whangarei (NZ) decided they could get around some selling restrictions by also selling "Milk Flavoured Milk". Milk flavored milk!

South Australia has the highest consumption of flavoured milk per person, where Farmers Union Iced Coffee outsells Coca-Cola.

I remember from a previous visit the shockingly unusual crisp (potato chip) flavors. Ham and mustard. Big red and meat pie. Feta and herb, Thai chili.

[Excerpt 2 from David Byrne blog](#):

A cluster of Aborigines sits on the grass in a tiny city park. A few meters away the traffic roars through the main street of Adelaide and pedestrians pass by. The little clump of people are like living ghosts, a reminder of the deep history of this land that is now currently occupied by people of European descent. These people are, if not the land's custodians, at least its children, birthed and formed by this land — they embody it, they do not manipulate it. (Maybe this is a romantic view.) The fact that they have

chosen to congregate in a little patch of lawn, right in the middle of town, visible but ignored, is somehow portentous, meaningful. It's a sign, a reminder, and a living billboard that says that all the buildings and hustle and bustle surrounding them and us who pass by is superficial.

That there is a deep and slow biological and geological history that this new colonial world seeks to cover over and obliterate from memory.

But it never will be obliterated completely.

PPPS For anyone who might care, I think David Byrne's best musical release (that I am aware of) is not anything by Talking Heads, but the [pioneering collaboration he did with Brian Eno called "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts"](#). By coincidence, this was released around the same year as the song that is the answer to the above trivia question.

« [Failings in education for aboriginal children, and Labor's latest indigenous statement](#) | [Do you play cricket?](#) »

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14 Responses to “ Can you hear me? Will iPods cause a hearing loss epidemic? ”

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Comments:

1. *Jason Grossman* says:
[March 11th, 2006 at 9:43 am](#)

I have two pieces of good news for you.

(1) Large, non-bud-type headphones are back in fashion. Maybe we could lobby Apple to sell them.

(2) I can recommend particularly good headphones for avoiding any further hearing loss. For travel: active noise-reducing headphones, which you can use them on the plane to Canberra. For home: electrostatic headphones, which reproduce the sounds so clearly that you're less inclined to turn them up loud. I can lend you either of these if you'd like to try them. (I'm a total headphone freak.)

2. *Jason Grossman* says:
[March 11th, 2006 at 9:47 am](#)

P.S. Please excuse shonky grammar in the previous comment. Is there any way you can turn off

this live previouw thing? It doesn't work well for people who have a slow link to the Internet.

3. *libertybelle* says:

[March 12th, 2006 at 8:54 am](#)

Tinnitus is the most common complaint with musicians. it's a constant ringing in the ear which can be annoying if you think on it, best to distract by having other sounds around. The problems with youth is that they think they are invincable, so they don't take the precautions necessary to safeguard and protect themselves from all sorts of dangers. Playing music too loud is one of those. Boom boxes in cars, standing in front of the speakers at a concert or dance party, playing music with the amps too high will destroy the ears.

So will playing crash cymbals.

Now to your quiz Andrew, and being 1% of the population who care about drummers, I am having trouble with this as I can't imagine you would listen to the former but to get the ball rolling I'll try, Down Under by Men at Work and my second go is Unguarded Moment by the Church. Hoodoo Gurus misplaced their drummer round about that time as well (as did many bands in the eighties who were trying to turn their drummers into machines) but they didn't have a top 40 hit at this stage.

The link to Byrne is fab.

4. *Eleri* says:

[March 12th, 2006 at 10:41 am](#)

The quiz is too hard for me - I did try. Other stuff was happening in the early 80s and I wasn't paying attention.

I did think David Byrne might have been missing something in the interpretation when he wrote about Womadelaide - "Brett, the festival director, said it [the show] was courageous, which was a lovely compliment."

5. *libertybelle* says:

[March 12th, 2006 at 11:52 am](#)

what other stuff was happening Eleri, In the early eighties in Brisbane we still hadn't had the Fitzgerald enquiry.

6. *libertybelle* says:

[March 12th, 2006 at 1:15 pm](#)

ok how about What about me by Moving Pictures -\$100 to go to Support Act the musicians benevolent society.

Still don't know why you were listening to that.

7. *wendy lewthwaite* says:

[March 12th, 2006 at 5:25 pm](#)

Oh for God sake has the world gone mad. Basically the man is saying . Is anything and everything unnatural good for you. The Answer is obvious .

8. *Eleri* says:

[March 12th, 2006 at 7:59 pm](#)

Wendy

If that's what he was saying then I've been completely misreading him for quite some time now :-)
) This explains alot.

9. [wendy lewthwaite](#) says:
[March 12th, 2006 at 8:12 pm](#)

Eleri.

Your certainly not alone there.

10. [Andrew Bartlett](#) says:
[March 12th, 2006 at 10:14 pm](#)

I'm glad "the answer is obvious" to someone?! Once I figure out who is asking the question, I might get a bit closer to figuring out what the answer is and what people are talking about?

(Unless there's a song I'm not aware of by an Australian band from the 1980s called "Is anything and everything unnatural good for you"???)

In any case, the answer to the highly exciting and clearly very popular quiz question is indeed 'The Unguarded Moment' by The Church - so the \$100 goes to [Support Act Ltd.](#) (although if I was being really picky I could have ruled out the answer because it left out "The" from the title, but that would be mean and unfair, and we all know I'm never like that). Nick Ward was the drummer, who was replaced before the band's first album had been released.

11. [wendy lewthwaite](#) says:
[March 13th, 2006 at 4:50 am](#)

Andrew please see your Senate enquiry post.

I would have thought you might have got the joke. I just find your attitude to us really interesting. However the members requested we ask you so again i am requesting you go back to that post and please answer the question.

12. [Robert Merkel](#) says:
[March 13th, 2006 at 11:33 am](#)

[This discussion](#) of the earbud-induced hearing loss may be informative.

I think there may well be a place for governmental action on the topic, particularly as there are technologies that can substantially reduce the risk (noise-cancelling headphones for one).

13. [libertybelle](#) says:
[March 13th, 2006 at 3:53 pm](#)

Hey Andrew, that's great that you are donating to Support Act Ltd. There are a lot of musicians who get ill and are broke at the end of their careers. The quiz was a great idea, thanks.

14. [Fabian](#) says:
[March 21st, 2006 at 8:57 am](#)

There's also [an article on Wired](#) about it

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- Saturday, Mar 11th, 2006 at 9:25 am
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