

# ORDINARY PEOPLE *BRILLIANT* MINDS

By TONY SARNO

**I**T WAS IN the middle of dinner with some of the most intelligent people in Australia that I asked Graeme Bernoth, genius, what was his favourite cause. In his mid 30s, with thinning blond hair and looking more casual than most, in a T-shirt and zipper jacket, he replied that he had many . . . Writing, research, travel . . . Then he paused and gave me a bashful look. Yes, there was something else that he felt strongly about but he didn't know whether he should say. "Go on," I urged. You could feel the apprehension building at our end of the table. "It's my pet subject," he revealed hesitantly. "I believe that masturbation is pathologically and psychologically harmful to the person, because it causes cancer."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There's a work of 500 pages (on it) researched last century by a French doctor, Des Landes, at the University of Lyons."

I thought he must be having me on. A genius's idea of a cruel joke. "They think it's ridiculous, they think it's preposterous, but I think it's true . . ." He continued: "Cancer is one side-effect. But there are 30 others."

Fifteen Mensans, the supreme egg-

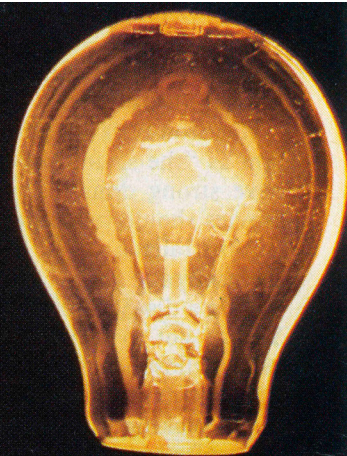
heads between their early 30s and late 60s sat around the table in the All Nations Club restaurant in Kings Cross for one of their monthly dinners.

Mensa is the society whose only rule for eligibility is that you must be smarter than 98 per cent of the population, commonly an IQ (intelligence quotient) higher than 148. Among the awesome collection of self-conscious genius around the table were Graham who used to sell adhesive labels, secretary Jean, Sandy who issues parking permits at Sydney University, civil engineer Ross, Audrey who is a writer (after spending most of her life as a secretary), maths teacher Brian, broker John, disc jockey Bob and Nicola, a marketing executive.

The first thing that Mensans stress is that you cannot stereotype them. And, contrary to popular preconception, Mensa is not a large think-tank or pressure group. Its constitution forbids collective opinions or policies. That's partly because "we could never agree on anything," says Graham Davies-Smith, the NSW secretary.

Another member, Sandy Steep, says: "Everyone's got ideas on how to fix the world and they can't agree. They all call each other a lunatic."

None of the table conversation seemed





to go above my head, though still I remembered with unease the warnings of one member about the impatience of Mensans with the obtuseness of mere mortals. Mensans, he said, "can see more in depth, they're more articulate . . . they talk more abstract than most people." And they apparently had the unconscious habit of gauging the IQs of those with whom they dealt. But talk was as normal as it could be for advanced intelligences.

Audrey Austin's 16-year-old daughter had just moved into a de facto marital relationship with an older man. "It's fantastic," Audrey said. She remembered fondly her own young love at school. He used to escort her home. They even talked philosophy. She was five, he was six.

There was annoyance at the dinner that a \$4 puzzle book (over which Mr and Ms Average IQ of 100 might slog for a week) took only a few hours to rip through. And did Bob Geldof deserve his knighthood or was he merely an opportunist?

It could have been a social club. A late arrival and lapsed member, Bob Hughes — a disc jockey for radio station 2DAY FM — thought that some Mensans could not communicate or form relationships with those less gifted. It probably explained the popularity of the Mensa social calendar where, in addition to regular speakers' nights, members could attend such events as the "Spa party and Sossidge Sizzle" and "Mad Hatter's Party." In a recent issue of Mensa's NSW newsletter, the editor reproached rowdy behaviour — at a recent "Laugh-In" comedy night — of some members who broke mugs and forced a fly-screen door off its hinges.

Mensa (Latin for "table") was started in Britain in 1946 by an Australian, Roland Berrill, and the Englishman Lancelot Lionel Ware.

Berrill wanted to call it Mens (Latin for "mind") but Ware objected because it might be confused with the magazine *Men Only*.

Any hopes that the superbrains would act as a research and advisory body were quashed by the hostile response from those it was meant to advise, such as the British Government. Nevertheless, the idea of a society of geniuses caught on and Mensa expanded — particularly in the US which has about 53,000 members.

Mensa had some trouble establishing itself in West Germany where anything smacking of the discredited notion of the *herrenvolk* — superior race — arouses suspicion.

Australia's 750 Mensans range from teenagers to a 103-year-old Melbourne woman. But there are few high-profile achievers among them. Members internationally include the inventor Sir Clive Sinclair and science-fiction writer

Isaac Asimov. But, says Gareth Powell, a journalist and former member of British Mensa: "Most people I knew were storemen, carpet layers or taxi drivers. The president (Victor Serebriakoff) was the manager of a timber yard. I bought the wood of my kitchen from him."

Powell, who decided not to join Mensa in Australia despite having an IQ of 180, says: "The big question in Mensa is, 'Do we have so few achievers as members of Mensa because achievers wouldn't join or because having a high IQ militates against success?'"

Most members would say a mixture of both. One plausible theory advanced by psychologists canvassed by *Good Weekend* is that people who join Mensa find it galling that their intelligence as measured by IQ tests has not translated into material success and, so, need an outlet for their frustrations. One Mensan who did not want to be identified agreed

that most of them needed to be reassured of their intelligence.

The "Tall Poppy Syndrome" and the dreaded egalitarian ethos are also commonly blamed for keeping down the numbers of achievers while at least one member, Brian Brady, thinks that most Mensans are not materialistic and so lack the need to achieve.

But a common feeling is that having a high IQ is as much a handicap as having a very low one, particularly in the education system. Sandy Steep, who complains that she was not allowed to learn as fast as she could at school, says: "You feel nothing is being done to help the bright."

But are Mensans actually as intelligent as they claim to be? International president Victor Serebriakoff proudly proclaims: "Mensa arises from the idea that mental ability can be scientifically measured." But doubt that this is

possible has become widespread. Dr Sally Andrews, a cognitive psychologist at the University of NSW and an authority on IQ tests, says: "There is no answer to intelligence. The major problem with IQ tests is that they imply there is." They do not adequately address one's ability to adapt to the environment. In other words, people can score highly without being in touch with the "real world."

By normal standards, the most intelligent man in the world is Chris Harding who has an IQ of 197.

He lives as a recluse with his parents in Queensland, spending his nights programming computers.

Mensans use an acknowledgement of the limitations of IQ tests to disarm criticism. Sandy Steep concedes that being good at doing IQ tests does not make her better than, say, a waitress or a labourer. And there are would-



### SANDY STEEP

SANDY STEEP got a perfect score in a Mensa quiz published in *Reader's Digest* in 1980. Tested under supervision later, she discovered that her IQ was 160. It made her one of Australia's most intelligent women.

She had once been on a deserted mother's pension with two daughters and had little inkling that an inability to conform resulted from her high intelligence quotient.

A brooding woman in her mid 30s, with vigilant blue eyes, she looks back and says: "I'm surprised I didn't end up in a mental institute."

Her youth had been difficult.

"I couldn't relate to people . . . I'd come up with unconventional answers to things. I didn't make the right small talk."

Sandy left Randwick Girls' High in Sydney when she was 16, despite having topped the school in Maths and Science every year.

"I detested school."

She found study tediously easy and felt that her schoolmates resented her.

After a three-year marriage which ended when she was 21, jobs were not easy to come by.

"I had no formal qualifications. I hadn't worked since I was 17."

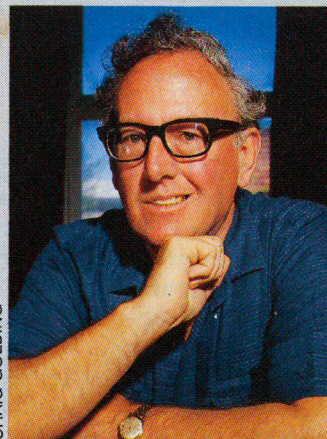
She found delivering the local newspaper underpaid and exhausting and a local real estate agent turned her down for a part-time job.

She became a part-time clerical assistant eventually and now works full-time in Sydney University's parking office. The job does not bore her. "I can sit and file accounts and I enjoy it."

There is plenty outside work to occupy her. "I spend a lot of time doing crossword puzzles, fill-ins, logic problems. I spend \$300 a year on subscriptions to puzzle books from the 'States."

With a sceptical tone, she says that she occasionally reads a Sunday newspaper.

She adds that she likes keeping up with worldwide developments in medicine with *Reader's Digest*. □



### GRAHAM DAVIES-SMITH

ENGLISH-BORN Graham Davies-Smith achieved instantaneous fame (or notoriety, among some Mensans) when he placed an advertisement in *The Sydney Morning Herald* saying: "Genius — for Hire." To a Sri Lankan-born salesman who contacted him, worried that his skin colour might be losing him customers, Davies-Smith suggested trying the following solution: "Walk in and say, 'Are you colour prejudiced?'" That should cause a lucrative guilt reaction."

At 49, with dark-rimmed glasses, receding grey locks and a scatterbrain grin, he looks like a genius should and has been eagerly acknowledged as such by arms of the media since becoming Mensa's NSW secretary a few months ago.

With a claimed IQ of 158-161 and no tertiary education, he prides himself on his ability to think laterally. His solutions to problems are often so simple, he says, that people who hire his brain sometimes refuse to pay his fee because they argue that they could have thought of them.

As an example of his lateral thinking, he suggests how to alleviate Sydney's traffic problems: build an expressway and flyovers running north to south of the city, just skirting the inner suburbs. Unarguably sound, though the plan does not seem to acknowledge the political reality of running an expressway through the suburbs.

To Graham Davies-Smith, the solutions are always obvious; pity that the politicians (and the voters) are so limited. "What I would love to do is invite everyone in parliament to take the Mensa test." He believes that only 20 per cent would pass.

Federal Treasurer Paul Keating has not replied to Davies-Smith's plan to turn the Australian economy around, based on a proposed scheme for home buyer finance and rural relief.

When discussing improving the country, Davies-Smith could well be a spokesman for the right-wing H. R. Nicholls society. There is too much apathy, he says. "There's a need for fewer rules and more reward for achievement . . . No country got rich by paying people who don't work."

His next project is to design a foldaway bicycle for train commuters. □

GERRIT FOKKEMA

CRAIG GOLDING

be geniuses outside Mensa, say the Mensans. For instance, Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Treasurer Paul Keating. And the host of ABC television's pop music program *Countdown*, Ian (Molly) Meldrum. Says Steep: "He has done a lot for the music industry, including being ridiculed in public (over his apparent incoherence)."

Would she expect "Molly" to qualify

for Mensa? "No, I don't know that he'd be good at the sorts of puzzles IQ people do."

Audrey Austin mentions Queensland Premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, because he's a "straight talker" — a quality she also admires in comedian Paul Hogan whom she thinks would make a good prime minister.

Jean Little suggests Mike Carlton, the

2GB radio host and satirist, "because I think he's got a shrewd mind."

I asked some of the Mensans whether the average person could become more intelligent? Forget it, they said. Intelligence is largely hereditary. But there is a society for the rest of us. Formed by the American J. D. Stewart in 1983, it is DENSA. It's for the 4.6 billion people not smart enough to be Mensans. □



MICHAEL RAYNER/IMPRESSIONS

Michael Hodgman



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Fran Powell



Mike Carlton

**GOOD WEEKEND** asked four achievers from different fields to sit for a general intelligence test, for an indication of whether they would be eligible for Mensa and whether mental ability and achievement were correlated. Administered by Norman Rees, consulting psychologist and member of the Australian Psychological Society, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale Revised test is a widely used individual test of two sections — verbal and non-verbal — designed to rate intelligence from the subnormal to the very superior. The results are given by percentile here but by traditional standards the very superior range in this test would denote an IQ of 130 and above — putting the candidate in Mensa range.

**MICHAEL HODGMAN (aged 47, Liberal MHR from Tasmania.)**

Hodgman is known in Federal parliament as "the Mouth from the South" and, says Rees, his performance would reflect that words are indeed the main currency for a politician. Hodgman was extremely competent in word knowledge, knowledge of social customs (for instance, explaining the rationale for various economic structures). He fell short in the clerical transposition tasks (the transposition of symbols under a time constraint), although it must be added that Hodgman had had a heavy night which reduces one's motor speed.

**Verbal:** Very superior range. Top 1 per cent.

**Non-verbal:** High average. Top 10 to 15 per cent.

**IMANTS TILLERS (37. One of the stars of Australian art, who was the nation's only official representative at the latest Venice Biennale.)**

Rees says: "He was particularly high on non-verbal type material. Very quick in clerical transposition, his visual motor skills were highly developed (good at making geometric designs using blocks) and did jigsaw puzzles easily.

"His general knowledge and word knowledge were also very high."

Tillers performed worst in auditory memory tasks (where he had to remember a string of numbers read to him). A good artist to invest in, chuckles Rees.

**Verbal:** Superior. Top 3 per cent.

**Non-verbal:** Very superior. Top 1 per cent.

**FRAN POWELL (43. Former television quiz champion who sets questions for and referees *Sale of the Century*.)**

"She had some outstanding scores in verbal material: general knowledge, word knowledge, social customs, similarities between abstracts." But her poorer results in the non-verbal area might have been prejudiced by her prior protestations that she would not perform well in them.

"She might have done better if she had a more positive attitude," concludes Rees.

**Verbal:** Very superior. Top 1 per cent.

**Non-verbal:** High average. Top 10 to 15 per cent.

**MIKE CARLTON (40. Radio personality, on 2GB Sydney, and satirist.)**

An excellent all-rounder and top of the class. Except for the mental arithmetic sub-test (asked to do basic shopping computations) where he rated high average and the clerical transposition where he was a bit slow, Carlton performed exceptionally in everything. Signs of a very well-rounded background, says Rees. Apart from radio, "he's obviously done a lot of other things in life."

**Verbal:** Very superior. Top 1 per cent.

**Non-verbal:** Very superior. Top 1 per cent.

WHEN the scores for verbal and non-verbal sections are averaged for an indication of general mental ability, each of the above would be in the top 1 per cent, says Rees. In the Wechsler test, that is where "you'll find lots of PhDs and people who run our organisations."

Rees points out that, "if I was marking them without knowing who they were, in each case you could say that they were persons with great potential but you would not be able to predict their achievements because any number of other factors could hold them back. I've seen plenty of tests where people have scored at this level who are in mental hospitals, jails or in subsistence situations. It's a person's personality and values which are the catalysts allowing them to make best use of their abilities." □

— TONY SARNO