
The inaugural *Margaret Bell Spirit of Volunteering Address*

Towards volunteering for the future

MARGARET BELL AM

Firstly, may I pay my respects to the Yugambah people, the traditional owners on whose land we are meeting tonight, and also to the many other Indigenous Australians who come from societies both immensely old and wise.

MODERN VALUES

Non-indigenous people have come to Australia mostly to improve their way of life, thus relying heavily on possessions and the market economy. But a certain egalitarianism has also been born digging in the minefields and later in the trenches. This encompasses in our nature something of a level of acceptance of the other and a sense of fair play.

We have boasted values such as equality, trust, tolerance and freedom but in the last decade these values have been somewhat eroded as we watch the gap constantly widening between the haves and the have nots and the involved and uninvolved. Sir William Deane once said ‘great disparity in wealth erodes and ultimately undermines a society’ and later, ‘equality, trust, tolerance and freedom stops when fear begins’.

VALUES UNDERPIN THE STRENGTH OF VOLUNTEER EFFORT

As part of our modern value system our society is now harbouring fear about issues such as border safety, health, climate change, social inclusion, ethnicity, and a downturn in the economy. We seek to know who will really provide forums to build coalitions of humanity wherein we can ensure

legitimacy for the long-term response to all of this. Will it be government or big business that will decide?

With short-term agendas of their own neither of these institutions are seen to work very much beyond their own survival. It is, therefore, only the citizens of Australia, and volunteers in particular, who can take a totally unbiased decision to work wholly for the common good.

RAISING THE BAR

The volunteer movement is at a crossroad. It can choose to maintain the status quo thus becoming an echo of its former self by promoting and encouraging little more than a benevolent model of volunteering, which was urgently needed in the 19th and 20th centuries, or it can accept the enormous challenges of the modern world by supporting new models of volunteering to develop a strong inclusive civil society. To do this there will need to be the introduction of a radical transformation in education programmes for volunteer leaders and volunteers.

THE BENEVOLENT MODEL

In 1813 the Benevolent Society of NSW recorded its first volunteer board of directors. In 1820 with great courage the wives of those directors began working as volunteers establishing the maternity section in the hospital and commenced looking after mothers and babies. More volunteers shortly assembled around the compelling need to provide feeding programs for the poor.

Other major charities as we now know them quickly began to emerge: Red Cross, Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and many others. They were brave new days that started a wave of benevolent action in Australia. New waves of volunteering have continued to follow.

The volunteer movement is now active in mansions and caravan parks, in cities and rural and regional areas too. It is alive in emergency services, on beaches, at sporting fixtures, in clubs and associations, in neighbourhood centres and in conservation and the environment. It shows its head at fetes, carnivals and in protest marches. It works to eradicate poverty to enable a disabled child to ride a horse, or an elderly person to receive a warm meal. It raises more than one third of the welfare budget that is spent in Australia and it plants trees and saves whales. It talks on the phone when kids 'dial-a-mum', or want to start-over. It had fifteen minutes of fame during the Olympic and Para-Olympic games in 2000 and makes volunteer options available through GoVolunteer in a matter of seconds. So what now?

ERADICATING FEAR

Sir William Deane suggests that fear eradicates values. And we say volunteering relies on motivation drawn from values. Therefore the new day for the volunteer movement in Australia is called on to prioritise education for inclusion to eradicate fear in communities and its consequences. I wonder in what ways we are right now allowing alienation and fear to flourish in the environs in which volunteers work? How has each volunteer within each corner of the movement created or failed to discourage divisions and animosities where they work?

We have emphasised recognition and rights and responsibilities for volunteers. Now we can emphasise 'volunteering for social inclusion and change' as volunteers, by the very nature of their work, are in a unique place in society to insist on animosity free zones in which to carry out their tasks. The volunteer movement is ideally placed to tackle today's big questions and to pledge itself more than ever before to fight against bigotry, racism, violence, and hatred – all of which come out of exclusion – and to commit instead to the notion of social inclusion to fight the ills of poverty, ignorance, greed, waste, conflict and fear. Volunteering Australia state and territory

and regional volunteer centres are ideally placed to work on providing the new education needed.

MODELLING MULTICULTURAL LIVING

The volunteer movement in Australia could model multicultural living in a most compelling way. With citizens from over 200 countries we are uniquely placed to determine the vital recipe for living in an inclusive rather than an exclusive world.

THE RECIPROCAL MODEL

A change of mind-set is needed to implement the new education for volunteering and can be drawn from the reciprocal model and the multi-identity model. Reciprocity has no sense of doing 'to' or doing 'for' but rather a sense of equality in doing 'with'.

Reciprocal volunteering is both old and new and is drawn from a long-established tradition of sharing linked by strong unwritten social pacts where people took as a norm the imperative of sharing their social skills, time, ideas and energy with their neighbours. This was done largely for survival in the spirit of reciprocity – something in it for you and something in it for me. Indigenous Australians have modelled this style of volunteering for thousands of years.

Today we see the theme of reciprocity lived very tangibly in people's choices of domicile, relationships, employment, hobbies, faith and cultural affiliations, and entertainment. So, too, can we expect the spirit of reciprocity in the modern volunteer. Often building on the need to find a sense of belonging and self-esteem, and a place or task where one can feel welcomed, included, valued, recognised and empowered to make a difference. We adhere to these practises as long as they serve us well.

MULTI-IDENTITY MODEL BUILDS ON RECIPROCAL VOLUNTEERING

Multi-identity volunteering is a vital act of engagement; demanding, sometimes uncertain, unrelenting and not always understood. It is not for the faint hearted and is recognised by the following characteristics:

- Whatever the task, the first role of the volunteer is to build social inclusion where they work. To practise it personally and to demand it in the workplace.
- Belief that volunteering in this pro-active way can make a difference;
- A willingness to walk beside and not in front of or behind the other;
- Shows a desire to experience the situation of the other without imposing judgement;
- A willingness to tread a path never traversed before;
- An expectation that there is deep learning for both the volunteer and the other in this model;
- An understanding that the survival of the planet will have a lot to do with our capacity to identify with the life experience of others and to feel comfortable in doing so;
- The knowledge that after sharing this experience I will return home by a different path.

EXAMPLES OF MULTI-IDENTITY VOLUNTEERING

These are likely to be found in organisations working for a sustainable future, a clean environment, poverty eradication, human rights, low-cost housing, in creative community development, striving for different and better education, and in areas such as theatre, regional and local arts and sports. It can be found too amidst those who are working for the elimination of all kinds of prejudice against women, children, aged people, indigenous communities, refugees, gays and lesbians, and other disadvantaged or minority groups.

MULTI-IDENTITY VOLUNTEERING CAN MAKE AUSTRALIA ONE OF THE STRONGEST CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS IN ASIA-PACIFIC

Just as market philosophies have dominated the thinking of the last twenty-five years the debate around new politics and civil society, volunteering will be at the centre of the debate for the next twenty-five.

Volunteers are and will continue to be at the forefront of the changing landscape of civil society. If the movement and in particular its leadership is willing to take the risks needed to educate for change the volunteer presence in Australia will have a vital impact on the health and well-being and, indeed, the very visibility of the new Australian society as it continues to emerge.

Volunteering can create its own indestructible force for building solidarity within and across each community of which it is a part by building social inclusion through multi-identity volunteering and restoring and adding to the equality trust and freedom of our society.

Margaret Bell was founding President/CEO of Volunteering Australia, the peak national body for volunteering; founding member of the Australian Prime Minister's round table on business and community partnerships; founding Director of CIVICUS, the World Alliance for Citizen Participation; and World President of the International Association for Volunteer Effort. She is the founder of Chain Reaction Foundation, dedicated to working with community, business and government leaders to find clearer, more sustainable ways to live and work as an inclusive multicultural society.