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VOLUNTEERS AND MODERN CHANGE- AGENTS

National Conference on Volunteering
Queensland, Australia

28 November 2011

The Margaret Bell Spirit of Volunteering Address 2011

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Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition Centre

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THE MARGARET BELL SPIRIT OF VOLUNTEERING ADDRESS 2011

VOLUNTEERS AS MODERN CHANGE-AGENTS

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG*



HONOURING MARGARET BELL

I have known Margaret Bell, after whom this Spirit of Volunteering address is named, for more than a decade. She is a national treasure. Indeed, she is an international treasure.

Margaret Bell was educated at the Sacred Heart Convent, Rose Bay in Sydney. She learned well from the nuns who taught her, the commitment of all the great religions to social justice and care for minority groups and the disadvantaged.

* Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009); President of the International Commission of Jurists (1995-8); Member of the Eminent Persons Group, Commonwealth of Nations (2010-11); Gruber Justice Prize 2010.

She completed her education at Ateneo University in The Philippines where she took a Master of Arts degree. In 1984, she became Executive Director of Volunteering New South Wales, a post she held until 1997. Concurrently, she was Executive Director of Volunteering Australia. In 1998, she became founding Regional Director of CIVICUS, an international organisation set up to promote a vibrant civil society in the world as an antidote to oppression and indifference. She held this position until 2001 and in 2002, she established the Chain Reaction Foundation, to continue her work with volunteers and for civil society.

Margaret Bell has held important positions internationally, as President of World Volunteer Effort. Nationally, she was appointed to an important post to encourage dialogue between business, government and society.

In between all of these busy activities, Margaret Bell found time to raise five children; to be kind to countless people; and to study and practise yoga. She is strong but gentle. In many parts of the world, she is the human face of volunteering in our country.

THE SPIRIT OF VOLUNTEERING

Mine is the third lecture in this series. The first was given by Margaret Bell herself. She traced the history of volunteer efforts in Australia from the infant colony in New South Wales where, in 1813, the Benevolent Society was founded. She recounted the way this initiative had led on to a maternity hospital and to the engagement of women in the colony to help young mothers and to feed the poor.

In the nineteenth century, volunteer movements were often associated with the churches. The Salvation Army began wonderful work for the poor, addicted and homeless. The St. Vincent de Paul Society did likewise. And on the international stage, the International Committee for the Red Cross was founded with its national branches, including in Australia. All of these initiatives followed the old principle of volunteering. They were top down. They encouraged gifts and charity from those with the money to those without.

In her lecture, Margaret Bell threw down a challenge. Taking her theme from the call of the former Governor-General, Sir William Deane, she urged us to put aside our fears and divisions and to search for values held in common. She urged the volunteer movement to embrace a reciprocal principle, whereby the volunteer walked not behind nor in front of the client, but alongside. Margaret Bell argued that the old ideas of condescension and charity had to be replaced by new ideas of inclusion and participation. She urged an active embrace of minorities in need of friendship and support: Aboriginal

Australians, children and the aged, refugee applicants and sexual minorities. It was a stirring address given by someone who knows a great deal about volunteering. I commend it to you¹.

The second lecture in the series was given by Professor Rob Fitzgerald, an Adjunct Professor at the Australian Catholic University and Commissioner of the federal Productivity Commission². He spoke from the viewpoint of someone engaged with non-profit organisations. The Productivity Commission had then recently completed an investigation of not-for-profit bodies. It had disclosed that there were 600,000 such bodies in Australia. They contribute more than \$40 billion each year to the national economy. They employ 900,000 individuals. They engage with 5 million volunteers. They are growing at a rate of 7% a year.

Professor Fitzgerald's thesis was that, as the not-for-profit sector grew in importance and attracted federal subventions for delivering tasks that hitherto were committed to government, it necessarily came under greater official scrutiny. It had to be more transparent. It had to respond to the urgent practical needs of society. Amongst such needs are those derived from the aging work force of Australia and the aging population living in retirement villages and nursing homes and care facilities.

With the increasing interaction between government and this sector, it had to be ready to submit to closer scrutiny and compliance with governmental guidelines and regulations. Professor Fitzgerald asked whether the volunteers' movement was ready for such similar scrutiny. As government funding was procured, not only would it produce demands for more transparency in administration, it would also require a lifting of standards and professionalism. Professor Fitzgerald asked whether the volunteers' movement was prepared for the challenges inherent in such intrusion and examination.

REACHING OUT: STIRRING THE POT

Like many in this audience and in this movement, all my life I have been a volunteer. I have been willing to go the extra mile beyond my work duties:-

- * At university, I became engaged in student politics. Many leaders of our country (including Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott) were engaged in student affairs. This was an area for student leaders to give back to others for the blessings of free or scholarship education;
- * Concurrently with these activities, and whilst working as a young solicitor in Sydney, I gave voluntarily *pro bono* representation to appear for students in discipline and educational exclusion matters and in the courts. Many a judge and captain of industry I defended in minor matters for fare evasion or participating in demonstrations. Many careers might have been blighted but for my 'brilliant' oratory;

¹ M. Bell, "Towards Volunteering for the Future", First Margaret Bell Lecture, Gold Coast, Queensland, 3 September 2008, published (2008) Vol.13 No.2 *Australian Journal on Volunteering*.

² R. Fitzgerald, "Initiate. Discover. Examine", Second Margaret Bell Lecture, Melbourne, 28 October 2010.

- * When my student days were over, I became engaged with the Council for Civil Liberties in New South Wales. This body represented citizens who claim that they were the victims of unjust laws or oppressive official conduct. I took part, without fee, in the defence of students who had 'liberated' the dress circle in the cinema in Walgett. Until that event, Aboriginal citizens were not allowed upstairs to see the movies. That was changed. I represented Vietnam war protestors and conscientious objectors. I took up the cudgels for Aboriginal students and for Abschol. I was engaged in the public debates about capital punishment, women's rights, the abolition of White Australia; and the remnants of colonialism in our regions;
- * My engagement with civil society continued thereafter. Non-governmental organisations (such as the International Commission of Jurists) and international bodies addressing some of the greatest problems of the age (such as the World Health Organisation Global Commission on AIDS and the UNESCO International Bioethics Committee); and
- * My partner of 42 years, Johan van Vloten, has likewise been a participant in civil society. He worked as an Ankali to help fellow citizens in Sydney living with HIV and AIDS. Yesterday, with him, I took part in the opening of a new facility for volunteers in the Ankali movement, in Sydney. Present on the occasion were Ankali helpers and some who are their clients. Men and women. Heterosexuals and homosexuals. Young and old. All working together for the poor, vulnerable and lonely who battle every day against AIDS. At my partner's insistence, I invited one of the volunteers, who had been working with the Ankali Project for 20 years, to come forward and to take an equal part in the unveiling of the plaque to mark the new facility. Men in suits who unveil plaques are not always the people who do the hard work. To all the volunteers here present, I express honour and praise.

I tell of these experiences not to boast or claim praise. I recall these activities of volunteering to make the obvious point. Australians are volunteers. Most of us engage, over our lives, in voluntary efforts big and small. It is a strong feature of our country. I hope it will always be so.

VOLUNTEERS AND LAW

The growth of the volunteers' movement in Australia has meant a need to examine the state of the law and the way it protects, or neglects, those who do work otherwise than for wages or like financial reward. Ensuring that workers' compensation law extends to volunteers can be an important challenge. Making sure that insurance covers volunteers against unreasonable risks. Taking care to bring volunteers within the protection of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination law. Considering whether, as in South Australia, a general Act of Parliament should be passed to cover all the major rights and duties of volunteers as they increase in number and take part in ever more onerous and complicated duties.

Sometimes volunteers need the protection of the laws against misuse of their services: treating them as cheap labour and abusing the assistance they freely give. Particularly in difficult economic times, which the world is now facing, funding to help support volunteer organisations can be harder to come by. Yet inevitable out-of-pocket and other expenses are incurred. Making sure that these are covered and properly paid can be an onerous and time-consuming effort.

Volunteers themselves should be consulted in respect of their rights and duties. Governments which frequently take advantage of the voluntary sector, should be prepared to pay for the training of volunteers and to resource activities that are essential to society. There should also be well-known and accessible redress against those who misuse volunteers. Care must be observed by religious groups to avoid unsuitable attempts to mix advocacy of a particular religion with the efforts delegated to faith-organisations by government to volunteers. In a secular state, when volunteers accept public moneys, they must conform to the general requirements of the state, including by avoiding discriminatory attitudes and unfair actions against minorities.

GROWING ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENT

The foregoing makes it clear that the volunteers' movement has to be careful and clear-thinking in the extent to which it engages with government. Of course, there are great advantages in fulfilling governmental programmes and in receiving governmental subventions for doing so. Apart from the requirements that accompany such initiatives (of transparency, accountability, auditing and conformity to non-discriminatory standards), the very proximity of organisations of volunteers to government can sometimes lead to a kind of seduction. Unless volunteers are alert to the risks, they may wake up to discover that they have sold their soul to government and have lost the essential independent spirit of volunteering: the energetic sometimes almost eccentric to doing the unusual and doing it in unusual ways.

When, in 1975, I was appointed inaugural Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission, I was keen to make sure that the Commission would be useful to government. Initially, the Commission was established in Sydney so as to be close to a national centre of the legal profession. This, it was thought, would facilitate recruitment of staff and consultants in a way that establishing the office in Canberra might have made more difficult. However, when I urged that the Commission should have offices within the Federal Attorney-General's Department, so as to be close to the Attorney-General and his officials, a wise federal public servant, Mr [later Sir] Clarrie Harders, warned me to guard the Commission's independence. He said that separation from the politicians and the Department of State would tend to ensure a distinctive form of advice. This was the value-added which the Commission offered.

The same lesson has relevance to volunteers. Their value-added is often that they perform their duties with an enthusiasm and imagination that is not always present in the public sector. Or even in the private corporate sector. The volunteer movement should therefore guard its independence. So far as

possible, it should prevent the all-too-ready seduction by governmental funding leading to detailed governmental regulation and control.

VOLUNTEERING AND TECHNOLOGY

The world we live in is profoundly influenced by new technology. This includes the technology of informatics: computers, iPhones and all the paraphernalia of the inter-connected world.

This week I witnessed two examples of how volunteers are now engaged through social networks in ways that did not occur earlier:

- * A colleague from Egypt telephoned from Tahrir Square to report on the waves of young people demanding an end to autocracy and the speedy conduct of elections and end to military rule. In the old days, great political movements were organised from soap boxes and, sometimes, the live broadcasts expressed by men in suits speaking in hushed tones. Nowadays, it is generated by texting and social networks that spread the news about issues of politics and justice. Volunteers must adapt to, and participate in, this brave new world of technology. This is where they must recruit, organise, proselytise; and
- * Earlier today, in Sydney, I received a video produced for YouTube. It is designed to influence the delegates to the national conference of the Australian Labor Party which will take place in Sydney in four days time. The film has been produced by the substantially voluntary social activism organisation *GetUp!* It shows a young man chatting up a friend on a Sydney ferry. The course of their relationship follows and obviously grows. But the friend is never revealed. Only in the last frames of the movie is the friend shown to be a man. The video is designed to show the equality of love and of human relationships. And the need to open up marriage in Australia, as elsewhere, to partners whatever their sex or sexuality. Volunteers can use technology to advance causes important to them. This is the way to turn hearts and minds to causes in our world.

Volunteers in today's age have to be aware of the capacity and potential of technology to identify needs; to mobilise resources; and to deliver messages in effective and efficient ways. This is a long way from feeding the poor in colonial Sydney.

GLOBAL VOLUNTEERING

The third new development is related to the last. I refer to the global character of volunteering today. Over the past year, I have been engaged in the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) on the future of the Commonwealth of Nations. This is an activity that engaged ten leading citizens of diverse Commonwealth countries. By July 2011, we produced a report which we wrote ourselves. It was delivered to the recent CHOGM meeting held in Perth, Western Australia.

The report covers a wide range of issues, including the provision of a Charter of Commonwealth Values; the creation of a Commissioner for Human Rights; attention to the HIV/AIDS epidemic; urgent action on climate change; and new initiatives to protect the rights of women and of vulnerable minorities.

One important set of proposals relates to advocacy and consensus building in the Commonwealth of Nations³. It proposes an enhanced role for young people in the Commonwealth of the future. It suggests the launching of a Commonwealth Youth Corps to tap the enthusiasm, imagination, energy and commitment of young people who constitute at least 60% of the population of Commonwealth countries under 30 years of age. The EPG report states⁴:

“We have a vision of thousands of Commonwealth young people experiencing other Commonwealth countries in ways that advance understanding, friendship, opportunity and leadership training. Strengthening their lives, prospects and experiences through the medium of service to, and with, others within the Commonwealth. Their prospects, experience, opportunities, energy and drive are central to the survival of Commonwealth values and human priorities. Upon their return to their home countries, these young people would bring a wider knowledge and understanding of the culture of other Commonwealth citizens and widen the prospects for global tolerance and peace. It is for this reason that we recommend the creation of a Commonwealth Youth Corps (CYC) to advance the values of the Commonwealth through the instruments of volunteerism, development, exchange and service.

We see the CYC as open to all eligible Commonwealth citizens. Young people would serve for up to three months, between school years, in other Commonwealth countries, in a range of activities such as education, training and skills and leadership, mentoring, development, democracy, education and sport skills development. In the course of such service, they would learn about the cultures and expectations of the communities in which they live.”

This idea of CYC derived from the wonderful work of volunteering performed in many Commonwealth countries, including Australia. Here, the original Overseas Service Bureau (OSB) has now grown into Australian Volunteers International (AVI). I am a patron of that body. For decades, OSB and AVI have been shining examples of voluntary service by young Australians in neighbouring countries of Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands. This concept needs to be expanded into the diverse lands of the Commonwealth of Nations as a whole.

The EPG has made this proposal. It is now up to Heads of Governments and officials to translate it into action. This is an illustration of the advance of the modern notion of volunteering. From works of charity by the rich for the poor, it has now become a more mutual and reciprocal activity. And all of this is within the spirit of volunteering, such as Margaret Bell has taught.

AND VOLUNTEERING IS GOOD FOR YOU

From these remarks of mine, the spirit of volunteering that I urge is one that is alert to the changing demographics of our society; to the growing and expanding technology that can advance the cause of

³ Commonwealth of Nations, Eminent Persons Group, *A Commonwealth of the People: Time for Urgent Reform* (Commonwealth Secretariat, London, 2011).

⁴ *Ibid*, 91-92.

volunteering; and to the global nature of human existence today in the new world community in which volunteers will increasingly work and live.

I realise that volunteering can sometimes be discouraging. Individuals may sometimes be abused, verbally and even physically. Ingratitude and lack of understanding and appreciation are rife.

But for all this, volunteering can be a joy both for those who are volunteers and for those with whom they work. Moreover, recent surveys appear to indicate the volunteering is actually good for the health of those that volunteer⁵:

“Wrong Billy Joel, only tools die young
Do-gooders live longer than meaner, less charitable people, research has found. The figures also showed that people who volunteer to others have an increased life span than those who do it for personal satisfaction.

Scientists studied 10,317 students from their 1957 graduation to present day.

In 2004, respondents reported whether they had volunteered within the past ten years, and how regularly.

Researchers found four years later about 4% of 2,384 non-volunteers were dead.

A similar number of volunteers with self-oriented motives were also dead.”

But the volunteers, it seems, live forever. Well, they live longer. And they may be happier. And more fulfilled. They are enriched with the knowledge that what they do is good for other people, especially if it is done *with* those others, as distinct *for* them as to them.

On a beautiful, sunny day, this hall is crowded with volunteers, reflecting on how they can do their tasks better. As a citizen and sometime volunteer myself, I express praise and thanks. The nation would collapse without the efforts of volunteers. But volunteers would collapse without the nation and without good causes to which they can devote themselves.

I close as I began with praise and expressions of respect for Margaret Bell. She lives her commitment in the activities of her life. She an example for us and an inspiration.

⁵ MX News, Friday 9 September 2011, 6.