



## **The 2010 Margaret Bell Spirit of Volunteering Oration**

### **13th National Conference on *Volunteering***

*Initiate. Discover. Examine.*

**The Sebel and Citigate Albert Park, Melbourne**

**28th October 2010**

Tonight, let me join with you in acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of this land and pay my respects to Aboriginal elders both past and present. It is a great privilege but even greater pleasure to present this Oration in honour of Margaret Bell, who joins with us tonight in this great celebration of volunteerism. Margaret's unwavering commitment to promoting volunteering as a critical element in the development of strong civil societies and her more recent work with Chain Reaction are great examples to all of us as to the power of enthusiasm, tenacity and optimism –essential qualities in leaders of this volunteer movement in Australia.

Having been involved as a volunteer for the last 30 years in the community services and social justice sectors, and having observed at first hand volunteers in a myriad of different fields I am almost convinced that volunteering is impregnated in the very DNA of many. Perhaps the international work on the human genome project will one day prove this. But what is certain is that volunteerism is ingrained into the very soul and being of this nation. Australia's well being, its social norms and values have been influenced and shaped by the enormous effort of the millions of volunteers that have served this community from its inception. More importantly, their values of mutual respect, fairness, selflessness and compassion underpin the values we collectively aspire to as a nation state. Or at least we should!

Yet the world of volunteering can not stand still. In 2008 in the inaugural Spirit of Volunteering Oration Margaret Bell said *'The volunteer movement is at a cross road. It can choose to maintain the status quo thus becoming an echo of its former self by promoting a benevolent model of volunteering.... or it can accept the enormous challenges of the modern world by supporting new models of volunteering to develop a strong inclusive civil society'*

This very same challenge could equally apply to the Not for Profit Sector in 2010. The recent Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Contribution of the Not for Profit Sector, on which I was the Presiding Commissioner, showed beyond doubt that urgent reform is needed to optimise the potential of the sector. The Inquiry tells the long story of this sector's evolution since its formal foundations in 1813 when the Benevolent Society was established in Sydney, which continues its work today. It is a story of remarkable optimism, growth, courage and adaptation. It is a story that is written across so many fields of human endeavour- health, education, community welfare, religion, environment, arts, culture, sport, recreation, community and emergency services. It is a story that traverses many phases of public policy including embracing some elements of the welfare state to a more market driven economy.

Yet, it is a story that today raises real questions and challenges for the sector, government, business and you, the volunteers. It raises five fundamental questions that I wish to canvass tonight that directly affects the future of volunteer effort in this country.

**Do you have the confidence to believe in the power of the sector to shape society's future?**

The Productivity Commission's Inquiry Report presents a conundrum. This is a richly diverse sector with over 600,000 bodies mostly small and local but some large and international. It contributes over \$43 billion pa to the Australian

economy. It employs over 900, 000 people and has an income of more than \$70 billion. Additionally nearly 5 million volunteers are engaged each year producing an additional \$ 15 billion in economic contribution.

And, most importantly, its economic contribution is growing at the rate of over 7 % per year. By all measures this is a dynamic, flourishing sector. Yet the submissions to the Inquiry often show the sector as feeling disempowered, under the control of government and less vibrant and innovative than at any other time in its history.

The sector needs to step back and objectively analyse its strengths. It needs to once again believe that it has the capacity to make that difference to society that so many volunteers and others aspire to. To do that, you have to believe that with the support of the community it can shape the values of our society. The late Peter Drucker a famous international management consultant and strategist more than a decade ago foreshadowed that the social sector as he described would shape the vision, values and competence of this century more so than business or government. Do you have the confidence to believe that this could be so? And if it is so, in which way would you like to shape the vision and values of our nation state?

### **Do you have the courage to be both valued and for your work to with be evaluated?**

One thing that I have learnt over my three decades of involvement in this sector is that good people can do things badly and good intentions must be matched by equally good competence. Volunteers have longed demanded that governments and society should better value and recognise the value of voluntary contributions to society. Indeed, so to have informal carers and the not for profit sector more generally. The Inquiry Report calls for a new national measurement framework so as to achieve this. Better measurement of the inputs, outputs and outcomes of the sector is much over due. But what is also required is a culture of evaluation in the sector to really understand the impacts that are being made to individuals and society. We need to better understand what is working and what is not. We need to know if the same results could be achieved in better and more cost effective ways. We need to allocate resources both human and capital to where the most impact can be made. This is as important in emergency services as it is in community welfare. It is vital in health and education.

Are you really prepared for your efforts and those of the organisations you volunteer with, to be fully and transparently evaluated. Are you prepared to be open to independent scrutiny and to make changes where necessary? Are you prepared to accept reforms that take you in new directions?

### **Do you have the willingness to meet the emerging challenges of an ageing society and workforce shortages?**

Most Australians are now well aware of the more rapid ageing of our population with very significant increase in the number of people over 65 years and the challenges for our health and aged care systems especially for those over 85 years. But few understand that the most immediate impact of ageing is on the workforce, particularly in the human services areas such as mental health, disability services and aged care. Today's staff shortages in these areas are already being felt but they are about to get much worse. Long term staff shortages will be a more permanent feature not just a temporary aberration. At the same time there are projected emerging shortages of informal carers that will impact on a number of critical care areas.

For many agencies they will once again turn to volunteers to assist in these matters. Indeed, many not for profits that actively moved away from volunteers will return to the field. Yet volunteers must not be seen only as gap fillers or worse, cheap labour. Volunteers must be properly respected and valued. They must be appropriately trained, supported and their needs well met.

However the real change lies in the fact that many models of care that assume an unlimited labour supply will cease to be viable. As a consequence we will need to reengage with the community and reactivate the community members as integral contributors to the care, support and wellbeing of those in the community in need. They will have to play a greater role in caring for the community and their neighbours. Self help groups will need to be nurtured. Community activism will need to be promoted.

Community organisations are best placed to achieve this. Volunteers will be critical players in this new community engagement and activism. This will be a very different role for the sector and for volunteers. Are you ready?

**Do you have the skills, talents and values necessary to engage and reactivate the community in creating an inclusive society?**

Community engagement is based on the concept of relationships not transactions. Community engagement is about forging relationships based on mutual respect, trust and reciprocity. This is not a giver-receiver model of benevolence or old style charity. It is a model that values each person's role and contribution in the relationship. It acknowledges the strengths of each and seeks to empower those who are in need of support to take control of their own lives and circumstances. For those that suffer social isolation and exclusion including the huge numbers of elderly, home bound residents, it is about allowing them to be able to participate in the life of the community as valued and valuable citizens. It does so by activating the surrounding community.

This will need new skills for agencies, workers and volunteers. It will require trained, talented, committed and flexible volunteers. This is not a role for government nor business. It is the natural role of the not for profit sector and its organisations. It goes to the very essence of building social capital and embracing a socially inclusive society. Do you have the values necessary and are you prepared to develop the skills needed for this exciting challenge?

**Do you have the drive to be innovators and collaborators in forging a new future?**

Until the last two decades there was no doubt that the not for profit sector was the driver of innovation in so many fields. The innovation was in large part fuelled by the volunteers who sat on boards, ran programs, galvanised resources and did what ever it took to achieve the intended goal. But in recent periods much of the innovation has been lead by government. Many organisations have passively accepted a new role as a contractor, engaged to provide government services, in the way governments want, for the price governments wish to pay. Boards have become increasingly risk adverse waiting to see what government want or even what business partners demand. Innovation has been sidelined. Yet innovation is at the heart non profit endeavour. Today the sector must regain its innovative capacity. It must seek to meet new needs or meet old needs differently. It must find new sources of funds from creative philanthropists and find new ways to raise capital to engage in cutting edge responses, some of which will fail. Volunteers need to be part of that innovation revolution.

To achieve this new collaborations need to be forged within the sector and between business and sector agencies. Corporate involvement carefully managed should be encouraged. Genuinely meaningful corporate volunteerism should be mobilised to help in this challenge.

Encouraging signs are emerging with the development of interest in social enterprise activity, some innovation funding coming from government and business and a renewed interest by boards and senior management.

Agencies must go beyond their own staff and boards for inspiration. They should engage their volunteers in this discourse, who should also help in developing long term strategic plans for the future of such bodies.

Do you have the drive to be part of this innovation revolution? Do have the skills to be collaborators with others in the pursuit of innovative solutions? Do you really want to be involved.

Tonight I have raised important questions. I have asked them of you, just as they need to be asked of governments, business and sector organisations concerned with the future of not for profit endeavour in this country. Under the leadership of your peak body Volunteering Australia, I am confident you will respond with insight and enthusiasm

Earlier I spoke of the long story of this sector. I spoke of the achievements of Margaret Bell, who has written her remarkable story through her work in volunteerism and civil society activism. ***What is the story you will now write for the future of volunteerism in this nation?***

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