



Address to 2014 ACOSS Conference

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THE COMMUNITY SECTOR AS GUARDIANS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Acknowledgement

I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I would also like to offer my respect to Aboriginal people from across the country and acknowledge their ongoing contribution to this Nation; to civil society.

Micro and Macro

At the start of the year I wrote on civil society suggesting that the role of the community sector was to be both the fabric and the seamstress of civil society. Today I want to emphasise two more roles – those of quality controller and designer.

In engaging with the debate it seems to me there are two levels of civil society which I categorise as micro and macro.

Micro

The Productivity Commission's report into the not-for-profit (NFP) sector found 600,000 NFPs or civil society organisations. The vast majority are small, engaging in and creating micro civil society. I define micro civil society as being about relationships where those receiving the benefits are also those contributing. There is rarely a paid relationship – they are communities of geography or of interest – a scout group, car-pooling, a new parent's group. This is micro civil society. It works on trust, reciprocity and relationship. A level of equality is also needed.

Macro

Macro civil society is characterised by organisations the like of which most of us in this room work for. Larger scale organisations or organisations more distant from our clients. Where our clients are often previously unknown to us, where staff are paid and

formal roles are in place. It also evens up the ledger for those without access to the benefit of micro civil society.

Macro civil society is made up of organisations which ensure the morals and purposes of the micro civil society exist, where the relationships and interdependencies don't. Incidentally they account for only about 50,000 of the Productivity Commission's 600,000 NFPs.

Our Role

The role of the community sector in civil society is at least threefold.

- We are the fabric – we provide what people need - especially to those without access to the full benefits of micro civil society. Our direct services provide what society sees as the basics in terms of food, shelter, warmth, skills.
- We are the seamstress. We seek to weave our clients into their own micro civil society – to move from providers of the fabric of the macro to enabling people to create, discover and develop their own networks, their own micro civil society. This is a level of change which is sustainable. Financially certainly, helping people to help themselves is a persuasive mantra. But also sustainable more importantly as transformational change. Change that occurs in relationship with others, change an individual can upkeep.
- Our third and some would say most important role are those of the quality controller and designer. It is to act as advocates for that which concerns us. As a one way valve to guard against erosion of progress already made and as designers and advocates to explore, explain and promote that progress not yet attained. It is also as part of this role that we promote the necessary conditions for micro civil society to flourish. Many of us will have one of these roles – some all three.

Where now?

So where are we in the debate at the moment?

Well interesting times indeed. I don't think there is anyone that would disagree inequality is growing.

The government certainly unveiled its true colours on budget night in terms of its conscious decision to create a sub-class in our country.

This government's erosion of civil society has also seen many of the guardians of civil society defunded and unravelled. Most recently the Refugee Council, most quietly the National Network of Environment Law Centres and previously the Drug and Alcohol peak body and a host of advisory bodies to government.

Sociologists talk of ecological models of violence where all that is needed for violence to occur is inequality and psychologists explain how we are able to mistreat those who are vulnerable by assuming they're deserved their lot in life. Both these lead to what I

believe is a growing ability to create and denigrate a class of people not like us – a category of “the other”.

Our Role

It is our role in times like these to take charge of the narrative – to present it in ways where it is hard not to hear everyone’s voice. To bring “the others” back in.

For example, when the Treasurer, Joe Hockey, flippantly described the \$7 co-paying for a GP visit as a “couple of beers”, we retold that story in terms of the impact – the deterrent that the co-paying is. \$7 to a person on Newstart Allowance is the equivalent of \$43.40 for someone on the Male Weekly Average Earnings. Maybe more tellingly, for those on \$120,000 (the likely salary level for the decision-makers in Health), \$7 equates to \$65.50.

Using the same modelling theory when we unwrap the heavy lifting rhetoric and examine the impact (not just the crude quantum), the effect of the changes for someone on Youth Allowance (when they can get it) taken in the same proportion would translate to an annual loss to the Treasurer himself of \$51,233 (a very stark contrast to the \$1,200 he will forgo).

It seems deeply ironic to me that the very government that promotes civil society holds at its core policies which neglect and destroy the precursors of civil society – trust, relationship, equality.

Call to Action

We shouldn’t be too pessimistic though – we inhabit a powerful space. This might be a long race. I might be a hard race but it is one we all believe in, one we’re all trained for.

That said, this race can’t be run alone or in isolation of each other. Worse still, it mustn’t be run in competition with each other. I don’t believe it has even been more important to claim and use our collective voice. Note collective, not one voice. We need to use this voice to keep reminding of the importance for all of us of equality and enable all voices to be heard.

Funding changes will be a distraction, of course they will. But they are a distraction that should be treated as such and not as the main game.

We might make up civil society but are also a large part of society in general and society is after all a collective of the ideas, norms and hopes of its members.

It’s time to make sure ours are heard and acted on.