

ANGLICARE AUSTRALIA CONFERENCE

John Roffey Memorial Lecture Canon Dr Ray Cleary AM

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“To Tango or to Tender”

Challenges to the Sector

When Kasy rang me to ask me for the title of my presentation tonight I quickly borrowed one from a paper I gave at a Victorian Council for Social Services symposium in the early stages of the Kennett Government in 1993 in Victoria, when the community sector was confronted with a less than friendly Department of Human Services, the implementation of competitive tendering, proposed amalgamation of the 90 or so service providers into what one senior bureaucrat defined as the “big six”, and the introduction of the purchaser/ provider dictum.

I titled my presentation “To Tango or to Tender”. I have no idea why I named it so and probably cannot think of a better reason for naming this presentation in the same way, other than to suggest that it marked a time when the traditional role and work of the community sector was to undergo significant change and the need for those who made up the sector to decide how they were to respond to the new context. “To Tango” on reflection was to engage in a robust, even provocative and assertive engagement with government, challenging the principles of the new competitive environment, as being inappropriate for human service organisations, while “To Tender” was to accept the new regime. At the time I wrote the initial paper agencies were being increasingly viewed by the government and the public service, (that is to say those who stayed or were not made redundant) as purchasers of government services. There was, I would suggest, little if any recognition or acknowledgement of the history and traditions of the agencies, nor of their broader role and mission, and their role in creating and sustaining civil society.

Change has continued to take place within the sector at different paces across the nation. Faith based agencies like the Anglicare Australia network have experienced, and will continue to feel, the impact of change on the lives of individuals, their own lives and the services they provide. They will also continue to face challenges from those who reject faith, as a legitimate praxis for engagement.

There has been a great deal of interest and debate recently, and in particular, in some more conservative neo liberal think tanks in Australia tanks such as the Centre for Independent Studies and Business Review Weekly, on the issue of whether not-for-profit community services should become more business-like and adopt corporate business practices. The reasons often touted for this need for change include:

- The need for agencies to be accountable for funds received from both public and private sources.
- The lack of transparency in decision making processes, including the influence of parent bodies in the agency's service delivery, advocacy and research (ie Church hierarchy).
- The advocacy role of agencies in seeking to influence economic and social policy at the macro and micro levels.

- Increased outsourcing of services to the community sector by all governments across the world (eg United Kingdom).
- The tax benefits available to Community Service Organisations, which if available to the private sector, would diminish their competitive advantage.
- The future of the sector to deliver outcomes to improve participation in the workforce and to retrain those who had lost their jobs due to changing technology.
- The sector creating and contributing to welfare dependency rather than enabling those on benefits to lessen their reliance on tax payer handout by failing to introduce what they often described as "tough love policies".

There are however, I suggest, a number of key issues that are ignored in this discussion, which have a significant impact on how we are to understand the role of Community Service Organisations, and for the purposes of our discussion, the role of Anglicare Australia and its member agencies, and the need to position ourselves at the beginning of the 21st Century. A period described by social analysts as post modern, or as I heard recently as post post modern, a time of rapid transition and change, a reaction to the modern era where the failure of the rational and the scientific to solve the problems of global humanity has led to a rethink of the importance of the self and the rejection of the meta narratives of religion and the once common building blocks or foundation stones of community life.

What then is the role of community service organisations, begun in a faith tradition, where the narrative that has underpinned their history and establishment is increasingly marginalised or rejected by many in the community they seek to serve and their ability to attract staff and resources in a competitive environment?

While the modern period may be described as a period of rapid deconstruction of the meta narrative, the post modern claims no absolutes, summed up in the words of Paul Anka and sung by the late Frank Sinatra:

*For what is man, what has he got?
If not himself, then he has nought.
To say the things he truly feels:
and not the words of one who kneels.
The record shows I took the blows,
And did it my way.*

Let me illustrate what I mean by two stories.

Years ago, a leading Economist shared with me his belief that the role of a community agency was to pick up the pieces left in the wake of an all powerful market economy.

He also suggested that as Chief Executive Officer of a welfare agency, I would always have a job because there would always be a minority incapable or riding or benefiting from the "market" wave, who would fall off the back and need support. This was the role of the charities was it not?

Not only did I find no comfort in his blunt assessment of my job security but I was disturbed by his lack of appreciation of the contribution the community sector, "Charities" as he calls them, make to the Australian economy and the value we add to government services and programs, not only in empowering and advocating with and on behalf of those who lack capacity, or opportunity or choice in the market economy, but in the provision of services. He had no perception of the community sector and its role. As I have already indicated he was not alone.

Welfare agencies as we know are not proxy government departments. And we are much more than the cleaner who comes in to pick up shattered lives.

We bring social policy to life by preparing communities to better access the market rather than trailing behind with a dust pan and shovel. We inform social policy through consultation and advocacy. We enhance government contracted services with the addition of our own funding to bolster the support offered to children, young people and families. And we ask the tough questions when a voiceless minority are not getting a fair chance. In this questioning we are also challenged to respond to a more poignant issue ourselves. Who's side as agencies are we on? Where do our loyalties reside? Sometimes I suggest the answer is not clear. Are we on the side of the poor, frail and disadvantaged, and do our own interests as agencies compromise our standards and organisational survival? How willing and prepared are we to give up for the greater good? This is an issue likely to come to the forefront in the near future as the Federal Government seeks to change ways of addressing homelessness, and child protection to name just two areas. There will be the need to reform, but on what basis and how closely should we as Faith based agencies respond?

The second story

On a rocky sea coast where shipwrecks were frequent, there was once a ramshackle little life saving station. It was no more than a hut and there was only one boat, but the few people who manned the station were a devoted lot who kept constant watch over the sea, and, with little regard for themselves and their safety, went fearlessly out in the storm if they had any evidence that there had been a shipwreck somewhere. Many lives were thus saved and the station became famous.

As the fame of the station grew, so did the desire of the people in the neighbourhood to become associated with its excellent work. They generously offered of their time and money so new members were enrolled, new boats bought and new crews trained.

The hut too was replaced by a comfortable building which could adequately handle the needs of those who had been saved from the sea and, of course, since shipwrecks do not occur every day, it became a popular gathering place – a sort of local club.

As time passed, the members became so engaged in socialising that they had little interest in life saving, though they duly supported the life saving motto on the badges they wore. As a matter of fact, when some people were actually rescued from the sea, it was always such a nuisance because they were dirty and sick and soiled the carpeting and the furniture.

Soon the social activities of the club became so numerous, and the life saving activities so few, that there was a showdown at a club meeting, with some members insisting that they return to their original purpose and activity.

A vote was taken and these troublemakers, who proved to be a small minority, were invited to leave the club and start another.

Which is precisely what they did – a little further down the coast, with such selfishness and daring, that after a while, their heroism made them famous. Where upon their membership was enlarged, their hut was reconstructed and their idealism smothered.

If you happen to visit that area today you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline. Each one of them is justifiably proud of its origins and traditions. Shipwrecks still occur in those parts, but nobody seems to care much.

From the Prayer of the Frog – Anthony Di Melo – India 1989

Both stories I suggest encapsulate the issue and the challenges Community Service Organisations face in post modern Australia. They involve the how and why questions, and require substantial change and rethinking from the 16th Century Elizabethan Poor Laws upon which much of our work has been built, whether it be the relief of child poverty or homes for the frail, disabled and aged. There is, in addition, the future challenge of a changing world and Australian environment where new issues and concerns, such as climate change and energy costs will impact more on low income families and individuals. Add to this gender, workplace, and urbanization and the future will look very different from the past. There is increasing evidence from both home and abroad that the communities in which we live and work are more critical and less sympathetic to the pleas and calls of agencies which base their work on a faith, ethical or justice framework without clear evidence on outcomes.

Change involves challenges and risks, and how we approach the need to assess our role and engagement with the community in the post modern age is ultimately a question of trust, with a confidence and mission clarity involving staff, supporters, donors, and funding bodies and our connectedness and engagement with the communities in which we work. As I was reminded on one occasion by a political advisor, our agencies represent only 6% of the population and they often are perceived, whether true or not, as takers and not givers. It also will involve constructive listening and research and less of what I suggest has often surfaced in the past as arguing only on a preconceived view that we know what is best. The foundation stones of Australian society are changing and it is not clear where they may finally rest in a society where, "my opinion and experience" is as good as yours, is becoming the measurement. As I have already said we are more than service providers, we have an important role in, as Mark Lyons and others have said, helping to shape our democracy.

Agencies within and outside the Anglicare network range in size, in the types of services provided, in our relationship to the Church and the community. Our history is varied, and we are part of a much wider community sector. We are as Joe Barraaket notes and who is supported by others, part of what is regularly described as the third sector.

Our Past

A reading of Australian Anglican engagement with the poor, the dispossessed, the homeless and the outcast has been somewhat piecemeal and more than often, not closely aligned or welcomed by ecclesiastical hierarchies or local faith communities. Many of our early beginnings, while encouraged, began outside official church structures. Their beginnings existed in the Father Tuckers or Sister Kates and other philanthropists and missionaries. They were inspired and encouraged by Christian teaching and saw in the poor and homeless the chance to share and proclaim the Good News of Salvation. For many of those early pioneers of our work their theology and engagement was both evangelical and incarnational. They understood their role as serving the poor and disadvantaged in the spirit of Jesus reflecting the generosity and hospitality of God. Today relationships and accountabilities to the Church vary across the country. Understandings of missions vary. These impact on our ability to be a single voice and the current challenges within the Anglican communion also do not help.

As agencies committed to change, transparency and empowerment many of the changes occurring in today's activities, are in part due to the professionalism, commitment, advocacy and wisdom brought over the years. We, along with others, have repeatedly called for more appropriate responses to child protection, early childhood services, housing, Out of Home Care, aged services and adolescent programs. As I look back over nearly 40 years of working exclusively in the community sector, I recognise the significant advances that have

occurred over this time and the wave of initiatives that have improved the lot of children and families. I am perhaps the last of a generation however that saw the faith based community sector as a long term vocation. This is not to say that Nirvana has arrived and that we have always got it right. Mistakes have been made in the past and with hindsight and greater vigilance and understanding, research and reflection, there is the need to continue to work together to ensure practice, education and advocacy of the highest standards. The capacity of the Community Sector to deliver services of the highest standards based on the professional training, practice wisdom, emerging cultural changes, new demands and the establishment of targets for achievement while recognising at the same time that working with disadvantaged individuals and families involves many others, and the need for structural change, remains an imperative. Investing in human capital - to use the current jargon - requires investment in infrastructure as well, such as health and housing. It also requires investing in the community capacity building defining outcomes in both structural and relational terms and a range of partnerships with likeminded agencies.

Rapid globalisation, community and personal expectations, the impact of illicit drug use, not to say anything about the impact of freely available alcohol and the growing influence of the media, continue to impact on us all, and in particular the 2.5 million Australians, including 600,000 children, who regularly use the services of Anglicare agencies across the nation. Add to this the unfinished agenda for indigenous Australians and new settlers from the Sudan and other trouble areas of our globe, the tasks and agenda before us remains challenging.

As a raw and adolescent participant in the 1970s I recall a time of significant mood swing where engagement in the political was recognised as necessary to address the personal or individual. The key initiatives remain in my mind. The first is the Australian Assistance Plan. The second, regional development and thirdly, the Social Welfare Commission. There is a sense in which we may be seeing another mood swing – even a generational change to how we as a nation will deal with matters of family violence, an ageing population, abuse, drugs and homelessness. Then, add to that, the agendas of climate change, resource and mineral exploitation and changing family and household structures. Strengthening and supporting families is as important for social cohesion and prosperity as it is for an individual and their family. Likewise, a commitment to early childhood education, positive and creative parenting and nurture, remains paramount for social cohesion and prosperity. So be it also for access to housing, education and health services.

It is my clear belief that the State in a modern democracy has a moral obligation to ensure the well being of all its citizens irrespective of class, race, gender or creed, and Community Service Organisations have a key role as mediating agencies and as legitimate participants in civil society, charged with the task to remove obstacles and impediments which prevent individual achievement. This I suggest requires a constant reflection on all of us of our mission and values which underpin who we are. The greatest challenge for faith based agencies is to remain faithful to our Christ given and inspired mission while seeking at the same time to work in partnerships with government and the wider community, responding to the needs of the day with professionalism and compassion. In this task we walk a fine line I suggest, in informing and working with governments and others while remaining true to our call.

The Social Inclusion initiatives announced by the new Federal Government provide an opportunity once again for a whole of Government approach to disadvantage. Here is an opportunity to regain a vision of Australia which embraces everyone. Our role in participation is as good citizens but also as part of the Church's mission and engagement with the world. Social Inclusion however is more than workforce participation, nor is it about achieving a level of income to enable each of us to buy more consumer goods. If it is to address the anxieties and concerns of our time, social inclusion must also embrace issues of wellbeing including quality relationships, tolerance, understanding and the meaning of human existence. Our agencies should have much to contribute in these areas. There is I suggest an opening here for one of our agencies to undertake research on alternative indicators for assessing

outcomes of services which embrace principles of wellbeing such as quality of relationships, confidence levels, interpersonal skills and social participation.

For the past ten years the Anglicare network across Australia, with many others, has been signalling major concerns about housing, education, health and public transport. Whilst ears may now be hearing what has been said for some time, sounds and words needs to be converted into action. (Economists have now recognised a housing crisis.)

Community Service agencies like Anglicare have historically played a pivotal role in the delivery of services to children, young people and families with many localised and community based, while others remain faith based, committed to draw their inspiration from both a belief and affirmation of a common humanity, but also to sacred texts and traditions.

In recent years the role of service provider has been increasingly seen by many government as the prime if not only role of the sector, although this has not restricted government departments from seeking free advice from Community Service Organisations and expecting agencies to subsidise services. There have also been occasions when government has not welcomed the advocacy role of agencies, preferring them to be service providers only. The last Federal Government abolished many peak bodies and threatened to curtail the voice of many not for profits. This conveniently ignored the role of the sector in critiquing, deconstructing and reconstructing the policies and institutions of society. It is welcome news that the new Federal Government has abolished such restrictions and is seeking to establish a compact with the Community Sector.

Australia has a strong tradition of Community Service Organisations both delivering services and in naming disadvantage. This role has been strengthened by a strong philanthropic and a shared ecumenical agenda. Only in recent times has there been, I suggest, a weakening or diminishment of this role, partly as a result of changing work patterns, growth in the role of governments and a decline in earlier shared religious values. The introduction of purchaser/provider funding models, tendering and unit prices have also both challenged and compromised our roles as independent free thinkers and innovators. Only agencies with extensive research capacities have been able to maintain the rage. Likewise, governance, occupational health and safety issues, risk management, past poor practice and growing community awareness and demands have placed enormous demands on service providers, with virtually no recognition of the need for risk capital investment for infrastructure and the agency's primary goals. There is a latent power however in the sector which I believe needs to be restored and rediscovered. Let me elaborate a little.

In determining the future of any Community Service Organisation the following needs to be addressed:

- An approach which thinks beyond the current context - we must recognise, assess, evaluate and respond in ways which are authentic to our mission and traditions, modifying and rethinking practice which has failed to deliver outcomes argued for and expected. Evaluation should include both imperical data and the less tangible.
- A recognition of both the strengths and weaknesses of the sector, asking ourselves as faith based agencies with a bias towards services for the poor and dispossessed how such an agenda relates to services which could be provided by more appropriate bodies.
- Building resilience regardless of the government and whichever political party is in power. This involves sourcing human and financial resources other than through government and traditional labour markets.
- A commitment and action to a preferred future. We need a vision as a network and as agencies which affirms our values and hopes for a truly just community
- Testing goals and objectives against mission.

- Establishment of an agenda which from time to time may be different from government, not politically correct and true to our role as innovators.
- Recognising that fairness is about justice and about the delivery of the highest minimum standards possible for all.
- It is about a preference for the poor and disadvantaged and it involves a struggle with an amoral market ideology and definitions of welfare which are not about wellbeing but which create categories of deserving and undeserving. It involves finding ways of embracing risks into our activities and in programs designed to shape communities. A number of agencies both in and outside our membership have drifted from their early beginnings and mission and a rediscovery of their role may in itself be a challenge.

Throughout this Conference I would like you to consider therefore these questions: How does the Anglicare network remain committed and faithful to its mission if its prime funding, 80% or more, is received from Governments? A second question that arises: What does an individual agency value add to Government programs to address this mission? How do we ourselves differ from others in affirming our mission and value base? What makes us different from another agency?

It is an understatement to say that Australia like many other parts of the world is experiencing rapid and constant change. However, one may evaluate this change, the human spirit remains alive, although where we may be heading appears less clear.

In my visit to South Africa last year and engaging with staff helping children and families to survive in conditions of immense poverty, risk and danger, without the protection of industrial awards, program standards and professional requirements, I was overwhelmed by the tenacity and resilience seen in staff and clients as they sought to overcome great trauma and tragedy. Passion for their work was an overwhelming attitude. I like to understand the community service, and in particular our member agencies, as more than just service providers but rather as I have said previously, extolling the virtues and strengths of the human spirit as a "vibrant, vigorous and prophetic" voice and advocating for our client groups; where the principles of restorative justice, compassion, mercy, forgiveness and hope remain as core values and indicators and outcomes of our work – expressed not only in best practice, but in our relationships with each other and in being a voice with the voiceless. Such an approach draws its inspiration from scriptures and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who walked amongst the poor and disadvantaged of his time, sharing the good news of God's love and dream for the creation. A passion for our work has always been strong, and whatever language or ecclesiology we may use, this inspiration should remain as central to our being and presence as agencies.

There are signs of a reawakening of the Australian conscience with the election of a Labor Federal Government - Kyoto, the stolen generation, treatment of asylum seekers, social inclusion - to name a few, although at the State level there appears some emerging and concerning signs. Being the agency I have just described is not without its risk. When we do not achieve, or fail to deliver, our reputation is at risk and in today's competitive environment, even in our sector, there are those waiting in the winds.

Professor Dorothy Scott in a paper she gave at an Anglicare Victoria conference two years ago reminded us that as an agency with a strong faith tradition, compassion and hope were at the centre of our work, "whether it is toward the outer world of social justice or to the inner world of personal pain." It is this two prong response which I suggest to you is at the heart and soul of our work together as a network and as part of the Community Sector. It is a high expectation and calling, readily challenged by the current climate, which Hugh Mackay and others describe as one of "fear and anxiety" and the dominance of uncontrolled market

ideology. Those already experiencing disadvantage require from us validation, incentives, encouragement, perseverance, creativity and resources. These are all tall expectations. Opportunities for employment, education, housing and health are key building blocks alongside personal values and skills for the development of healthy individuals and for the building of communities. Communities and households where hope has been abandoned or is not present, are on a path of destruction and despair. The question to ask however, is will attention to structures alone be sufficient?

The research and the practice wisdom of agencies such as to be found in the broad Community Sector and in our network, suggest that the nurture and formation of individuals and families requires more. It requires a belief in the value of each child, young person and family and their right to justice and equity. Just as the issue of culture and identity face many indigenous people, so the same issues face many other Australians today including the homeless, those with a mental illness, victims and perpetrators of abuse and neglect, and the abandoned. Structural inequalities, deprivation, domestic violence and child abuse and neglect are all signs of something amiss at a deeper level, namely cultural isolation, poor self esteem, anxiety about meaning and purpose, a loss of spiritual engagement (and I am not talking here only about religious affiliation or institutions alone) and a breakdown in trust, resilience and compassion. Recent concerns about alcohol and drug abuse, the growing demand for mental health services, the increasing numbers entering the child protection system are all indicators of unease, despite the incredible wealth of this country. They are signs that many Australians continue to struggle in the post modern community in which we live. The future for these same people may be more traumatic and demoralising unless the awakening I spoke about earlier gains momentum across the nation.

Here I am reminded again of the question that Alice asked the White Rabbit in "Alice in Wonderland":

"Which way do I go to get out of here?" The White Rabbit replied, "That depends". "Depends on what?" said Alice. "Depends which way you want to go." replied the White Rabbit.

In conclusion I want to suggest to you today that our way forward is to be a vibrant and prophetic part of the reawakening of the Australian community, an exemplar of vision, hope and a "hands on" approach. "Without a vision the people perish" said the ancient sage. Jesus calls us to the Building of God's Kingdom. It remains as true today as then.

The recent apology to our indigenous brothers and sisters is a promise of hope. The services and programs offered by the Anglicare network and often in partnership with others, likewise, should be a source of hope. Service provision alone however cannot deliver hope, without a belief in the capacity of each individual to move forward, and a commitment to share the bounty of the nation. This involves more than program designs, purchaser/provider contracts and written inspirational statements. Rather, it is about embodiment, vision, compassion, resourcing and naming those aspects of our community life which disempower and diminish the capacity of many Australians to reach their potential. It is about cultural identity, vision, and meaning. It is also about respect for the different, the dissident and the difficult. It is about moving beyond tolerance alone and to recognise our neighbour in the other – our common humanity.

Our gathering over the next two days is about choosing the way forward, of Anglicare's role in the broader community sector and in influencing Civil Society. I believe there is much creative thinking to do about these tasks and the need for us to remember our primary mission. It is a journey and I invite you to offer your thoughts on the way forward.

In his inaugural speech as President of South Africa in 1994 Nelson Mandela spoke these words. Let me leave them with you.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, "who are I to be brilliant?"

Actually who are you Not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It is not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

I challenge us all to imagine what we could be.

Ray Cleary
August 2008