



ourcommunity.com.au



Imagine the Leaders we Need and Deserve

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 7th June 2005

Fiona Smith

Chair, Equal Opportunity Commission

*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to
the
2005 Communities in Control conference
convened by Our Community and Centacare Catholic Family Services.

What does a leader need?

I want to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we meet on today – the people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to their elders and their customs as well as acknowledge other indigenous elders here today.

I am here today to talk about the leaders we should have.

And unfortunately one of the leaders we should have – the brave and courageous Justice Michael Kirby -- isn't here today. Only a heart attack could have kept him away from a roomful of community leaders, but as it happens he had an emergency triple bypass two weeks ago. I'm sure we all wish him well.

While you would have drawn inspiration from Justice Kirby, who I think is one of our great intellectuals and community advocates, I can guarantee one thing. He would have stood here and drawn more inspiration from you. He would have drawn strength from the spirit and resolve in this room that is typical of grassroots community leadership.

So before I start today I want to do something that we don't do enough. I want to send a heartfelt thank you to all the community leaders here before me. I look around this room and I see many people that I have worked with over the years and who have provided the solidarity, the support, and the inspiration to me in my work in seeking fairness and equality in what we do and in particular, seeking rights for Australians with disabilities

But I also see many familiar faces of people that I have seen in the frontline of other community battles over the years, advocating for their own communities.

I am not sure that if you polled 1000 Australians or asked the media to develop a list of great leaders whether they would automatically name or nominate many of the people in this room.

But I would.

Fiona Smith speech, Communities in Control conference, June 2005.

Visit www.ourcommunity.com.au for more information.

When people think about the leaders who have changed Australia in so many different ways, they wouldn't necessarily highlight the actions of people in this room.

But I would.

Society changes because people are prepared to push for change. Because people have the courage to call for change. Because leaders make it happen.

So I want you all to stand. Please. Don't mind me if I remain seated, but I want you to stand and I want you to pay tribute to all the people in this room who have - by their actions, by their advocacy and by their commitment - helped to change the community in which we live.

The thing about community leaders is they rarely seek the limelight and rarely seek or receive the recognition they deserve. But today you are among friends and among people who do respect and appreciate the work you do.

While we will talk about leadership and what makes great community leaders let's start by giving the community leaders here a much-needed and much-deserved tribute. So I would now ask you to give yourselves and the people next to you, in front of you and behind you a standing ovation. Give them the due they deserve.

Thank you.

In thinking about this speech I kept coming back to community leadership and the silent, often unrecognised dedication that is the life of the community leader. I also think of the many people who helped to pave the way for me to be sitting in a wheelchair in front of almost 1500 people talking about leadership.

Does it strike any of you as strange that a forty-six year old woman in a wheelchair is sitting up here talking about leadership? How can I be considered a leader alongside a John F Kennedy or a John Winston Howard?

And the truth is that forty years ago when Donald Horne wrote “The Lucky Country” I would never have been asked to muse about leadership. Forty years ago, leaders were white, middle-aged and upper class anglo heterosexual men; many of whom were members of the Melbourne Club.

Much has changed. We must be optimistic that community leadership can shape a better future when we consider that forty years ago:

- married women could not be employed in the public service;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians were not considered as human beings under our constitution;
- we had a white Australia policy;
- ‘human rights’ and “people with disabilities” never appeared in the same sentence; and
- lesbian and gay men dared not speak of the life and love they shared.

These things changed because community leaders and their followers dared to believe in the beauty of their dreams. Being clear now about what we need in our community leaders will help us achieve change without waiting another forty years!

Although leadership is one of the popular topics of our time, it often gets confused with being charismatic or strategic, for having an eye for a serendipitous chance, or for making money.

This is a false image, and a dangerous one.

To me, community is about belonging, culture and memory. So today, I want all of us in this room to celebrate some people who have provided leadership in shaping who our community considers belongs, what our culture is and who help us see what true community leadership is.

Heart, courage and brains

Even today, textbooks and leadership courses adhere to the criteria for leadership set forty years ago, saying that leaders need vision, drive and dedication.

I'd say that even if we get vision, drive and dedication, we still need to ask what is the purpose of leadership, because it could be leadership for anything, good or bad.

As well as all these attributes, community leaders need a heart, courage, and a brain; the gifts of the Wizard of Oz.

Heart

The Tin Man, machine like and incapable of love, had to find a heart in order to become a leader. For community leadership, we need hearts. We need hearts to care, to empathise, to feel injustice, and to be passionate about righting wrongs.

We need new community leaders with the hearts of those great indigenous leaders who refused to endure the wrenching injustice of their people's dispossession, discrimination, and abuse. They saw their people demoralised, marginalised, ill-housed, ill-fed, and uneducated, with soaring deathrates and high substance abuse, and still they managed to move heaven and earth to force white Australia to forget about soothing the pillow of a dying race and to come to terms with the rights of the owners of the land.

Let us celebrate those who fought so hard to keep the issue of indigenous rights from being consigned to the memory hole; community leaders from the past such as Jack Patten, Charlie Perkins, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Eddie Mabo, Doug Nicholls, and many, many others.

Courage

The Lion had to find courage. Courage is a critical aspect of community leadership. We need, now more than ever, the courage shown by Walter Lippman, Jim Gobbo and Petro Georgio in the struggle to recognise the worth of multiculturalism in a culture that

arrogantly proclaimed the superiority of Anglo Celtic values and saw the rest of the world through contemptuous stereotypes.

We should applaud, too, the courage that Petro Georgio is now showing once more in his refusal to allow the issue of refugees to be swept under the carpet yet again.

Petro's example poses the question for us:

How do you balance a general commitment to the aims of an organisation that you do not wish to see harmed or diminished, with a particular disagreement on a specific issue?

Brains

The straw man had to find brains, and this is a third critical aspect of community leadership – the brains shown by Anne McDonald and Rosemary Crossley, tirelessly writing and agitating to turn one case of freeing a person with a disability from St. Nicholas Hospital in Carlton into a movement that could shut down that institution, give guidelines for state-wide deinstitutionalisation, and point to the vital importance of giving people with disabilities the resources and support necessary for them to be able to make their voices heard.

Who can believe now that in our lifetimes children were starved to death five minute's walk from Victoria's Parliament House?

We need now this kind of intelligence, able to find new takes on tired old problems, able to imagine risky lateral moves around entrenched institutionalised stumbling blocks.

Heartless, cowardly, brainless

Whilst there are some shining exceptions such as the Victorian Attorney General's current consultation on the possibility of a human rights charter for this State, we in Australia now appear to have hearts that can grieve openly for an Australian on drug charges but seem impervious to indigenous Australians asking for substantive justice or the pleas of Afghans on Nauru.

Do we really want our politicians to have to prove their hard heartedness to be taken seriously?

Without empathy there is no justice and no capacity to realise human rights.

Leaders need followers- the others

While I believe strongly that all leaders, not just community leaders, need a heart, courage and a brain, they're not the only essentials of leadership.

The other aspect of leadership that leaders absolutely can't do without is followers.

Without other people, there is no leadership. Leadership is not a set of qualities in any individual. Unlike such things as keen eyesight or a nose for wine, leadership doesn't actually reside in a person or title. Leadership must be earned and it's something that goes on between people.

Please, let me also assure you, speaking today about leadership and stringing some clever words together about what it is and is not, certainly does not make me a leader.

Leadership is relationships

It seems to me leadership exists only in relationships, and only in the imagination and perceptions of that group of "followers." No matter how charismatic someone may be, there's no leadership unless a group of people are influenced to act. Because leaders need the group, in that sense, leadership is a relationship of equals.

Mobilising, luring, cajoling, coaxing the group, leaders have to offer their followers participation and fulfilment.

I've seen great grassroots leaders create good followers – a good group of autonomous volunteers who know and understand the goals of the community organisation or of the campaign that's being fought.

As I suggested earlier, being a leader you have to have courage, and you especially have to be prepared to be unpopular with a lot of people but if you're not popular with somebody, you've got no followers, and what kind of a leader is that?

Leadership is giving it away

A leader not only has to have courage but they must also strive to give it to others.

Although Justice Michael Kirby cannot be with us, I'd still like to testify to his immense courage; a courage that builds courage in others. Listen to his speech at the opening ceremony of the Gay Olympics;

Little did my partner Johan and I think, 30 years ago, as we danced the night away at the Purple Onion, less than a mile away, that we would be at the opening of a Gay Games with the Queen's representative and so many to bear witness to such a social revolution. If an angel had tapped us on our youthful shoulders and told us of such a change we would have said "impossible". Well, nothing is impossible to the human spirit.

Paradoxically, courage, brains and heart, as well as insight, and drive, and motivation; all the things that go to making up leadership can only be sustained if you first help ignite it in others.

Leadership is a joint vision

But driven or not, leadership is about sharing in the creation of a vision. We need leaders to expand our sense of what is within reach and possible to control beyond ourselves.

This involves leaders earning the group's trust, but leaders also have to generate the group's trust in each other, and especially in themselves – each and every member.

I've seen community leaders create an inclusive organisation by changing the culture to extend the borders of trust over the fault lines of old ignorance and old antagonisms. I've seen poor leaders retreat to the convenience of the old ways and the old target groups.

This leads me to the hardest leadership issue of all. Successful leadership recruits good people who can ultimately take over the leader position. The hardest aspect of leadership is being able to roll over, to move on, to let the next generation of leaders in.

How many chairs of community groups or artistic directors, or coordinators stay for decades with the hoary old plea, “We can’t get new blood.” This is what I call constipated leadership, leadership that won’t let anyone else have a go – and in itself this is negative leadership.

It’s leadership for the here and now. It’s leadership for today with no consideration of the needs for tomorrow.

Leaders can be monsters and create monstrously passive followers

With all this romanticizing about leadership, it is also important for us to recognize that leaders can also be monsters – and that many are. Now I don’t want you to look strangely at the people you were congratulating a minute or two ago, but let’s be realistic – not all leaders are great leaders.

There are leaders throughout history and many today, in public as well as community life, who are intemperate, lacking in self-control - where their misuse of power widens rather than heals rifts.

This is because leadership isn’t a solution. And where leadership becomes corrupt it’s invariably because the group or the population at large is prepared to sit back and leave things to the leaders.

Negative leaders require passive groups who are locked into the fantasy of rescue, projecting on to their leader the wisdom, the solutions, the creativity, the responsibility they seek.

This is where the group gives up its own leadership – it gives up its brains, courage, and heart, and hands over every sense of what’s right in return for the false safety of falling in behind a charismatic, comforting, sometimes matriarchal but often patriarchal leader.

Leadership for Values

Yes, leadership is a highly lauded quality. Everyone wants a bit of it. They want to spot the leader, or to build leadership. I'm told there are 140 leadership courses listed on the Our Community Leadership Centre website directory.

But in this stage of our history, the word leadership of itself does not necessarily denote values. It is worth reminding ourselves that Hitler was certainly a leader.

By and large, leadership courses are teaching skills not values.

The word VALUES doesn't seem to appear in course outlines to draw out qualities of empathy, tolerance, sensitivity or kindness. None mention courage to be unpopular and swim against the tide – and very few courses talk about the need for the heart to stick up for fairness and justice. Few talk about the brains to be a risk-taker, to think up completely new approaches in tackling social issues.

We can't allow the term leadership to become a value-free vacuum. It's too slippery a slope.

We need to regard community leaders standing up for communities, for human rights and social justice with respect and not with suspicion.

The reason that you are leaders in community; the reason that you're pushing your ideas forward everywhere, is that you believe things have to change. You see a lack, an injustice, a need. And you see, at least in a glass darkly, a way of groping forward.

The whole group ownership of leadership

And then it's essential that others are drawn in. Leaders have to offer people incentives – not just encouragement but new skills, greater autonomy – and especially a sense of control, belonging and hope.

Community groups exist not only to address a problem or a need in the community; they exist also to allow their members to have some ownership over the solution. So leadership in community ensures that community members are a part of the solution, rather than having a solution imposed on them – this is leadership. This is communities in control.

So lets ask, does leadership in community groups go some way to giving us a sense of control sufficient to empower us? This is community leadership that makes a major contribution to the members not just the issue.

This is why the leaders we should have need to facilitate the opportunity to accomplish as a group, all together, as this is what inspires people to give their best.

This requires leadership that shows genuine respect for others, and most important of all; values and practices inclusion. This is leadership that generates a genuine sense of belonging.

The neighbourhood house example of leadership

And where has leadership led to a place where we should be able to find a genuine sense of belonging? In the fantastic community houses or neighbourhood houses started by inspired leaders like Gwen Wesson and Phil Slattery.

These leaders and other like them used their brain, their courage and their hearts to create the model of the community or neighbourhood houses to provide a genuine place for inclusion of everybody.

In the seventies, when the neighbourhood house women leaders started the first houses, the focus was on women, who were at the time excluded from education and job opportunities. They were isolated, lonely and often quietly going mad alone at home.

The houses provided a place for everyone, whatever their background, disability, or ethnicity, to come for a home away from home -- a place for the house members to gain confidence, to learn new skills, and most importantly to have a sense of belonging, control, and hope that so that they could find their own internal leadership – their own pace in the sun.

Fiona Smith speech, Communities in Control conference, June 2005.

Visit www.ourcommunity.com.au for more information.

The best of the neighbourhood or community houses provide great examples of the group as the leader. Nonetheless, Gwen and Phil's charismatic leadership should still be acknowledged, because this persuasive, tirelessly struggling leadership was absolutely required to get the community house movement going in Australia.

The disability rights example of leadership

So let's honour some more of our community leaders.

I'd like to acknowledge two areas where leadership started major movements,

One example of fantastic leadership was the start of the disability rights movement in the late seventies - leadership by a group of people with disabilities who decided to aggressively pursue a human rights agenda and pull down institutional walls and mindsets.

I'd like to pay credit to the core group from the seventies that Rhonda Galbally acknowledges in her book, *Just Passions* – Geoff Bell, Roger Melnyk, Vicki Aitken, Hal Fitzpatrick and Rob McNamara. For the origin of the disability rights movement, the group was the leader. It ran as a collective - the same collective structure that had been used by the women's movement. Of course informal leadership emerged, but unlike most other movements there were no cruel purges, no feuds or covert undercutting. In fact, I agree with Rhonda's analysis - the disability rights movement's early decade had an amazing generosity of spirit.

The self-help movement example of leadership

A second example of heart, courage and brains leadership was in putting the Australian self-help movement on the map. Jenny Florence created an extraordinary network of self-help groups, all sharing the goal of giving people a major say over their own lives.

Jenny set up the Collective of Self-Help Groups. The Collective was the network where the Seahorse Club united with Friends of the Earth, the Council for the Single Mother and Her Child, Parents Without Partners, the Unemployed Worker's Union, Community Childcare, the Residential Tenant's Union and the Disability Resource Centre. They all came together in, again, an example of the power of

leadership to form a strong group – or, in this case, a network of groups.

These pioneers changed the direction of the hierarchy. Before, the community agency delivering services was the expert. They had the goods, the services and the wisdom, and the user was only the passive recipient. The power was with the giver, and the receiver was inevitably weakened.

Now that has changed – or, at least, the rhetoric around empowerment has changed.

What I do know is that the culture and organisation of the community service agency will reflect its real intention regarding empowerment. How many consumers are on the Board of most community service agencies? If consumers aren't on Boards, how do the service agencies know what an empowering service looks like? Feels like? Is?

How many disadvantaged people – take indigenous Australians and people with disabilities as an example - are employed by the community service agency? Have they developed a positive discrimination employment strategy? Do you know a community service agency that has done this? This would be tangible empowerment or putting your money where your rhetoric of empowerment is.

This self-help network fought together for community-managed community health centres, public transport, electricity concessions, public housing, community child care, and adequate unemployment, disability and single parent benefits, and for law reform that ranged from anti-discrimination legislation to class actions for people locked away in institutions.

Any particular victory was won by a combination of different (and usually oddly matched) groups.

New leadership for twenty-first century justice

Now let's fast-forward from the seventies to the year 2005. We have to move on. We mustn't stick to leadership that clings nostalgically to what succeeded in the past. We've got to invent new approaches to the same issues that still beset us today. And we sorely need leadership.

Australia is in an era of enormous change and transition. Australians – or at least white Australians – are living longer, getting richer, moving to the cities, having smaller families, living further from their work and working over 220 hours a year or five weeks longer than the average worker of other OECD countries.

Church, family, gender roles, and the nation-state -- these are now all in a constant state of transition, and they have been inextricably weakened. Fewer Australians go to church than ever before. Fewer belong to political parties, or unions. More live alone. More work for money and work many more hours. All this diminishes communities as well as provokes anxiety.

There are things that we all know must come – the republic is the smallest of them, reconciliation perhaps the most important – but that have been put on hold for no good reason until no known season.

It seems we have been put to sleep like the staff in Sleeping Beauty's castle, waiting until our betters start the clock going again?

These are, however, challenging times. The women's movement, gay rights, people with disabilities fight to be included, and the rights of people whose race or religion might be different from our own - so many movements are coping with increasingly powerful attacks from entrenched forces that we thought we had wiped off the field of debate decades ago.

In the community sector itself, a push to update the meaning of 'charity' for tax purposes has dissolved, leaving only a vague threat against organisations that engage in uncharitable activities such as advocacy.

Many of the larger not-for-profit organisations voices have gone to mute as service contracts with government lessen their ability to speak freely on injustice.

Leadership on the issues

Looking back at the large issues, we find that not only are the struggles of previous generations incomplete but even those achievements we celebrated are under threat.

In Indigenous affairs we have systematically destroyed all bodies that could stand between the community and the power of the government. Each community is now required to negotiate its own workplace agreement with the Department, trading a curfew for a petrol pump. Who could blame anybody for losing heart?

In multiculturalism, the old stereotypes of the threat from Asia have been re-embodied in new forms, but the old bigotry has flared again .

The words “a courageous decision” now evoke not the memory of Eddie Mabo but of Jim Hacker from Yes Minister fame –

"Humphrey, I just want to make absolutely sure you're not asking me to make a courageous decision."

In disability rights, we have reached a stage where there are now rights for those who have the resources to contest them, but where the principles of inclusion and autonomy for all struggle for recognition.

In the film The Wizard of Oz, you may remember, the Wizard sidesteps the difficulties of bringing about brains and courage and heart. For the Scarecrow, he says

Back where I come from we have universities, seats of great learning -- where men go to become great thinkers -- and with no more brains than you have.... But! They have one thing you haven't got! A degree!

For the Cowardly Lion, he has

Back where I come from, we have men who are called heroes. Once a year, they take their courage out of mothballs and parade it down the main street of the city. And they have no more courage than you have. But! They have one thing that you haven't got! A medal!

To the Tin Man he gives

Back where I come from there are men who do nothing all day but good deeds. They are called philanthropists. And their hearts are no bigger than yours. But! They have one thing you haven't got! A knighthood!

All three are paid off in false coin.

Conclusion

So, now more than ever we need leaders with courage to lead from the front, being first out of the trenches, attracting the flak away from the ones following.

We need leaders who show by their own attitudes and actions how everyone else should behave.

We need leaders with the heart to make an unswerving commitment to keep people going through the darker times, when some will question whether the vision can ever be achieved.

On the other hand, we do not need leaders that allow the bright unswerving light of their vision to blind them to the oncoming train. That's where we need leaders with the brains to move seamlessly from the transcendent vision to harsh realism.

If ever there is a time for a renewal of leadership with values it is now. Values really matter. We all need to develop personal and organisational action plans to ensure community leadership takes back the fight for values. I'll leave you with Lowitja O'Donohue's 10 Tips for Human Rights Action to assist in this quest.

Sir Gustav Nossal, speaking at the first Community in Control conference, challenged community leaders to continue to speak out, to lead, to convince and to serve.

As he said:

There is still enormous inequality, there is still residual intolerance, there are still challenges that need to be overcome, and Australia will be the worse for it if we allow them to remain.

Who can look back and see some of the changes that we have already been through – in disability issues, in indigenous issues, in gender issues -- and say that the pain wasn't worth it?

So lead, follow, or get out of the way. Those who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it.

Don't be discouraged. Don't be dismayed.

Do stay strong. Do continue to lead.

We need you.