



“LEADERSHIP – HOW AND WHERE DOES IT EXPAND COMMUNITY CONTROL?”

ADDRESS BY SIR GUSTAV NOSSAL
COMMUNITIES IN CONTROL CONFERENCE
1 PM, APRIL 7, 2003
MOONEE VALLEY RACING CLUB
MEMBERS ENTRANCE
MACPHERSON ST
MOONEE PONDS

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

THANK YOU

Before I start I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people and pay my respects to their elders and indeed any other elders among us and remind everyone that we are having this important meeting on their traditional lands.

Rhonda has made me quite sentimental. Between 1988 and 1997 when I was foundation chairman and she was Foundation CEO of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation we had many great gatherings – we were sort of a cox and box outfit during that time. It is a terrific honour to be here today and to see so many people here who have demonstrated such an interest in the health and wellbeing of their communities.

Where would we be as a nation without this sort of enthusiasm and support for communities? And where would we be without so many of the community leaders who sit before us today?

I do want to pay tribute to my good friend, Rhonda Galbally, the CEO of our community and Fr Joe Caddy of Catholic Social Services for demonstrating strong and effective leadership in convening this conference. And to Carol Schwartz as its chair and also my colleagues, Emeritus Professor Len Syme and Professor Lisa Berkman and Professor Fiona Stanley – what eminent leaders we have among us.

I am pleased at the title of the conference - Communities in Control because of this huge sense of empowerment that the word conveys. I am pleased at the title you have given me which is leadership for the health and wellbeing of community because I have given thought to that for virtually my entire working life. With 30 years as Director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research and I think for most of that time I realised that Director of Medical Research Institute was an oxymoron. Can you direct someone to be creative? Can you direct someone to make a discovery? Of course the answer is no, all you can do is create the boundary conditions in which creative people can

flourish and create an atmosphere where people can go forward and make discoveries.

In those years of working with Rhonda at VicHealth I saw her exercising a brand of leadership that resonated with my own personality to a significant degree. What did Rhonda do at VicHealth? She created networks, she brought people together, she knocked heads together, she brought people who might never have met one another and she empowered these groups to do their own thing. That's the kind of leadership I approve of.

Now Communities in Control. The reality is that sometimes community leaders don't feel in control – in fact they can feel as though they are the voice in the wilderness trying to get an important message across when often the audience either doesn't want to listen or isn't ready to listen. Or hears only enough of the message to be able to attack both the theme and the people espousing it.

So yes, community Leadership is often about getting back up after being knocked down - about spreading a message that nobody at the time wants to hear. It's often about taking the wider community out of its comfort zone and forcing it to confront issues that it would rather not.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the field of HIV-AIDS. Now that I am devoting most of my energies to developing country health where HIV-Aids is the number one problem, I see first hand the very, very worst aspect of it being the denial that so many Governments and so many people have with the problem.

Taking the wider community out of its comfort zone, who wants to talk about condoms? Who wants to talk about safe sex? Who wants to talk about abstinence? When, in point of fact, it is only by behaviour change that we have any chance of getting on top of this dreadful pandemic. The communities are not in control and their leaders are not empowering them and the community is not being taken out of its comfort zone.

To do all that, community leaders need to be well-equipped. And what do they need? They need vision, dedication, drive, and a sense of humour.

They also need passion and the power emanated by someone who is passionate to the cause is enormous. I don't mean the zealot – I certainly don't mean a person who will not be moved from their own view of the world and can understand little of anyone else's. I know that kind of leader and that kind of leader is not going to be successful in an area such as medical research because you are often going to be proved wrong and if you can't roll with the punches then you are not going to progress. What I am talking of the passion and the power of someone who can generate a vision –of how Australia should be today and importantly of how Australia should be tomorrow.

Leaders also need a support base. The reason Community Leaders have an audience is that they represent a group of people, whether it is a dozen sufferers of a genetic disorder, whether it is an indigenous community in trouble, thousands of sporting groups, land care groups, neighbourhood houses or a collective of artists - whoever.

Any group is only as good as the staff that is servicing and the staff is only as good as the community of interest being served – that's what I mean by a support base. In this sense, leadership is about giving voice to people's concerns, their fears and their needs. Not someone else telling them what concerns them. Listening and hearing their concerns and what makes them afraid and what they need, but taking up their voice and propelling it onto a larger stage. That's leadership.

I deliberately won't talk of leaders and followers because one of the biggest responsibilities of community leaders is to spawn an army of other NOW empowered potential community leaders who are prepared to take up the baton. Otherwise the gains dissipate quickly if the leader is strong but the movement is weak.

It makes me think of the women's movement. I was lucky enough to be married for 48 years to a feminist in the best sense of the word so I have been hearing about the women's movement for 48 years. Look at how the gains have come

– not just through the work of a clutch of leaders but because there have been tens of thousands of empowered would-be leaders at so many levels.

Today we have many women in the room who hold important roles in the Federal and State and local Government. Yet there was a time when women were forced to resign from the public service when they were married because they were expected to be supported by their husbands.

We laugh at such ridiculous thoughts today but without several generations of feminists prepared to take on the public battle and many more who took on leadership roles in individual workplaces, in the home, in schools and in every aspect of community, these gains simply wouldn't have come.

As well as change coming in big broad brush strokes, so it also comes in thousands of miniscule little additions and strokes. One stroke alone is meaningless. Only when stroke after stroke after stroke are added to the canvas does the bigger picture emerge. That's very like the painstaking little steps but with enough of those little steps, the big breakthrough does come.

That is not to say there is not substantial work still to be done but leadership is also about mentoring and about providing the opportunity and the resources for others to find their voice. I guess as I look back on my 30 years as Director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute it's the success of so many of the colleagues, so many of the post-doctoral fellows, so many of the post-graduate students which gives me the greatest satisfaction in my retirement.

Old people do get sentimental so let me tell you about my great mentor, Sir MacFarlane Burnet. I was a little 21-year-old medical student when I first met Sir Mac and took a year off to what they called a Batchelor of Medical Science which was really a way of finding a free lab for a full year and seeing if you liked the taste of the research lab. I remember coming from Sydney down to Melbourne and spending time at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute where then director, Sir Macfarlane Burnet, my great teacher and mentor, would have us sit

in on lunches with his colleagues from the CSIRO. We called them the “foot in mouth” lunches.

It was not just a case of sitting and listening as medical students are often expected to do for myself and my great mate Frank Johnson. Burnet showed his strong leadership by encouraging us to join in, to join in, express opinions and share in the discussion, not be a mere spectator. How incredibly empowering for two young student but, looking back, it was also an example of a leader who not only led by his own example but whose mind was focussed on encouraging others to take up the leadership baton and be an active participant and not a passive spectator.

I guess what I am also so grateful for to Burnet over those leadership years is that he never, ever, ever took credit for a discovery that was not his own. How different from today’s world.

Strong community leadership is about creating a healthy debate when people don’t realise there is any thing to argue over. It can be about causing ripples when people want a smooth pond. Sometimes it’s loud. Sometimes it’s heated and sometimes it makes the public feel uncomfortable, it makes policymakers feel uncomfortable and especially makes Governments feel uncomfortable.

So it’s all about engineering a debate where people are vehemently opposed to your message. But just by having the debate you have the opportunity to break down all the arguments until – in time – your position gets to be seen not as radical but as common sense and one that enjoys the support of a majority of people.

Len Syme and Lisa Berkman have shown courageous leadership in the public health area. They have dared to suggest that the medical approach alone cannot lead to success. They have dared to suggest that by showing that social factors – communities in control – actually make the enormous difference as to whether people stay off smokes, combat their alcoholism, stay off drugs, adopt safe sex practices, wear seat belts, attend mammography clinics. Being part of social networks is the best thing that can be done for the health of older people.

Things that seemed unimaginable at the time but now are commonplace – changes in the culture such as smoking. In my youth, everybody – 70% of us – smoked. Now we've driven them out of the buildings and they are not even allowed to smoke in the workplace and we have adult smoking rates down just below 20 per cent in Australia and that is a remarkable change. And we are in fact either at or very, very close to world leadership in this regards. All because community leaders were prepared to speak out when few among us recognised there even was a wider problem.

Think again of the enormous steps taken to overcome the discrimination against people living with a disability that would never have been taken without community leaders speaking out. And more importantly, it was about people with disability themselves wanting to be in control of their own destiny – the best example of a community in control model.

The disability movement in its time was considered a radical movement. There were protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations. Community leaders and people with disabilities forced decision-makers to confront the way in which the community's actions discriminated against them at a time when most were blinkered to the issues in the first place.

Now, children with disabilities go to mainstream schools, they are out and about in neighbourhoods, in restaurants, in pubs – in the public. These changes and many others have happened only because community leaders and the people who pursue a community in control model made it happen.

I want to pay another tribute to consider mental health a big part of mental health. Certainly when I was a youngster in medical school we hid mentally ill people away inside ghastly institutions and they were in no sense members of the community. At VicHealth we took many steps to improve the consciousness of mental health and one of the great things Rhonda did was to set up this adolescent health centre at the Royal Children's Hospital conjointly also with the Royal Melbourne Hospital where there was an outreach into the community. There was a dawning of an understanding of this strange concatenation

between depression, risky behaviour such as drug-taking and unsafe sex. The possibility of suicide, communities out of control and we reached out to these people and – hopefully, at least a few instances – were able to break that cycle and certainly able to bring these sorts of not quite as obvious mental health problems out into the open.

Of course there is still a fantastic amount to be done. But laws are now in existence ingraining principles which were once seen as radical and confronting. Bit by bit that leadership has helped, Governments have followed and individuals now understand the issue and the need for change.

It is the same with discrimination against ethnic groups in Australia. A lot of what was acceptable 50 years ago is no longer acceptable in this community. We celebrate different cultures and what they have to offer and much of that has been because of the work of our community leaders.

I arrived in this country just 64 years ago and at that time there were 6¾ million Australians – there were certainly some Chinese people and there were of course our wonderful indigenous population but really what there was were the Micks and the WASPs. The feeling between Catholic and Protestants were really quite strong, unfairly so, stupidly so and that is now thankfully well and truly behind us.

And of course the work is not finished. We only have to look at the treatment of refugees over the past couple of years and try to understand that there is much still to be done to convince Governments and communities that they deserve to be treated better. I have said before that I do understand the need of this country to protect its borders – I absolutely do but we have to guard against it too far. But when you are faced with a boatload of people you have extremes that need to be avoided. You need to avoid the extreme of extreme hardship and the extreme of total and compliant and unthinking compassion. I would just argue that the needle has spun far too far in the harshness direction.

These people deserve to be treated better. We need to remember that these people are human beings – men, women and children – who deserve to be treated humanely, fairly, with love and care.

And again it is our Community Leaders who are standing up to give voice to those that have none. It is the community leaders who are standing up – often at great personal loss – to pursue change. And to represent those who have no representation and to offer friendship and comfort to those that feel they have none.

Brian Walsh found me a lovely quote from George Bernard Shaw who once put it that ***"The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."*** I was reminded of Jesus Christ. Remember how Jesus Christ warned about being lukewarm. He didn't mind people being hot or cold but didn't like people being lukewarm.

Now pursuing the rights of refugees is not necessarily a popular pursuit. And to get to my earlier point, neither is being a community leader advocating for the rights of your constituency necessarily something popular. Sometimes good leadership is about having the courage to be unpopular in the belief that by bringing on the debate, it sheds light on the issue and out of that focus will flow a greater understanding.

Someone once said: "A real leader faces the music, even when he (or she) doesn't like the tune." The challenge for community leaders is to force us to play another tune. Unlike the tastes in music that change far too quickly for me to keep up with, changes in our community can take far longer.

Let's just think about our Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander population. On January 26, 1938, the first national conference of Aboriginal civil rights leaders was held in Sydney during the quote "celebrations" unquote of Australia's sesquicentenary – 150 years after Invasion Day as far as our Aboriginal colleagues are concerned. This conference helped to shape the future of Aboriginal affairs in this country.

Issues those representatives of the indigenous community identified included the return of stolen lands, citizens rights, Aboriginal representation in parliament, living conditions on the reserves, equal opportunity to employment and education, health, housing, recognition of Aboriginal law, the abolition of the Aborigines' Protection Board (established 1883), and revocation of the policy of the Stolen Generations.”

Think about it1938 Fast Forward to 1967 when at long last we had the referendum that gave Aboriginal people full citizenship rights in this country. And then fast forward again to 1997 (30 years after the referendum) to the moving Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne and fast forward again to the year 2000, the last few months before the Centenary of Federation.

In year 2000 a million people voted with their feet in the Bridge walk to say what they thought about reconciliation.

Some change has come for our indigenous people but it has not come quickly – not quickly enough despite the strong leadership of those wonderful community leaders such as Jack Patten, Charlie Perkins, Oodgeroo Noonuccal [Kath Walker], Eddie Mabo, Faith Bamber, Doug Nicholls, Lowitja O'Donoghue, the Dodson brothers Michael and Patrick, Marcia Langton, Evelyn Scott, Jackie Huggins and how many, many others could we cite. Wonderful, wonderful community leaders.

And what have they said most consistently. The most consistent thing they have said is the involvement of communities themselves in the process of not only determining what is the best thing for their local communities but how it can best be put into practice.

If the communities don't have some “ownership” over the so-called solution, then it will fall down. I know that very well from my own work with global immunisation. Yes, it's true with the fantastic \$1.5 billion benefaction from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation we now have the means to immunise people

in the developing countries. But it cannot be done and cannot have sustainability except through a partnership with the communities themselves. For the communities themselves to see this as a health priority is the best way. Then they become part of the solution. Then comes the sustainability.

We can go in and immunise children but what happens when you leave? What happens when you move to the next town or country? Unless the community has some control over the intervention, unless the community takes a leadership position, any change you bring in is cursory. Advocacy has to be part of the leadership because it is only with advocacy that people can be persuaded to enter into the partnerships that we need.

Community leaders at the time they are proposing important things are often considered to be the “ratbags”, the “whingers”, the “chardonnay socialists” or even, at times were given the awful sobriquet of being “un-Australian”. And think about how many people who once wore those derogatory titles 10 or 20 years ago are now regarded by us as Australian heroes and heroines?

And think of the effects they have had. Australia has changed incredibly in the 64 years I have been here. And, unlike the doomsayers, the sky has not yet fallen.

- The sky didn't fall in when we decided that discrimination was something that should be opposed.
- The sky didn't fall in when the women's movement showed that equality was a basic concept we all should embrace.
- The sky didn't fall in when we eventually and belatedly gave our indigenous people the right to vote.
- The sky didn't fall in when we demanded a greater respect for those people from other cultures.
- It didn't fall in when we demanded that communities have a greater say in the way they lived.

And the sky won't fall in with many of the other challenges that will come as YOU community leaders face the challenges of the future and pursue your dreams.

Much of what passes for angry and divisive debate now and creates controversies that tickle the fancy of lay commentators on all sides will in a few years come to look like orthodoxy and common sense to our children and grandchildren.

Future generations will look back at many of the issues that we face today at and say what the hell was the fuss about. That is the result of community leadership - the ability to not only bring about change (or sometimes to ensure things don't change) but to then – over time – bring acceptance of those changes.

We need leadership that inspires people to action, inspires people to think. The last thing we want is a society where people who have the courage to lay ideas before us, who have the courage to lay different options before us are vilified, labelled or denigrated.

At a time of war and these dark days, it's so easy to denigrate groups. For Heaven's sake avoid that outcome. The worst outcome is to have a society where our leaders become timid, where our leaders don't say what they want to say or what they believe in but say only what is politically correct.

Good leadership is not about popularity. We may not support someone's point of view. We might be diametrically opposed but it is difficult not to at least have some respect for their courage in saying what they truly believe.

My challenge to all of you sitting here from the community sector – leaders, people committed to a vision, to a mission, to a cause is to continue to show that leadership. Continue to speak out. Continue to lead us. Continue to convince us why action must be taken. And continue to serve well those people who you represent.

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 that to remain.

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

Challenge us - Please challenge us as individuals, as groups, as businesses, as Governments and as a Society. Then – and only then – through the advocacy, hard work and determination of community leaders like those before me today can Australia continue to be a country we are proud to leave to our children and grandchildren.

Our Community is playing an important role, as ever it would with the likes of Rhonda pushing every button she can to force that change, and I do give her and Joe and the network who came together on this issue special credit for being at the vanguard yet again with the “communities in control” agenda.

Before I finish I would just like to recall an English proverb that says – and I quote: "A smooth sea never made a skilled mariner."

I think a strong community can also never be achieved without the challenge of overcoming a few waves.

As a society we rely on you – our community leaders – to negotiate the turmoil and the currents and steer us towards those calmer waters.

Thank you.

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