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# Reimagining the community sector

Presentation by

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## About the presentation

Community sector workers usually start with the best of intentions but are too often met by outdated systems and poorly conceived rules and laws that prevent them from achieving the best results. There is no denying the sector is in need of a serious shake-up, but what does reform on this scale look like?

## Robert Fitzgerald

It's a great joy and it's an enormous pleasure to actually be here today and to see you in person. I am aware of how long these conferences have been going. If we think today is about big ideas, I don't think there would have been one of those 18 conferences where the people attending didn't "think big". Because in a sense, being part of the community sector is always about seeing the big picture. But often acting in a small way and often acting very locally.

This morning, I want to firstly say thank you. I want to acknowledge all contribution to the well-being of Australia and its society. You created it, you shape it, you maintain it and into the future you will do the same because it is at a community level that nations are shaped. Not necessarily by their political leaders and not by great organisations. But at the end of the day, it's the way in which people seek to come together to share and to govern each other and you epitomise that.

The second thing is I want to obviously acknowledge the country that we are on; the elders both past and present. This morning we have seen an interesting reflection of a young Aboriginal man, Mitch Tambo, who's using his gifts and talents through music to spread the message of love, the voice of change, the voice of Indigenous people.

And of course, Jack Charles, who is well known to many of us, who as an elder within the community - as he said a self-proclaimed elder - a man of respect and of good repute is using his talents and skills in a way to actually empower Indigenous people, including those that are in prisons and in other circumstances that are obviously of some distress.

In a sense, both of them reflect what the community is all about. It's about individuals using their community, their own personalities, their own gifts, their own talents in a way to enhance the community. Today, we should just pause and think about one of the most important calls to Australia that we are receiving in relation to

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2



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Indigenous people and of course, it's the Uluru statement from the heart.

In that statement, they have an expression which says that the problems of the past and of the future are caught up in this particular expression called the torment of powerlessness. The torment of powerlessness, and if you think about that, what they are saying to us is that we can do all the services we like. We can do all of the supports we like for Indigenous communities and individuals but unless we fundamentally change the power imbalance that exists, unless we fundamentally allow Indigenous people to have power and control over their own lives and destiny, then nothing will change.

Surely that is the clearest call for communities to be in control. The very theme of this conference. As a nation, that's a huge issue, a big issue, and the truth of the matter is for those of us that have been around the Indigenous space for a long time, it is actually the truth. Unless we in fact change the power imbalances then very little will be achieved.

Are we ready for that? Are we as a nation ready for that? Are we as a community ready for that? If you want to think big, there is probably no bigger issue that confronts the future of Australia than that issue today.

Today's topic is about reform. I noticed a quote from David Crosby, the CEO of Community Council of Australia when he said, "reform does not come to those who wait". He went on to say we must get better at properly promoting our value - the value of the community sector.

In a sense, the last ten, twenty, thirty years have been nothing but reform in this sector. For those of you that are in VET, we've seen enormous changes where we moved from a few hundred TAFE colleges to over 5000 registered training organisations. Those in the university sector have seen extraordinary changes - not only related

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3



to the way in which they are funded but the very student make-up, particularly in relation to international students.

We've seen enormous reform in the aged care areas over time, and of course in the disability space the most significant reform of course was the NDIS. So, in fact, this is a sector that has had reform happening to it, with it, and around it for a long time.

But a question for me is which, if any, of these reforms have actually transformed our nation for the better? Could we seriously sit here as a nation and say that our reforms in relation to vocational education have left us with a more skilled empowered workforce, a trade workforce and a better and more sustainable system? Could any of us actually say that our university system today is better, providing greater education and in fact taking us down the path of a world leading educational nation? Could those of us say that the aged care reforms have actually delivered better quality care for older people within those institutions in recent times? Even NDIS - which is a truly remarkable piece of work - we continue to see many problems and issues in relation to those.

So, reform in and of itself is not really the issue. I think the issue today - and there are two I want to confront - the first is community organisations as agents of transformational change. Not reform but transformational change in the way we as a society and a community will exist into the future. The second is the transformational changes that need to take place to the sector itself over time. So, I think the agenda is well beyond what reforms we wish to seek but rather, whether or not we wish to use the very essence of what being community is to create a new future.

In many senses, COVID gives us the platform for doing that. Throughout history there are only a few things that bring about transformational change in societies. The first are wars, particularly world wars. Following each world war there have been transformational changes in this nation and many others. Great depressions that affect the whole of the world are another factor that gives rise to change. The third are substantial and catastrophic

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4



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national disasters. And now COVID. Many of you will have your own view as to what COVID has done to Australia but my take on it are four things.

The first is, for the first time in about two decades, Australia now understands that governments matter. For so long, we believed the governments didn't matter and the agenda of small governments - less significant governments - was certainly in play. But today we see as a nation, particularly at state level, the way at which state governments have to be able to read and respond to their various communities at a local level, particularly better than the Commonwealth has been able to do so. The fact that governments do matter, is important. The fact that governments matter in the lives of most vulnerable, is finally once again recognised as centrally important.

The second is that the notion of citizenship actually means something. How many of you in the last fourteen months have heard yourself being referred to as a consumer? A consumer of health services, a consumer of anything. No, for the first time in decades Australia has re-embraced the notion that the state and each other owes each other a responsibility because we are part of the collective, we are part of the society, we are part of a citizenship nation and that is something the community sector has long valued. But in terms of national agendas and others that has been lost to us.

The third point is really that communities matter. And you've already seen that today in the expressions by Uncle Jack today, about how community matters in his culture and the work that he's doing. But you and I have known that communities matter much more than simply the delivery of services and the supports we give but suddenly the nation saw it; older people, people with disabilities, people that were unable to leave their homes. We saw the extraordinary movement of neighbourhoods of local government, of community organisations, suddenly mattering. Not in a tangent way, but in a real and powerful manner. Why was it that we ever thought that communities didn't matter? Why was it that this

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5



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nation of ours, bright and intelligent though we are, actually thought that communities could be supplanted by something else?

The fourth is this real notion of connectedness. Really deep connectedness. Connectedness and connectivity. What we have learnt of course is the ability and the necessity for us to be connected. Connected to services, connected to each other, connected by new technology and to use technology in a way that empowers, not simply provides services.

In any sense, we are in a historic moment and the question is whether or not we are brave enough, clever enough to grab this moment or will we simply revert back to where we were? The general state of play in Australia after small recessions is that nothing changes, and we revert very quickly to back to where we were.

Indeed, the signs at the moment are not encouraging. The signs are that many in society want to go back to what we had, to where we were. Well, I don't. I want something better, something that is different and so do you because you wouldn't be here if you didn't. I do think we have the capacity to do that. But we can only have the capacity if we use those four elements; that of government, citizenship, the notion of community and the notion of connectivity, to really bring about those changes.

Let me just be the really practical one. In my current role, my role is about preventing and responding to the abuse of older people and the abuse of adults with disabilities in NSW. So, let me just say to you, what is our approach going to be in relation to reducing the abuse of older people? In our society, we know that Australia is aging, and we know that Victoria and every other state will have an increased level of aging population. I mean it will be an older population than traditionally the case. Many more people in their 80's, 90's and even over 100. What we've learnt through COVID - before that even - was how being connected in the community is critically important to the wellbeing of older people.

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6



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Well, what will that look like on the ground? I am at the pointy end where we are looking at abuse, neglect and exploitation and the greatest level of abuse takes place for older people between the ages of 75 years and 85 years of age, when three things occur: great frailty, increased dependency, and sometimes a loss of capacity.

Well how is it that we as a society respond to that? We know for sure it's not through the aged care system. The aged care system is about something very different and yet, we have an increasing number of people living next to you in your neighbourhoods, in your suburbs. So, what's the strategy to prevent those people being at risk? Or a much more positive attitude, how do we continue to ensure they have a meaningful life and important and significant life with our society. Do you think that's going to come from government? Well, I don't. Do you think it's going to come from business? Do you think the markets are going to in fact respond in some way magically to deal with that? Well, the answer's no.

The answer is you, me. Strangely enough it's churches as well. It's local government organisations. It's all those sorts of organisations that operate locally into which the answer is. So, what is that plan? How will you do that in your communities? How will you respond? That's going to be the challenge.

So, what's the greatest issue I think in terms of social policy is around the change of power imbalance for Indigenous people? The greatest public policy response in relation to the way in which our communities operate is our treatment of older people. It's not surprising therefore that these campaigns of anti-ageism are taking on, the campaigns against loneliness are starting to grow right across Australia. The issue of social isolation is real and has the governments attention of the present time, none of which gets solved by the aged care system. But it can be solved by us and you by doing it differently.

Let's just move back to the other point that I wanted to raise which is transformational change within the sector itself. The history of this sector - it's important to understand where it started. In 1813, the

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7



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Governor of NSW invited a group of Christian men - not a particular church - to create a house or a place for single parents. Girls or women having children. It wasn't for the poor; it was for middle class members of the colony who were in fact having these children out of wedlock. And that was the beginning of our very first charity, which is the Benevolent Society which today is still around, and I was privileged to be on the board of that 1813.

Since then, we have seen one of the most dynamic civil societies in the world. Australia is blessed by one of the most civilly-active groups we have. We've seen it take all iterations, particularly dominated by faith-based organisations in our early history, but growing and growing in terms of a more active civil society more generally.

The 1970's saw a flourishing of community activity. But a phenomenon in the 1970's was that very few of those movements lasted. They didn't have sustainability. The two that survived were the women's movement - particularly in relation to domestic violence and refuges for women who were being abused - and legal community centres. Beyond that, not a lot survived. But nevertheless, it was a demonstration of how we can bring the community together.

Since that time, we've seen very great changes to the sector brought about by some of the issues I have referred to. From the 1990's, we've seen competition becoming a mantra and a way of operation. We've seen outsourcing of government services, we've seen the marketisation of the human services endeavours. And in many senses, some would say we have seen a loss of voice of the sector. I wouldn't be one of those people, but I would certainly say that the message of community-initiated, community-operated organisations and movements has been less powerful in recent years.

So, where to from here? What is the shape of this particular sector going to look like? Now, it's not simply a matter of the reforms that we already know about. I was privileged to be one of the

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8





Commissioners on the inquiry into the contribution of the not-for-profit sector 10 years ago and many of you in this room were participants in that. And it set out an agenda of reform for the not-for-profit sector - whether you want to call it that or the third sector or the social purpose sector or whatever other term you want, or the social enterprise sector doesn't matter to me at all. And there were four or five components, and I won't go through those in detail other than to say they give us a guidance for the future.

Knowledge systems, which tell us about what the size of the sector is but more importantly what the impact of the sector is - since that report, we have seen a very substantial increase in trying to understand the genuine impact of the sector. The point that I would make is it is well beyond the services you deliver. The great value of the sector lies in what they call externalities or spill overs. That is things like social cohesion, the restoring of social trust, social engagement and the reduction of social isolation. Or as we've been talking about, connectedness.

Unfortunately, however, we've seen no new information data, surveys being done, about the economic and social strengths of the sector; a key recommendation of that report.

The second is about clearer governance and accountability within the sector. And indeed the ACNC - which was headed by Susan Pascoe, who's here today, and I had the privilege to be the first chair - is probably the most significant, not the only, but almost the only substantial change that's taken place in that regulatory framework and more needs to be done.

We recommended more effective sector development and the creation of intermediaries that could look at different ways of working with the workforce, in working with financing of the sector. Very little of that has occurred to date, but some has been occurring.

A fourth one and a critical one, which remains completely undone, is in fact an increase in the level of social investment within the sector itself. Today, we seem to have governments that are incapable of

9

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understanding the notion of social capital. Sure, we understand infrastructure, but social capital comes about through the support, the development, the entrenchment of organisations that work within those social sectors, including organisations such as yourself.

There has been some money in Victoria in relation to social enterprise capability bonds. Recently, in NSW, there has been the establishment of a social sector transformation fund. Yet tragically in the budget that was delivered last Tuesday, there was no additional support for the charitable or third sector at all. Despite all of the evidence that showed during COVID, it was that sector that stood the test of time, were there with the people, doing what the government wanted but most importantly, supporting our people in the way that they need it. So that was another one.

The last one was about building new relationships, particularly with governments. So, yes of course, we understand that there has been substantial changes in those relationships. The development of the NDIS for example is based on a fee-for-service base where the consumer has choice and control. That's a good model but there are many other areas of activity which don't lend themselves to those models. In that particular report, we looked at four or five different ways by which governments and the sector should engage with each other. One of those - just one of those - is about a relationship-based model which is trying to deal with what we call 'wicked problems'. Wicked problems are problems that are entrenched within in the community. In many senses, you never eliminate them. But you reduce them, and they don't require government funding in the way we operate today through contracts - rather a very different form of relationship building.

In many senses, we have seen some of that in some of the states, but it's been short lived. In Western Australia, there was a very strong move to change the way in which funding occurred following that report. And there certainly have been attempts in other states including Victoria to look at a different way of funding. In some states, we have seen different arrangements put in place in relation to certain types of services.

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10



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But fundamentally, the pathway for reform of the sector is clear. Indeed, there was a Zoom conference that looked at those particular recommendations 10 years on - that was held I think late last year or early this year. But do they really go far enough when we are talking about the sorts of issues we are here today? Do they really go to actually the transformational agenda that I think is needed, and is capable of being delivered?

So, let's just very briefly look at some of those barriers to it. One is the barrier to us embracing transformation at the moment. The first at the political level is the inability to believe that the community will accept big ideas. We seem to be beset by a political culture that has been embedded now for at least 10, 15 maybe 20 years, where they no longer believe it is possible to sell to the community big ideas and big reforms. The Commonwealth is littered with public servants, advisory bodies and politicians who no longer believe that it is possible to achieve substantial transformational reform. Are they right? Have Australians given up on the big ideas? Have Australians given up on the capacity to embrace reform? If they are right, we simply live in the mediocrity of incremental reforms and very small ones at that. Many of us in the room for a while gave in. We said okay, it's not possible to achieve big ideas. What we have to live with is reform by this process called incrementalism but you know it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if we do that. All we achieve is small things and half of those get wound out later on anyway.

So, have we been selling ourselves short and more importantly are we selling the Australian people short? Because right at the moment to get substantial reform through is very difficult. Reform is not just about more money. It is very pleasing in the budget there was more money for the aged care system. Increasingly important that NDIS is being supported to the level that is necessary and they're welcome. But are they reforms? Are they transformational? Well, perhaps they may be, but it's not just simply about more money.

The second is a market ideology. I'm not an opponent of markets or competition; I wouldn't have been with the productivity commission

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11



for 10 years had I been. Except to say, that we have to understand it's simply not about opening markets to any players. Rather we have to be very conscious about who's actually delivering it. I am very clear now in my mind that in the human services areas, markets should not be dominated by full-profit operations. They absolutely should be in the market, they absolutely have a role and many of them are outstanding performers. But what not-for-profit organisations give to society is so much more valuable and yet it is not acknowledged. All governments say, "we are neutral as to who provides the services - let the market decide. Our funding is neutral, we don't care whether it is for-profit or not-for-profit", or a variation of that. I am now convinced beyond a shadow of doubt that's not right. That we need in the human services area to be concerned about who delivers and how they deliver as well as the funding models.

Now again I want to be clear, this is not an attack on the for-profit sector. What it is saying is it's time to recognise that in the not-for-profit base, there is an additional contribution to the well-being of society that needs to be acknowledged. There is a reason why not-for-profits and for-profits operate differently within marketplaces and human services areas, and those differences are important to understand.

A third is our obsession with a focus on services. I go to the point that I made in relation to elder abuse. It is about getting good quality services to older people; good quality homecare, good quality access to social supports, good quality access to aged care. But at the end of the day, the very things that maintain the well-being of older people in their own homes and in their own environments are those issues of social connectedness. If you want to call them a service, fine, but they're not really. They're something very different and they need to be constructed and funded in a different way. It is pleasing in the Royal Commission's report on aged care that they acknowledge a particular way by which social supports should be delivered. In the NDIS there was also an acknowledgment of how that should be rolled out. Tragically, that has not worked well and the NDIS system in relation to social supports is well short of what

12

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people with disability both deserve and desire and well short of what a competent scheme should be able to deliver.

A fourth is 'big is better'. So, let's understand that there will be a great emergence of organisations in the human services areas. Health, aged care, early childhood development, disability. You will see the emergence of very large players and that's already occurring. Indeed, it is inevitable that it will occur. But what's been very clear - including by the findings in the Aged Care Royal Commission - is size doesn't mean better. In fact, the Commission in the Aged Care Royal Commission explicitly said that the poorer performers were the larger agencies, the bigger homes. Now, again, let's not rush to say that means we shouldn't have big players. But it means to say that that is where we will head. That doesn't mean however, that there's no role for smaller organisations to play more boutique roles, to be actually offering particular types of services both on a subcontract and other basis to larger organisations. But it would be fatal to those human service markets if they are dominated almost exclusively by large for-profits or not-for-profit organisations. They have a role, they will be with us and many of them are very good operators. But we do need to be very cautious about this notion that big is better, big is the only way that you achieve efficiencies. That is not true and it's a falsehood that is being propagated by far too many people who should know better.

The last point is our fear of innovation and funding that innovation. For some reason, we know that in business - and every other part of life - failure is part of success. It's almost a prerequisite. Trying things that don't work is important. The fellow that made the Dyson vacuum cleaner, he said what people don't understand is the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of prototypes that failed. Everyone looks at the vacuum and says it's a great success. He said if I didn't fail hundreds of times, you wouldn't have the success. We get to social services and we take this sort of risk-adverse approach, as though innovation is somehow dangerous. That somehow the sector is less accountable than business, for God's sake. What a shocking thought that is! It's not true and yet we have very little funding left in the sector for innovation.

13

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So, we seek it through, you know, impact investing bonds. Or we seek it through new activist philanthropy. Or we seek it through the community's support. But why is it, as a nation, we are reluctant to fund innovation in this sector with the risk that it may not work?

We have to find that new energy, that new capacity to accept risk. And the sector itself has to do the same. The boards of the not-for-profit organisations have become more risk adverse in recent times than previously. The heads of philanthropy in Australia are less risk adverse than they once were. Not all of them and not all boards. That can't be right.

It can't be that we're becoming more and more conservative at the very time that we need greater and greater innovation, creativity in order to have transformational change. Our voice needs to be part of that encouraging people. Not reckless spending, not unaccountable spending of course not. But in fact innovative spending.

There is one from, I think, in the sector itself - or two perhaps - but one in particular. One is the decline in the ability of the sector to work with each other. There's a higher level of individualism crept into the not-for-profit sector in recent years, largely born out of competition and market-based principles. So many in the sector want to do it themselves; they don't see the value in peak bodies, they don't see the values in collaboration. My view is that it's collaboration that has actually made the Australian and civil society so strong - it's the very essence of it. You can be a competitor for funding but still be collaborative, in terms of best practice, in working together to achieve the aims and objectives of low-income people or socially disadvantaged people in your own community. We can do that.

And yet some of the sector bought this nonsense. I think I've given a speech that the sector thought they were buying a pup and they got a mongrel. In other words they listened to people that told them you can't collaborate, we can't talk to you about this. One government agency at the Commonwealth level actually said we

14

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can't share best practice - we can't share best practice with the providers because that's a breach of commercial practice. This was a program to get the unemployed back to work and I said to the perso, "you can't be serious, you can't be serious that a Commonwealth funded program to get people back into employment won't share good practice - best practice - with the very people that you're funding because of some commercial confidence". It was nonsense. Is nonsense, complete rubbish and yet people in the sector buy it. Why do you buy it? Because the government tells you?

Well, I work for government and let me tell you I wouldn't buy it and you shouldn't. But it also feeds into something that's happening in the sector itself. Very strong entrepreneurs, particularly who see their organisation as being a standalone excellent service, and they are excellent services. Social enterprises as I say - whatever you want to call them - they have in fact given great strength and depth to the sector. But my view is it needs to come together, otherwise I think that some of our strengths will be lost.

But overarching all of that, what is the sector really about? It's the restoration of societal trust. Societal trust is the trust that you have in the unencountered institution. That is, it is not in the institution that you deal with and you trust them because you deal with them, it's the unencountered institution. It's the government enterprises, it's the political framework, its religious bodies, its government agencies, it's all of those groups. In Australia, like in so many other parts of the world, societal trust in our institutions has crashed. There's lots of reasons for that. Yet I make the point that in COVID it reversed. This nation accepted government, believed in our political leaders and so again, are we really as distrustful of each other and our institutions as we think we may have become?

My point going forward is the community sector is all about that. It's all about developing societal trust and of course, as Jack was talking this morning and others will talk about it later in the day, its about respect. Respect of institutions and respect of each other. I think Hugh McKay is going to talk about the notion of kindness. Others

15

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will talk about compassion. Some will talk about care. At the end of the day, they all have one foundation and that is human dignity and that's expressed in respect.

So let me conclude by just going back to where I started with elder abuse, cause that's the business I'm in at the moment. The difficult and challenging part, and in my area, the vast majority of those that offend are not institutions because I don't look at that. It is family members. So, the vast majority of older people are abused by their adult children and the vast majority of adult people with disabilities are abused by their parents and so, we're in the world of relationships that have gone bad but as a society how do we address that? What sort of organisations will we have to create to respond to that or do we already have them? How does the voice of older people inform those organisations, both their management and the way they operate?

We talk about in government co-design. We don't see it very often, but we talk about it a lot. Well, what about you? Who do you use to co-design your organisations? How do we leverage of the multiple groups that are involved in this space? The world of the older person has lots of people in their space, particularly at local level, but how does that come together in a meaningful coherent way that makes sense in the lives of older people?

What's the role of local government? I'm a big believer in local government - not necessarily in the developments that they approve, but - I'm a big believer in local government because they have a capacity to do something that State and Commonwealth governments can never do. It's to mobilise the local people. In NSW, we have 17 elder abuse collaboratives and those collaboratives are supported by my office. Un every one of those there is the local government, the local health, the local police - it's the old fashion notion of interagency just retitled as you have to do always in this sector.

The last one is what is technology going to do for older people? Here is a really significant issue which the sector has to embrace. It's

16

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the good use, the adaptive use of technology as an instrument of protection for vulnerable people. I don't pretend to understand as to how far we can go with that, but we did see through COVID that that becomes an important arm. It all fits into a broader public policy agenda which you'll see in the next five years which will be the largest public policy agenda going forward. That is, the safeguarding of adults, safeguarding of vulnerable adults, This has been sparked by an ongoing acknowledgement of the level of elder abuse. Commonwealth government says five percent of all older people in Australia are abused each year - that's 192,000. Quick maths, but it's actually come about from the death of Anne Marie Smith in Adelaide.

Anne Marie Smith was an NDIS recipient, unusual that she had some wealth, and she was well connected. She died a tragic death and as you know, the carer has been charged. But when you actually look at the systemic issues, the challenge for all of the governments has been why was she allowed to die in such circumstances? In recent years, I'd never seen a single case have such a dramatic impact on the thinking of State and Commonwealth governments. It only has that because there is an undercurrent that we now need to work to creating a safeguarding regime for vulnerable adults - and you're part of that. How will you respond to that agenda? Those are the sorts of issues that I think confront you.

Let me conclude by saying that this sector is strong, it is robust, it is innovative, it is passionate, it is committed and more often than not it is compassionate. But it has to rearticulate the value that it has to society in every forum, and governments and other leaders of our community have to reappraise this importance.

It's not about saying that we're better than anybody else - it's not about saying business is bad, it's not about saying governments have lost the plot. It's to actually say that this particular sector - community engagement, community activism if you want - has a real and legitimate role in the future of shaping Australia. COVID proved it, so we don't need the evidence - we have it. The question is whether we have the will to do it.

17

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Some say its already lost. Some say the will for transformational reform for our society is lost. I say, “not so”. Never say not so because this is an agenda that looks for opportunities and I think there is one at the moment. So again, I go back to where I started to say thank you. Thank you for everything you do, thank you for everything you do in shaping a better Australia and may we do a better job into the future. Thanks very much.

**ENDS**

## **MORE INFORMATION**

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18



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