

**“ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF A
HEALTHY COMMUNITY”**

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

By

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**WESTERN AUSTRALIAN
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
ANNUAL SUMMIT**

FRIDAY 9 JUNE 2006

I'd like to begin my address today by quoting from the political novel Primary Colours published in 1996. As you know the novel is about the Democratic Party Primaries and involves a Governor from a small southern state.

At one point in the campaign a stunning speech is delivered by one of his opponents. Contained in this speech is an extraordinary description of contemporary politics and what we should do to re-make it.

“This is really a terrific country, but we get a little crazy sometimes ... I guess the craziness is part of what makes us great, it’s part of our freedom. But we have to watch out. We have to be careful about it. There’s no guarantee we’ll be able to continue this – this highwire act, this democracy. If we don’t calm down, it all may just spin out of control. I mean, the world keeps getting more complicated and we keep having to explain it to you in simpler terms, so we can get our little oversimplified explanations on the evening news. Eventually, instead of even trying to explain it, we just give up and sling mud at each other – and it’s a show, it keeps you watching, like you watch a car wreck or maybe wrestling. That’s right. The kind of posturing and hair-pulling you see us do in thirty-second advertisements and on podiums like this one is exactly like professional wrestling: it’s fake, it’s staged, it doesn’t mean anything. Most of us don’t hate our opponents; hell, we don’t even know ‘em. We don’t have the fierce kind of ideological differences we used to have, back when the war in Vietnam was on. We just put on the show because we don’t know what else to do. We don’t know any other way to get you all riled up, to get you out to vote. But there are some serious things we have to talk about now. There are some decisions we have to make, as a people, together. And it’s gonna be hard to make them if we don’t slow this thing down a little, calm it down, have a conversation amongst ourselves.”

He concluded by saying:

“And I guess that’s what I want to do with this campaign: sort of calm things down a little, and see if we can start having a conversation about the sort of place we want America to be in the next century.” ⁽¹⁾

Although it is clear that there is much more substance to the party-political debate in the USA today, with the Iraq War playing a similar role to Vietnam, the contrast drawn in the speech between politics as adversarialism and soundbites and politics as a serious conversation about the future stands the test of time.

Let's take his advice and calm things down so we can think clearly and rationally about what needs to be done to produce a healthy community.

HOW TO APPROACH THE SUBJECT

There are a number of ways we could tackle the issue of a healthy community.

We could focus on the sorts of values we would like to see incorporated into the social, economic and political institutions and practices.

This would be a useful exercise in that it would make transparent our most fundamental beliefs in values such as freedom and democracy, equity and justice, and rights and responsibilities. At the same time we could explore principles like accountability, sustainability and reconciliation.

The problem, however, is that it is how we apply these values and principles, most of which are in constant tension if not conflict with each other, that is most important.

Another approach would be to describe in as much detail as we could what a healthy community would look like.

By doing this we would be getting closer to that which would be useful. However, there is a danger that we would simply build an idea-type utopia in our mind and not come to grips with the practical issues and constraints involved in its realization.

I will endeavour, then, to approach the subject from the point of view of what the evidence tells me – either from personal experience or academic research – about the ways and means by which we can produce better outcomes in today's world.

I certainly hold the view that we can aim higher than a politics based simply on the pursuit of economic growth and the management of the conflicts that result with a divide and rule form of populism.

The alternative is more complex, it requires more discipline within government and it does require the support of the community to work but it does offer that much needed and all-too-often missing element in modern life – hope.

INDICATORS OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

In speaking of a healthy community are we simply referring to one with a strong and growing Gross Domestic Product per capita? Or, to put it another way, is material wealth the basis of health and happiness?

This takes me to the important and growing literature on “Indicators of Wellbeing” produced in Australia by the Australia Institute, in the United Kingdom by the New Economics Foundation and in the United States by Redefining Progress. ⁽²⁾ They are all working within a framework provided by the ongoing debate about sustainability.

The central point made in this literature is that we can’t simply rely upon the Gross Domestic Product as an indicator. It works within the realm of monetised exchange, it doesn’t distinguish between productive and unproductive activities (or indeed between costs and benefits) and it ignores the distribution of income throughout the community. Nor does it take account of household labour, a major contributor to our well-being.

Its reference points are totally economic and we all know that the quality of our society and the environment is equally important. Issues like crime and violence, anti-social behaviour, family and relationship breakdown, urban amenity, air pollution, resource depletion, climate warming as well as the quality of health provision and education all play a role in determining not just our individual life chances but the quality of our life more generally.

There are two ways to deal with this analysis – either develop a new indicator which takes these factors into account or develop a set of indicators and benchmarks for the range of economic, social and environmental factors deemed relevant to well-being.

My preference would be for the latter, although the work associated with the development of an indicator is most helpful. However, one wonders whether it is possible to bring together measures for these various factors into the one framework. Some of the measures are qualitative and some are quantitative. To reduce the former to the latter is a cause for concern. Indeed it is doubtful whether there can be one measure of progress that would satisfy any human community as to its overall relevance. For one thing technological change is constantly altering the terms of the debate about progress.

However, the development of indicators in connection with these factors is very important and should be a feature of modern government.

In the first place they provide a very useful checklist of what to look for in determining the health of a community. For example, they will find any imbalances that may be resulting from the priorities set by the government or by the community itself.

In the second place they bring discipline and a sense of purpose to government itself.

PURPOSE IN GOVERNMENT

Even if the Government doesn't set specific targets the development of goals towards which it directs its efforts and attached to which are indicators of progress has the potential to bring that much needed purpose and priority to Government activity. This represents a strategic approach to government.

There is no doubt that much of government today is short-term and re-active. The development of a sense of purpose is a much-needed corrective to this phenomenon. Some jurisdictions have gone so far as to involve the community itself into the setting of objectives, benchmarks and targets. The highly successful Tasmania Together program initiated by Premier Jim Bacon was an example of this. ⁽³⁾

Tasmania Together has 24 goals and 212 benchmarks by which progress is measured. Attached to each benchmark is a goal, a standard, an indicator and a target. The goals relate to Community, Culture, Democracy, Economy, and Environment.

In the Western Australian Government's strategic plan of 2003 goals were set in relation to five areas – People and Communities, The Economy, The Environment, The Regions and Governance – attached to which were 72 strategic outcomes. ⁽⁴⁾

When you look at the range and type of indicators you can start to get a feel for what modern democracies are seeking – the provision of jobs in a competitive economy, a fair distribution of the benefits of growth in a society that promotes equal opportunity, freedom for the people to pursue their ideas and interests and protection and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage.

In the national context you would add protection from external and terrorist attack. To feel threatened or uncertain in the face of world events can undermine all efforts to realize a healthy economy.

Note how both of the plans – Tasmania’s and Western Australia’s – incorporate governance arrangements. All too often we simply look at government as a means to an end. The truth is that the quality of our governance arrangements is itself an issue that ought to be incorporated into any account of our quality of life. ⁽⁵⁾ Nor is it just a case of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration and public services generally. It also means improving our democracy and the way we engage the public in decision-making.

In our society politics provides the link between government and the people. There is no reason why this ought to be restricted to elections every four years. Proper methods of consultation can make a real difference in providing for more efficiency in government (particularly financial efficiency as potentially costly and time-consuming delays are avoided by dealing with community issues upfront and preferably in the planning stages of decision) and in ensuring relevance in service delivery. It should not be an afterthought but a process built into decision-making at the earliest possible stage. ⁽⁶⁾

There are, of course, different levels of government in national, state and local. The ideas being developed here today would apply whichever level one was referring to. Indeed I would argue that State and Local Governments have been more innovative in their approach to government than has the Commonwealth Government in recent years.

DIVERSITY AND BALANCE IN SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITY

This leads one to make the obvious point that there are communities as well as a community. When we refer to a healthy community we may mean the Nation, a State or a Locality. We may mean a region, a town or a suburb. We may mean an association of like-minded individuals brought together by interest or aspiration in almost all areas of life. We may mean a religious community, a political community, an ethnic community, an occupational community, a sporting community or a cultural community.

I would argue that one of the ingredients of a healthy community is the existence of lots of communities within its boundaries. As Robert Putnam has written in his study of the Italian regional governments :

The correlation between civic engagement and effective government is virtually perfect. ⁽⁷⁾

In the regions of north central Italy rich networks of community associations, organized horizontally, have created richer economics, better governments and more social and intellectual progress generally.

I believe Putnam's argument about social capital and civic engagement can also be applied to our multicultural society and our market economy. Social harmony doesn't require social or religious control in the interests of one culture or one religion. In the real world of diversity harmony comes from mutual respect and tolerance. Our democratic processes and liberal culture are needed to allow people the freedom to express themselves within the minimum limits deemed necessary.

It is important that we encourage exchange, dialogue, and co-operation between people of different backgrounds, cultures and religions. As Putnam has noted there is a difference between "bonding" and "bridging" social capital. The former involves connections that link people to others like themselves. The latter involves connections that link people to others unlike themselves. ⁽⁸⁾

If we have only bonding social capital there is a danger that differences may degenerate into division and conflict. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, brings together different races, ethnic groups, generations and social classes. It is harder to build but especially important in democratic societies. When you see bridging social capital at work in sporting and service clubs you can appreciate the role it plays in bringing people together.

A rich mosaic of bonding and bridging communities is both a means to and an end of a healthy community. It's not just a case of a healthy community, it also means healthier people generally. Epidemiological studies in the USA have shown that social involvement and social cohesion are positively linked to public health. ⁽⁹⁾

Just as you can't straightjacket human society within one culture or one religion, so too you can't straightjacket the economy within one system of ownership and control. A healthy economy will involve government and private sector enterprises as well as other economic forms such as co-operatives and mutual societies. This is important not just for reasons of choice and efficiency but also for reasons of balance. As Henry Mintzberg has put it so well :

Above all, we need balance among the different sectors of society. This applies to attitudes no less than to institutions. Private sector values are now pervading all of society. But government and other sectors should be careful about what they take from business. ⁽¹⁰⁾

By having a genuine mixed economy that involves government, private, and communitarian elements we are best placed to achieve public interest outcomes.

This case for balance can also be made in respect of our federal system of government. There are locational and historical elements in Australia's pluralism that energise our democracy and allow for more choice and innovation. ⁽¹¹⁾

It is important, then, that each of our levels of government be treated seriously and given the constitutional, political and financial autonomy to be able to make a contribution to national progress. The link that has often been drawn between "the Nation" and "the Commonwealth" and between "Nationalism" and "Centralisation" needs constant challenge. We need strong and innovative governments at all levels.

In and of itself a market economy and the economic rationalist approach to policy associated with it are incapable of creating a healthy community. That's why the range and diversity of community associations, cultural capital, economic forms, and centres of political power are so important to our health as a community.

Let me summarise my arguments so far :

- *A healthy community will involve strategic government around the achievement of important objectives in relation to the economic, social and environmental indicators of wellbeing.*
- *Good government is not just a means to an end, it is an end-in-itself.*
- *A healthy community will require a wide range of healthy communities that develop social capital and bring people together in the public sphere, mutual respect amongst the diverse cultural and religious traditions, a balanced market involving government, non-government, co-operative and private sector organisations, and strong, autonomous and innovative governments at all levels.*

TACKLING POVERTY

In talking of a healthy community we cannot ignore the question of distribution – how are the burdens and benefits distributed throughout the community? Can we guarantee that our citizens have equal opportunity to participate in social, economic, and political life? Do we have pockets of poverty holding people back from realizing their capacities?

These are not just abstract distributional questions but important questions of public health. Empirical research has shown that “income distribution plays a greater role in the quality of public health than more traditional indices do”.⁽¹²⁾ It follows that a community which provides equal access to a good education, quality health care, security and amenity is one that will have higher levels of trust and social cohesion. Once again it is government that has a key role in ensuring that this is the case.

In many ways we could characterise the Australia of today as strong on market economics, better on the environment than it was before, but still battling to deal with the wider social consequences of the type of economy and life-style that has emerged in recent years.

So too are we battling to find solutions to the problem of persistent poverty in our cities, regions and isolated communities. Even if the overall performance of our Nation, State or Locality was good in economic, social and environmental terms the reality of poverty and what it means for individuals and families should never be let to slip off the radar screen of community concern.

One thing is clear – whilst the issue is not only a responsibility for governments there is little doubt that without concerted and co-ordinated action from governments such persistent poverty will remain. In order to achieve their objectives Governments will need partners from the non-government sector and social entrepreneurs within communities but they will have to provide significant resources and focus if the problem is to be tackled.

In this respect there are two challenges facing governments.

Firstly, to adopt a strategic, life-cycle perspective to social policy that aims to prevent the emergence of problems in the first place.

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence has come up with a strategic direction for its own work that focuses on the “at risk” years – the early years (both at home and into school), the years from school to work and further education, the

periods in and out of work (whether voluntary or involuntary), and the retirement years. ⁽¹³⁾ This is the type of holistic approach we need, backed up by properly joined up government and case and place management for individuals and localities. The more that service delivery can be localised and individualised the better. Indeed “wherever possible people should have a direct personal relationship with government, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all principles which lead to crude, inefficient outcomes.” ⁽¹⁴⁾

We now have an enormous amount of research relating to these at-risk years (for example from our own Telethon Institute for Child Health Research) that should become the basis for government and community-based initiatives, particularly in education and training so that all our citizens have the capacity to participate in the mainstream social and economic life of the nation.

Secondly, to adopt more comprehensive interventions to address existing poverty, be it individual, family or community (or, as is most often the case, all three at once).

Here issues related to passive welfare dependency, long-term unemployment, the Stolen Generation, disability, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, family violence and child abuse make it a hard nut to crack. There is not one rule for all situations and all too often the assumptions that lie behind our chosen interventions are themselves the problem.

This is also an area where there can be a complicated intersection between our social policy networks and programs and our criminal justice system. The encouragement of more co-operation across these sectors – particularly at a local level – which we are now seeing represents a positive step forward.

Certain factors are very clear if we are to make progress in tackling persistent poverty:

- it is resource-intensive,
- if change is to come the individuals, families and communities themselves will have to be engaged in and committed to the process,
- a one-size-fits-all approach will not work, and
- change agents are vital ingredients for success.

To say the issues related to persistent poverty are complex is an understatement. This is certainly not an area for right wing intolerance or left wing impatience. It requires hard work over a long period of time, particularly in respect of indigenous poverty.

The unpalatable truth is that we have some communities in our nation that are completely dysfunctional. To talk of a healthy community means first and foremost establishing a proper system of law and order as recommended in our Gordon Inquiry.⁽¹⁵⁾ Then the process of building can proceed through the provision of government infrastructure and support for social entrepreneurs and community leaders. However, without partnerships with the business community and engagement with the market economy that leads to employment and income all the above will be incapable of producing lasting change. As Noel Pearson has observed :

No amount of resources and government and non-government service delivery will solve our social problems as long as our people are economically passive. This means work.⁽¹⁶⁾

In tackling poverty, then, governments need strategies that go to the causes of poverty, particularly in the “at risk” years as well as strategies that address the complex reality of existing and persistent poverty.

A commitment of resources, community and business support, and new approaches to service delivery will all be needed if social exclusion is to be overcome and equal opportunity guaranteed.

A HIERARCHY OF NEEDS?

This observation by Pearson raises the issue as to whether there is a hierarchy of needs – starting with the material and going through to the spiritual – around which priorities should be framed. What this would mean, for example, is that the economy ought to be given priority within the triple bottom line of economic social and environmental factors.

The type of thinking involved in this approach would have it that we should abstract “the economy” from its social and environmental context and vigorously pursue its health independently of concern for community and the environment.

The fact is that the triple bottom line is a bottom line. Not only are there biological and ecological principles that have to be represented in order for

human life to be sustained, there are also personal and social principles that have to be followed if economic development is to be possible, trust for example.

Not only are there connections at this basic level. We should also refer to the costs of environmental decay and the benefits of a pristine environment for today's tourist economy. We should also note that when economic and social principles are applied in support of each other, nations are inevitably more productive and certainly happier. ⁽¹⁷⁾

Yes we do have to eat to live, but we also need to breathe and to feel. Nor is it just a question of "body and mind". It's also a matter of "soul". Life needs to be meaningful as well as productive and relational. If we don't provide space for human beings to seek meaning our personal and collective lives will suffer.

All of these considerations make it harder for the decision-maker. There is no hierarchy of needs or naturally provided set of priorities. Everything is connected and dependent in one way or another. This makes for complexity in the pursuit of a strong economy, a good society and a clean environment.

It is not surprising, then, that instructive commentary on healthy communities today will use concepts like sustainability, balance, holistic government, rights and responsibilities and public/private partnerships. These are the sort of concepts that indicate seriousness in respect of the problems we face and the solutions we need. They reflect the complexity of real life and correctly focus on the public policy intersections rather than the bureaucratic highways.

However, as our friend the Democratic candidate noted in my quotation at the start of this lecture, these are the sorts of concepts that cannot be easily converted into soundbites for the nightly news. It's not just a case of complexity of decision it's also a case of complexity of vocabulary. There is an important communication challenge that faces all of us who wish to make a difference.

CONCLUSION

How, then, can all these issues be brought together? What is essential for a healthy community?

Two factors stand out – strong and purposeful government and active citizenship in all its forms.

If we are to create the balance necessary for a healthy community, and incorporate economic, social and environmental factors into our thinking and practice, strong government is vital. It needs to be purposeful and strategic in respect of sustainability, to be tough and uncompromising in confronting violence, discrimination and prejudice, comprehensive in its assault on social exclusion, forward looking in its support for education and research, and clear and disciplined in its defence of diversity and competition in all areas of life, including government and politics.

At the same time, however, there needs to be active citizenship in all its forms ranging from individual interest in public affairs to participation in community associations. It also means corporate citizenship and public/private partnerships in economic and community development. Indeed the creation of a healthy community is not the responsibility of government alone – it requires all our efforts. Just as there needs to be balance within government there needs to be balance between the community and the government.

Government and community are always connected, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. We can predict good outcomes when they are connected via accountability and citizenship. We can predict less than good outcomes when they are connected by populism and cynicism. We can predict bad outcomes when connections are weak and a narrowly based government faces narrowly focussed and privatised individuals.

We need citizenship and politics, community and government. At their fulcrum may not be utopia but there may very well be a healthy community.

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