

## 2020 Royal Society of NSW and Four Academies Forum: “After COVID-19: Creating the best of times from the worst of times”

Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC

### Opening Address

“Bujari gamarruwa  
Mudgingal  
Babana  
Gamarada  
Gadigal.”<sup>1</sup>

As Patron, I welcome all members of the Royal Society and the four learned Academies as you examine “After COVID-19: Creating the best of times from the worst of times,” as this 2020 Forum is titled. I especially welcome our university students who are represented at this Forum. Your voices are important to this conversation.

In a year where just about every possible analogy has been used to describe the impact of COVID-19, likening it to a war, a hidden enemy, a year like no other, and that literary reference to “the worst of times” from the indefatigable Charles Dickens, there is perhaps one observation, which more than others, captures where we are at the moment: “nobody knows how the story ends.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, scientists are unsure whether this particular story does have an end. We do know, however, that it has had, is having and will continue

to have consequences. We also know that the negative consequences have not fallen equally on the various sections of our community.

In the research article *The Impact and Implications of COVID-19: An Australian Perspective* (O’Sullivan et al., 2020), the authors posited that: “People who were already poor, unemployed or underemployed, with high levels of existing debt ... or facing existing difficulties with access to health and social services, and people with disabilities, were likely to be further marginalised.” We also know that mental health has been of significant concern and that isolation has been a particular problem.

At the community level, Philanthropy Australia has pointed out that “The economic realities of COVID-19 are threatening the existence of not-for-profit organisations and charities” and their capacity to respond. As demand for their services increased, the pandemic diminished their ability to fund-raise.<sup>3</sup>

On the positive side, I have found people, both personally and within organisations, thinking and re-thinking about what is important to them and those around them; what things they would want to keep arising

1 Michael West, Cultural Officer, Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council. Translation: “Good day, men, women and friends/comrades.”

2 <https://time.com/5779872/coronavirus-ebola-news-coverage/>

3 <https://www.philanthropy.org.au/tools-resources/news/australian-philanthropys-response-to-the-covid-19-crisis/>. Also quoted in O’Sullivan et al. (2020).

out of the COVID restrictions; what things they would do differently in the future. As the Artistic Director of one of our creative festivals said: “I feel that COVID has given the introverted part of my brain time to think.” He was, of course, talking about the time to think and re-think creatively and, indeed, about creativity itself.

Karl Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum, summed the position up well when he said: “Deep, existential crises favour introspection and can harbour the potential for transformation ... People feel a time of reinvention has come.”<sup>4</sup> These words echo what John F. Kennedy had pointed out in 1959 when he said: “When written in Chinese, the word ‘crisis’ is composed of two characters — one represents ‘danger’ and one represents ‘opportunity’.”<sup>5</sup>

This period of time offers us the chance to press the re-set button; to make this a time of re-calibration and reinvention; to think how we can “build back better,” a term

that has been used by leaders from Jacinda Arden to Joe Biden and organisations from the OECD to the United Nations. To do this, we will need to draw on the strength, the ingenuity and the creativity of each sector of our community.

In the best Royal Society tradition of “omnia quærite” (question everything), this year’s Forum provides a unique and fertile environment — in the words of one of our esteemed speakers, Dr Genevieve Bell, to “create a little bit of room to imagine other interesting possibilities of how we want to be (and) who we want to be.”<sup>6</sup>

## References

- O’Sullivan, D., Rahamathulla, M., & Pawar, M. (2020). The impact and implications of COVID-19: An Australian perspective. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 2(2), 134–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2516602620937922>
- Schwab, K., & Malleret, T. (2020). *COVID-19: The great reset*. Forum Publishing.

---

4 <https://www.afr.com/world/europe/when-will-things-get-back-to-normal-never-says-davos-founder-20200714-p55br2>

5 John F Kennedy Speech: United Negro College Fund, Indianapolis, Indiana, 12 April 1959.

---

6 Dr Genevieve Bell, Reshaping Australia dialogue, in *Australian Financial Review’s* Recalibrating Society series: <https://www.afr.com/companies/financial-services/recalibrating-society-in-a-disrupted-time-20200804-p551c9>

