

Forum Program Committee Report

Stephen Garton

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The Program Committee for the joint Royal Society of New South Wales and Australia's Five Learned Academies Annual Forum sat down in early 2022 to plan the topic and potential speakers for the event. As we tossed around various ideas for a theme, we kept coming back to the times we have been living in. While bushfires, epochal floods and a global pandemic are not unprecedented, as many commentators have been fond of announcing, their conjuncture was very challenging for all Australians. The response of governments, public agencies, charitable organisations, community groups and many individual citizens, however, was extraordinary. This context of resilience in the face of catastrophe helped shape our thinking.

There were long-term trends that also impinged on our discussions — the growing disparities in wealth and opportunity in Australia, the impact of under-investment in many areas of government provision and the privatisation of key services which came into stark relief as health and aged-care systems struggled to cope with the impact of the pandemic. Evidence that “interventions” such as “Closing the Gap” were facing major hurdles in addressing the needs of Indigenous Australians further highlighted challenges in the provision of effective social policies. How are we to sustain a polity and society that serves all its citizens? How can our citizens become active participants in shaping social outcomes? How might the

work of researchers in all disciplines assist our community? Here, was a wide-ranging theme where we could canvas the contributions of experts and those from community organisations who live with the daily reality of these challenges.

Rather than a focus on disaster, however, our thinking shifted to resilience and the ways Australians have managed both the long-term effects of social disadvantage in areas such as health, aged care, child welfare, housing, education, infrastructure, family violence and poverty, and more recent challenges like the climate emergency. While governments play a vital role in tackling these issues, communities, charities and for-purpose organisations have been equally important. Many Australians have little awareness of the significance and importance of the not-for-profit sector, now more commonly and appropriately titled the for-purpose sector. A 2020 Social Ventures Australia and Centre for Social Impact report on the charity sector highlights that this sector of the economy is worth \$155 bn or 8% of Australia's GDP, employs 1.3 m workers, 10% of the workforce, and in addition there are a further 3 m volunteers delivering \$12.7 bn worth of unpaid labour in the economy.

By any measure the volunteer, community and for-purpose sectors of our economy and society deliver very significant economic and social benefits. The size of the sector and the striking mobilisation of communi-

ties dealing with fires and floods suggest that volunteering and community action remain a strong ethos in Australia.

This presents significant risks and opportunities for researchers. The risk is that researchers claim expertise to give them a privileged position with which to speak for others, on occasion marginalising the views of communities, leading to less optimal policy and service outcomes. The opportunity is for experts to listen, to give communities a voice in how the challenges they face can best be managed. Researchers, governments and communities are increasingly working in partnership for solutions, and this is enriching both the research and the impact of potential interventions.

These were the factors shaping the thinking of the Program Committee. We wanted to explore some of the ways in which community action was shaping Australia and equally highlight some of the ways partnerships of researchers and communities were driving more constructive research and implementation outcomes.

The Forum began with some scene-setting thinking on the economic, demographic and big-data evidence on patterns of social disadvantage and current Commonwealth government approaches to social policy development — economic, rural, regional and metropolitan patterns, the impact of global warming on communities, different patterns in migrant communities, health disparities and especially the evidence for the disadvantages faced by Indigenous communities in Australia.

Our first session was followed by specific case studies. In these sessions we explored the views, experiences and strategies of community groups, climate activists, Indigenous community leaders, as well as the work of

leading researchers, policy makers and those in the corporate sector, in such fields as Indigenous health, child and mental health, education, urban policy and infrastructure, who were collaborating with communities to develop better solutions to the policy and implementation challenges facing the nation.

The Forum finished with an illuminating discussion about new forms of community politics. Over recent decades there has been much discussion about the decline in volunteering and community participation. The evidence suggests that there has been an erosion in membership in such organisations as political parties, clubs and societies, established charitable organisations and other institutional forums of civic life. Similarly, there has been declining interest in traditional mediums of information, such as newspapers, television and radio. On the other hand, social media has become an increasingly influential space for community mobilisation and action on specific issues, where community volunteering is more spontaneous, horizontal and immediate than formal and hierarchical in structure, suggesting that community action is still vibrant but more situational and informal than previously. The challenge for researchers and governments is to adapt to and engage with these new forms of community activism.

The focus of the Forum on how communities are re-shaping Australia and how researchers are collaborating with communities as partners rather than as objects of study to the benefit of both the research and the community was uplifting. There remains much to do but the Forum highlighted examples of where community action and expertise were making a difference, help-

ing to address pressing social problems and crafting better solutions to improve the lives of all Australians.

We are grateful to all the wonderful speakers on the day who made these such lively and engaging sessions and particularly to our moderator, Julianne Schultz, who not only provided crucial advice and suggestions in the planning phase but also did a marvelous job keeping the conversation going.

I would particularly like to thank my colleagues on the Program Committee. We were fortunate that the President of the Society, Susan Pond, was able to participate in the program meetings. Her input and ability to keep us on track was vital. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the five Learned Academies in Australia, which each nominated a representative to sit on the committee. Their insights and contribution made all the difference to the program: Annabelle Duncan

(Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering), Hala Zriqat (Academy of Science), Pip Pattison (Academy of Social Sciences), Tony Cunningham (Academy of Health and Medical Sciences) and Bridget Griffen-Foley (Academy of the Humanities). We also benefitted from the participation of Emeritus Professor Robin King, a Fellow of the Society and the Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering. Tragically Robin died, in a terrible holiday accident, just before the Forum. He was a wonderful contributor to the committee, and we hope that his family might draw some comfort from the success of the Forum, as a fitting tribute to his contribution to the work of the Society over many years.

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Closing Remarks

Susan Pond

President, RSNSW

Well, what a day. I'll only take up one more minute, but it's important to thank Julianne for carrying the day. She knew it was going to be hard. I knew it was going to be harder, and I'll have to ask her later where it stood on her assessment of the energy that was required. But I think she's done a fabulous job, and thank you, of course, to our final panel and to Lisa and Ariadne and especially Lisa for performing with such consummate skill, having only been contacted yesterday when Marcia was unable to attend because of her health. I promised that we will go back in this digital world and amend the program so that, forever more, you will be on the program and Marcia will be there as an apology. Thank you very much.

Peter Shergold spoke about the number of learning profiles that we create during a lifetime. I thought it was a very good phrase, and I think today I've created at least six of my own: one for each of the five sessions and the other related to how to be a community activist. I realised that each and every one of us here is a community activist. All of

the volunteers that have contributed to this through the Society and through the five Learned Academies, volunteers, and by definition, community activists. Everyone else in the audience, including the students, the past officials of the academies, and certainly the Society, the past presidents, of which we have four in the room.

We're all community activists. All of our speakers are activists. As the introduction to the program said, the aim of today was to show how great a community participation might impact long-term policy development for the benefit of all Australians. We heard some wonderful examples of that actually happening, but also some challenges about what else needs to be done to reshape Australia for the better. You've got no excuse when you leave this room. You are now empowered with all of the learning profiles you need to make your own individual and collective contribution and impact to and on a better Australia. Thank you all for coming. Congratulations to all of the speakers, to all of the organisers, and for every one of you who has stayed for the drinks.

