



# **The 2007 Leadership Oration: The Proper and Just Role for Community in Advocating for Change in Australia**

Address to the Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 5 June, 2007

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Thank you Rhonda for the generous introduction. Can I acknowledge the traditional owners and thank members of the Wurundjeri people for their custodianship of the land on which we gather today.

Apologies to Michael Kirby for anything I might say that might in fact not be approved of by him. And indeed apologies to you because while I'm absolutely honoured to be here, I certainly am not a High Court judge and frankly wouldn't have the skills or even the audacity to aspire to be such an esteemed Australian.

But I'm particularly delighted to be able to talk to you about community. You heard I grew up in a small-town community; the sort of place where not just your family but your neighbours, your networks, delivered the sort of framework in which you felt secure as a child growing up, knowing that people around you cared about you, that the aspirations of your family and other families was to actually build a secure future for the children in their care.

Of course, we all grew up with aspirations, particularly for my generation, that things would improve. It might have been a little rosy-eyed in a sense but you know the adage, it's a pretty easy one, all of us shared it – our parents convinced us that if we got a good education, if we got a good job and could build a family, invest in our own homes, and make a difference where we could, that life would increasingly be better, generation by generation.

Well, it really distresses me that the word *community* appears to have dropped from our political lexicon. Now, of course, with Rhonda and others of you in the room, and Joan Kirner over there, who deal every day in advocacy around community, it is a little audacious of me to talk about this. But the community for union people is equally as important. We are members of a community; we are part of our own community networks; we see our membership as family as well as friends; we understand that the fabric and the strength of a collective culture is to stand up with and for each other.

And so it seems to me that it's not just the word *community* that seems to have been dropped, it's the whole idea of the collective base of our

community that seems to have been lost, in favour of a very narrow definition and debate around economic prosperity, as if you can actually divorce that from the wellbeing of people more generally.

As a result of this, communities are actually dropping off the edge in Australia. If you read a recent report by the Jesuit Social Services and the Catholic Services of Australia, they have mapped out the communities that are struggling to keep their heads above water, under a government which has watched the alarming growth of indebtedness in families, and then sought, frankly, to scare them with false economic claims and a false sense of debate about our economy, its prosperity and what it's indeed supposed to be for.

If you take just one snapshot of a Victorian community from that report, I was flicking through it this morning and came across an area called Gippsland that you would all know well. That area spreads across two federal electorates, but this report says that this area includes four of the top 10 most disadvantaged communities in Victoria – four of the top 10 in two federal electorates.

The reason I raise this is if you identify what the characteristics of that disadvantage are – and, of course, it hasn't sprung up overnight, it's been a gradual and identifiable transition to the point where we can now say that some of those communities are bordering on being in crisis – the major characteristics identified by the report go to low family income, early school leaving, limited computer and internet use, high unemployment and under-employment, domestic violence, criminal convictions and lack of qualifications.

All these factors in turn lead to isolation and eat away at the reality of community. That picture is occurring in too many regional and rural communities – I know it; you know it – as well as, of course, in our urban communities, where there's an even greater sense of isolation, if that's possible.

This report is a wake-up call. It's worth reading and we should all heed the danger signs that in fact, as tired as you are, should cause us

to strive to advocate louder and harder about public policy to turn around this level of disadvantage in an otherwise rich nation.

The sad fact is that Australia is heading in the wrong direction and it's taking its communities with it. We've had 16 years now of economic growth, yet families are working harder, not to get ahead, but just to keep what they've got. This is well out of step with the international community, and is embedding rather than addressing the negative aspects of the social dimension of globalisation.

There's no doubt that the government can claim that economic prosperity is indeed the case – they're keeping corporate profits and share prices at record prices. But the household budgets of working families are under more pressure than ever: four interest rate rises since 2004 creating mortgage or rent hikes, and escalating prices for essentials – petrol (people still name petrol as the thing that frightens them most, after interest rates, in terms of the rise in cost); food (and I've been distressed to see recently that families are saying not that they can't feed their children, but they're worried about the quality of food they can now put on the table); housing; childcare; health; and education. Added to that are record levels of indebtedness and the insecurity of take-home pay due to, of course, the IR laws that are placing families under inordinate stress.

The IR laws means that people have lost job security, income security, have no right to collective bargaining, and of course are not comforted by the powers of the independent umpire any longer. If you wanted to look at the current debate about the fairness test, it's not only got so many holes you could drive a truck through it, but if you're not content – having been forced to sign an AWA to get the fairness test applied – with the decision by one person in the first and last instant, in a secret process for which there is no transparency at all, then you have to go to the High Court to get some form of redress, and then only on legal proceedings. It's a little akin to the movie *The Castle* when you simply say, "You're dreaming". I mean what working person would even think that they would have access to the High Court, let alone afford the cost of it, simply to work out whether their employment contracts were fair

or not? But this is the level of denial of fundamental rights that working people now face in Australia.

Unfortunately that's not all. Today, of course, I was accused of smearing Australia's name. I pointed out that many of us stand up for Australia every day, but we stand up for a decent Australia. And if it's now a crime to actually advocate the implementation of international law to which this government is a signatory, to stand up for injustice in our own land in every tribunal, then I'm guilty as charged. Because we can't afford to back off; we simply can't afford to back off and leave a legacy that the IR laws would leave for our children and grandchildren.

But it goes way beyond the daily stuff of my advocacy and the advocacy of union leaders, delegates, members and other activists in our communities. It actually goes to many other areas of our public policy. Punitive Welfare to Work laws that punish single mothers or the disabled and the sick who are temporarily unable to work simply don't make sense to me. They just don't make sense, socially or economically. I look at the statistics and shake my head. Now what are we really saying here? That children don't deserve the care of the only parent they've got in their most vulnerable years, where the woman chooses that? That's just unbelievable. I might tell this community, who we all feel very close to, that in fact this is personal. I was a single mum at the age of 19 and it was Gough Whitlam's single mother's pension that meant that I could actually go to university; I could make a choice to have my child and go to university. For the several years of support that the Australian community gave women like me, I think we've given an enormous amount back to the community, both through the raising of our children and indeed through the work that we do through the rest of our world.

So it makes me particularly angry to see that we have not got Welfare to Work laws that encourage people into jobs, which is the heart and soul of my work, but in fact punish people who, as I said, are temporarily unable to work, or indeed are amongst the most vulnerable people in our community. That's pretty shocking, but it's just one set of wrongs in a sea of damage to the Australian ethos of a fair go that

still, I think, is the dream of people who want to build and rebuild communities.

The Government has presided over the emergence of a massive shortage in skills, while we have unacceptable levels of youth unemployment. As I travel around Australia visiting different communities, you continue to see, despite the macro statistics, alarming levels of unemployment and under-employment. And it is simply not that easy to find yourself out of work one day and walk into a job the next.

On *Insight* last night I was listening to young people telling their stories, and you can't help but reflect what kind of world it is where people are frightened about getting a job at age 15 or 16 or 17 or 18, of walking into a job where they have no idea of their rights. There was one young man who was actually not paid for six weeks in a local business. His mother pursued it all the way to a union, which wrote a letter, and finally he was paid, but not paid for 11 hours of training. You sort of reflect on what that says to young people about the way in which they're treated in their first job. But what I was reflecting on most was his courage. He pursued that all the way through the Office of Workplace Services to the court, and he actually won a major victory at age 15 for young people all around the country – it was declared illegal for young people not to be paid for periods of induction or training.

Now, not many people will know about that. But it demonstrates the courage of people like that, and particularly the young people in our midst, who I think will build the heart and soul of future communities, particularly for those people who are not picked up in the official statistics of the land.

People are struggling and unfortunately we've got levels of government, particularly the Federal Government, that refuse to even acknowledge this and work with us to try and do something about it. Rather than provide opportunity and optimism for our young people, this government has systematically put the price of university entrance out of the reach of children of working parents and turned back the

clock in terms of the privatisation of university places. Now they're putting loans for TAFE on the agenda.

We've already seen, of course, the Education Minister continually undermine and insult the professional work and integrity of teachers – another matter that's a little personal – in our public schools. It is disgraceful, conservative rubbish and it's designed to distract the nation from the fact that they've under-funded our community schools, our public schools, by \$2.9 billion. Our children, Australia's children, deserve a lot better than that.

There is the silence or lame excuse for the misuse of the 457 visas, which shame a proudly immigrant nation by allowing our young people to go without work while seeing the sons and daughters of neighbouring countries exploited.

Then there is the despair of families over the cost of childcare. With up to a million potentially outside the labour force at a time when we need to do all we can to encourage participation, investment in quality childcare that's affordable will reap significant dividends in terms of more workers, increased tax revenue and early childhood development. But above all, it will alleviate real financial stress for families. All it takes is the political will to care for the children of working people. In fact, the cost of childcare has risen by over 12% in the past year. The Liberal Party's response to this on the weekend was astonishing – subsidies for nannies. Well, we wish! Particularly the women in the room, we wish!

And yet, you know, we don't, because we have a bigger sense of community than that. We're happy to have our young children cared for by professionals who are appropriately paid for their skills, and we are happy to have them develop in both social and intellectual terms with the children in our community. Wouldn't it be nice to wake up and hear a fight about what levels of universal provision of childcare the nation could afford, and what the economic dividend would be that it would reap? Rather than simply the policy positions that will work for one group or the other but not for all.

Australians are willing to pay for childcare. They're willing to pay for public education. They're willing to pay for a quality health system in which we can all share. Yet it would appear that we would rather prop up the profits of an inefficient private health insurance industry than make Medicare work for everyone.

And then, of course, public housing's not even on the priority list, despite the levels of homelessness and the extreme financial stress of many families living in poverty. When more than half of Generation X – they're my kids, the children of many of us here – when they say that they've given up on the dream of ever owning their own home, then surely affordable housing must rate a higher priority than just a political swipe at the state governments. What does it do to intergenerational wealth and security and the dignity of retirement incomes for working people if the dream of owning your own home is entirely dissipated?

And then, of course, there are those people struggling with rent hikes, particularly, again, our most vulnerable, either at the beginning of their working lives or indeed at the end of them. Well, it just seems that if we are such a rich nation, we must be able to do better.

The fact is, it's harder to either invest in the dream of owning your own home in Australia or indeed simply to pay the rent on a fortnightly basis than it's been in economic terms, in financial stress terms, than for any other generation in the last few decades.

Then, of course, you've got infrastructure, industry policy, innovation – all the things that generate smart jobs – all suffering neglect, with our export of high-end manufacturing falling into negative territory for the first time in decades. In 2006 we had a record 17% of high-value-added manufacturers, the stuff that we actually use our brains to make, being exported. And of course it's now down to a very sad, in fact almost unbelievable, level of 0.2%. That's the neglect and the vandalism that's occurred because we haven't invested in skills and R&D and industry policy. And again, it's despite being the rich nation we are.



We are just a very, very lucky nation that we have had an economic boom due to the resources sector. But beyond the current boom in that sector, we are not tending to the fundamentals. Ultimately, this neglect can only mean the loss of more jobs in manufacturing in our communities, the loss of decent jobs for our future and an economy that's increasingly dependent just on what we can dig up and sell, while we import all the smart stuff.

Fifteen years of solid economic growth, I would argue, has been squandered, and we could have used that economic growth and prosperity to build and galvanise the community feeling in Australia, rather than fostering the distrust and the isolation that is all too unfortunately on display.

If you just think about what could have been done over the past 15 years with this once-in-a-generation prosperity! When you think about it then you wonder why we haven't invested in public education, real investment in making higher education more obtainable rather than more expensive; better access to childcare assistance; solving the Indigenous disadvantage and bridging the gap that we know is still there; more local community development programs; and the list goes on.

Our mayors who are in the room, struggling as we know on inadequate budgets to build community every day, could have done much with just a small proportion of the budgetary surpluses that have accumulated.

These surpluses could have helped to build a fairer and more equitable Australia. Fred Argy, that amazing economist, wrote a book in the early '90s that I didn't believe that said that egalitarianism is dead. Well if egalitarianism was dead in the early '90s, then we've certainly lived through the process of seeing it well and truly buried. And we've got to do much better than that.

Your work deserves much more attention. It deserves more funding. It deserves the kind of respect that says that your advocacy should be listened to.

I won't go into our issues, but we should at least list them. Climate change is a political battle against which no-one should be standing. And yet it's ironic that the government has only just realised that it's out of step with the community, that it must appear to have a plan for the planet. The impact of water shortages are frightening people. The challenge of safe energy alternatives should have seen unprecedented cooperation with state and local government, rather than the kind of battle ground for a national takeover of community assets that we're seeing on the agenda today.

You can't have policy solutions to any of these things that are just developed by a few people out of self-interest. We must have policy solutions that are inclusive, that listen to people, that respond to local situations and actually work for everybody.

And I can't leave this section without saying what I think about nuclear energy. It is unbelievable, I think, and maybe I'm just an unreconstructed '70s child, but to impose nuclear energy on our children, with no guarantee of safe technology or waste storage, with a half life of hundreds of years – we know Australia will say yes to clean energy because they're saying it every day, but they are saying no to nuclear risk. When you don't have to leave that legacy to your children because you've got other alternatives, then, again, I think it's just an indictment on a government who has stopped listening to the people.

When you look at just a few other things, and I'll just list them – the constant attack on the independence of the ABC; the continued participation in a war that Australia doesn't support; the abandonment of the right to a fair trial with the denial of the presumption of innocence; the contempt for fundamental freedoms, represented by the sedition laws and the authoritarian power of the Attorney General; the acceptance of American interrogation procedures and the damage to Australia's long-held opposition to all forms of torture; the scare-mongering on Native Title; the encouragement of fear of difference in a multicultural society and the constant attacks on Australian Muslims; the determination to gag advocacy with the threat of de-funding civil society organisations, and/or the loss of charitable tax-free status for those that dare to speak out on behalf of the vulnerable; and the

abolition of funding of Commonwealth legal centres, and the attempt to gag the rest.

These are things that you don't think could happen in our communities that could happen in our back yard. We used to value people who stood up. We didn't always agree with them – people don't always agree with me – but when you stand up and you actually speak out on behalf of your community, you have a right to do so, and you have a right not to be punished as a result.

I must admit even I was totally astonished, in fact it's pretty anger-making stuff, that when I went to address the community legal centres' conference in Wollongong a few months into last year, that the Attorney-General took \$25,000 off their budget – not because they'd done anything to deserve it but because I was on the agenda. I actually said to them, "Look, you know, you could have just asked me not to come. That's pretty serious stuff." And they said, and you need to understand just how courageous our advocates are, they said, "We won't be bullied like that. We know that we need to understand what your concerns are for working Australians, and the industrial relations laws. And the only way we can understand that is to listen. If the Attorney-General doesn't want us to do that, well then we'll actually make up our own minds."

Those people are your colleagues. They're your colleagues, they're our neighbours, they're decent Australians standing up. Likewise the churches, community groups and individuals who stood up for the rights of asylum seekers, for refugees, stood against the imprisonment of children and their parents, stood against the Pacific solution, and stood against the insecurity of temporary protection visas.

When Australians know something is wrong they will stand up and fight. And while we have been shocked to see the public and visible attack on NGOs, the de-funding of many NGOs because they've had an advocacy role, the threat to their economic base so that they can't continue to do the work that they do on behalf of us all, then you say something's gone wrong. Something's gone wrong in a democracy. Because in order to have healthy communities we of course need to

have freedom, we need to have a strong sense of democracy, we need to have humane public policy.

I'm pleased to be able to say to this group that we have had such support, working Australians have had such support, from communities right across the country that last year we decided we would give something back. We asked ACOSS and the Australian Conservation Foundation and the National Council of Churches to be our partners in starting something unique in Australia, a civil society dialogue at the national level, to actually bring civil society leaders and representatives of the communities that they advocate on behalf of or with, to Canberra, to our parliament, to talk about the things that matter to us as people who are community workers.

It was such a rich dialogue and such an encouraging and optimistic discussion that we decided we would continue this dialogue, that we would hope to make it a more permanent feature on the landscape, that we would work towards the sort of outcomes that we could track progress against, that we all agreed with. And we could analyse public policy and track progress against it. And that we would meet again to build a consensus about a 10-year set of objectives for a decent Australia.

We plan to meet again this year, in a couple of months. What we hope to do this year is establish the kind of broad-based objectives with benchmarks underneath them that will allow us to analyse our own progress as a nation in terms of our communities and the people who live within them.

And while that's still a work in progress, the broad themes that we are talking about go to the heart of supporting the Bridging the Gap campaign for Indigenous Australia – the establishment and the guarantee, I should say, through our laws of decent work for economic wellbeing; the challenge of addressing climate change solutions; and the notion of healthier communities, in all of its guises – healthier communities where people feel included, where they have their needs met, where they feel safe, and of course where they have the

fundamental services of health, education, housing, transport and the like.

These things belong in any community, but they particularly belong in our community. In a rich nation where people have fought for decades, where our parents and grandparents fought to build a decent Australia where everybody could have the aspirations and indeed the freedoms that go along with a set of human rights and community freedoms, then we've got a lot to defend. In this nation, we have a lot to defend.

We have done enormously good work. And you can talk about all of the positive things that come from your work. So can we. We are very proud, as I said to a group of people last night, of the work that union members do. But we know that we've got a lot more to do.

And it really is the test that's set by Sir William Deane. He says that we judge ourselves by the way we treat the most vulnerable amongst us. So in that context can I leave you with the thought that this year you have a very powerful tool at your disposal. It's a right that everybody has in a democracy – it's the right to vote. People have the power to make a decision this year about what kind of Australia we want to be, whether we want to redress those issues that we're seeing diminish – in our terms, against the benchmarks we set – at an alarming rate.

I know that your work will go on regardless of the democratic decision at this election, but it would be so much easier, I suspect, if we could genuinely make judgements about a political future where we're on the same team with people who listen. It doesn't matter what political party, as long as they listen to Australians, to working people, to their communities, to the families who need assistance in a country where we should be standing with and for each other.

In that context we've got a bigger campaign to think about. I would urge you to look at the *New Matilda's* advocacy around a human rights act. It's first and foremost the only piece of plain English legislation that I've seen drafted, so it's very easy to read. It's on their website. It

covers off the principles and, beyond time in this country, the articulation of those principles as rights, within the context of the UN and the human rights framework, that we would want to see as a basis for guaranteeing a legacy to our children and our grandchildren, of decent, strong, caring communities.

Thank you.

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