

# JOAN KIRNER SOCIAL JUSTICE ORATION 2012.

Melbourne, Australia, May 29, 2012



**Communities in Control**  
One of the 16 Knowledge Centres  
of Our Community.



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Joan remains  
an enduring  
community  
activist and  
champion for  
the forgotten.

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## ABOUT JOAN KIRNER

Courageous, ceaseless, clever, compassionate – over many years, and in many theatres, The Hon. Joan Kirner AM has fought for community, equality and social justice.

Joan is perhaps best known for her work as the front-woman for the grassroots campaign for educational reform in Victoria in the 1970s, and later as that state's first female Premier.

She has also been prominent in the nation-changing struggles for social inclusion, women's equality, environmental protection, and community-driven community development.

Having played an integral role in the development of the social fabric of Australia, Joan remains an enduring community activist and champion for the forgotten.



**The 2012 Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration was delivered at the Communities in Control Conference, an initiative of Our Community and CatholicCare, in Moonee Ponds on Tuesday, May 29, 2012**

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## JOAN KIRNER

I would like to acknowledge the Kulin nation, and its elders, past and present, and thank them for their contribution to building a socially just Australia.

I would also like to acknowledge Carol Schwartz, the inspiring Chair of Our Community, and I would like to pay tribute to Fr Joe Caddy and Denis Moriarty, co-chairs of the Communities in Control Conference. What a special role you have played in recognising the need of communities for knowledge of the big picture, and the inspiration we need to individually and collectively organise and make a difference.

I also acknowledge the people at this conference – the people from community, business and government organisations, who work to ensure this nation continues to embrace the universal values of human rights, social and economic justice and environmental sustainability. It's great to have Maryborough Neighbourhood Renewal here as well.

After all the inspiration and networking of this conference, I hope you will be further inspired to meet the challenge of the conference program: We are ready; we are passionate; we are brave enough to continue to work together to shape a socially just nation.

I am honoured to be asked to present to you the second Social Justice Oration. I acknowledge the support of Our Community staff, especially Denis Moriarty, Kathy Richardson and Chris Borthwick, in preparing this speech.

I am also honoured to be asked to follow friend and colleague Sharan Burrow, President of the International Congress of Trade Unions, who presented the 2011 Social Justice Oration, and sends you all her best wishes.

And I am honoured by my friend and our Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, in introducing this Oration.

I have known Julia Gillard for 30 years. I know she truly believes in equity and social justice and is determined to implement those principles in government. Just take a careful look at her family leave, aged care, disability, child care and school education initiatives.

Australia has made great strides in laying the foundation of social justice in our nation – but there is still much for us, as future activists, to do to achieve a socially and economically best world, and to ward off the emerging threat of the Big Society.

So first let's be clear about what we mean by social justice. Children's views of social justice seem a natural reference point here. If they are anything like my nine-year-old grandson Joachim, they are pretty clear.


One of his favourite sayings is, "That's not fair!" And while his comments usually refer to how he is treated by his sister, teachers or parents, his analysis doesn't stop there. They also apply to television stories of starving children in parts of Africa, bullying at school, umpires' decisions in football, hockey or soccer, innocent victims of war.

Joachim is pretty clear about the concept and practice of fairness within his own experience. I look forward to him practising that concept with others in the adult world.

And when he says to me, "Nan, that's not fair!" What do I say to him? **"What are you going to do about it!"**

I am honoured because I know I share with Our Community members, and this audience, and the many church and community organisations and foundations not here today, a passionate commitment to a nation based on democracy, mutual respect, human rights, equity, environmental sustainability and community ownership.





That is why I have been a participant and partner since the Whitlam years in developing policies and programs that open up equal opportunity for women and girls, children in disadvantaged and remote schools, children and adults with special needs, communities faced with inter-generational disadvantage.

Over the past 40 years it has been fantastic to have been an active participant in successful community-based social justice programs. It was a privilege to lead a Labor Government which closed that hell-hole asylum for people with mental and physical disabilities called Caloola, in Sunbury, and replaced it with supported community living. It was a joy to meet some of those former inmates transformed and happy living in our Williamstown community.

What a privilege it was to be a partner with community activists in helping to ensure our principles of community ownership, participation, social justice and equity were underpinned by government policy, programs and funding in Victoria and Australia for much of the 1970s, the 1980s and the first decade of this century.

And what an opportunity now to continue to advocate those principles as the Victorian Communities Ambassador –and to work with so many people in this room and in the community.

I am delighted that one of these place-based Neighbourhood Renewal Programs has just received the Joan Kirner Social Justice Award, courtesy of Carol Schwartz, of the Trawalla Foundation, and Our Community.

Congratulations to the Maryborough Neighbourhood Renewal Program and all the others who work every day to turn disadvantaged communities from so called losers to winners – shaping their own futures.

In community development, we all know from theory and experience that if social justice is to work for us as individuals, it must work equally for others. The current public and media preoccupation with the individual good has to be balanced by an understanding that a strong and successful nation has to be also focused on enhancing the common good.

Two of the facts which underpin my passion for social justice are encapsulated by Professors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in their compulsory reading for activists, *“The Spirit Level.”*

They demonstrate that:

**“The vast majority of the population is harmed by greater inequality.”**

and

**“The effects of inequality are not confined to the least well-off; instead they affect the vast majority of the population.”**

Joe Hockey, Shadow Federal Treasurer, recently suggested that the “Age of Entitlement” was dead. For a moment I thought he was saying the “Age of Enlightenment” was dead (I thought he could be right), but then I listened more carefully and a cold shudder went down my spine – he meant the “Age of Entitlement” was dead.

Surely he wasn’t suggesting that the strength of our nation’s progress is based on breaking the link between an economically successful society and one which is socially just with social justice obligations? In my view, a society which breaks that link is on the road to social division and economic disintegration.

As one of yesterday’s excellent speakers, Dr James Whelan, asked, do we really want to follow UK Prime Minister David Cameron in redefining the role of the public sector as subservient to the private sector and reliant on an under-resourced community sector?

Let’s be clear: we can and we must afford social and economic justice in Australia.

On the United Nations **Human Development Index** we in Australia are second out of 187 countries, just behind Norway and a 185 places above the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Australians have the **highest median wealth** in the world. Not the highest average, because even now we have fewer billionaires than other countries, but the highest median. Higher than the US, higher than Japan, higher than Switzerland.

We build the **biggest houses in the world**; the average new home has gone up in size by a third – 50 square metres – in the past 25 years, over a time when the average family size has dropped.

Yes, many are homeless, and their problems can't be dismissed – but their claims on us are so strong precisely because the rest of us are relatively well off.

The good news for all of us is that Australia's median wealth means we don't have to put off national and community action to establish Australia as a social justice beacon.

But a key question remains: Do we have the will to go further and invest our wealth for the benefit of all Australians?

And I mean “we” as a community. Because if the community has the will – government takes the action.

We can demonstrate clearly where the investment needs are. For example: we know that the citizens of Melbourne's wealthy suburbs live a life expectancy of 4.5 years more than the citizens living in our lower income, employment and services areas of the western suburbs.

We also know that, on average, city dwellers have a longer life expectancy than country folk.

We know that Indigenous people have a life expectancy of 17 years less than the national average. We know that Joachim would say, “That's not fair!” “No, it's not,” Nanna would add – and it's a disgrace – it is a shame job for all Australians.

So our question for this 10th Communities in Control Conference, and the last in this format, is, **“what are we, as community activists, going to do about it?”**

## **Actions for Social Justice**

So we ask ourselves – what can we do, as individuals, and as a nation of communities, to achieve social justice?

Firstly, we can reject the often offered solution of “citizen choice” in the basic areas of education and health. Anatole France said once:

**“The market, in its majestic equality, allows the poor as well as the rich to choose to go to private schools, use private hospitals and have top lawyers.”**

Frankly, I believe the concept of choice is a load of rubbish as a basis for social justice.

I grew up in the western suburbs. Like many local dads, my dad was a fitter and turner. He was out

of work during the 1930s Depression and he had to ask his dad for a loan to maintain his house payments. He'd pay him back when he got a job.

He and others like him could have gone on choosing until they was blue in the face – but their children were never going to go to the top private schools. Sure, he had the right to choose – a right almost deified by Conservatives – but never would he have the money to back up that choice for my education.

My parents and their friends knew that the only way their children would succeed in education and benefit from climbing the meritocracy ladder and, in my case, become a teacher was through our parents advocating, working for, and shaping and insisting on governments providing a quality public education and health system.

I lost count of the number of fundraising events I went to in the 1940s and 1950s, and the number of raffle tickets I helped sell to build the Essendon Hospital and equip the Aberfeldie Primary School.

But they knew then – and we know now – what correlates with prosperity for our nation – indeed all our nations:

- A quality, free, accessible and participatory public education system;
- An accessible and affordable top quality public health system (both preventative and remedial);
- Effective, cheap public transport;
- A vibrant and inclusive cultural life;
- An ongoing investment in a sustainable environment;
- The right to have a say; and
- The responsibility to participate in shaping our own future.

These are the public goods that a society as rich as ours must provide through a fair and equitable taxation system based on what companies and people can afford to pay.

Those with wealth – companies and individuals – should be required to invest in the Australian nation.

They should get a fair return on their investment, but so should their fellow citizens from whose land or labour they gain their wealth.

I get angry that in Australia, the country of the fair go, the richest 20% have seven times the income of the lowest 20%.

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The richest Japanese have about half that ratio of their nation's wealth.

And the gap in Australia between those who have and those who have not is getting larger. During the Global Financial Crisis the net worth of the top end of town went up 15% in four years. At the bottom end of wealth scale, the net worth went up 1% at the same time.

Yet we know, as voters and as citizens of the world, that the happiest, most productive countries in the world are those where there is the least gap between highest and lowest income earners. This is not about earnings or class envy. It is about ensuring the quality of life of all our people, in Australia and the world, is underpinned and sustained by shared wealth.

Increasingly in Australia, as the Gonski Report demonstrated, we are creating a divided education (and health) system – public versus private.

Just look at the yawning gap between higher and lower school retention rates and VCE scores in well resourced private schools compared with the state or Catholic schools in lower socio-economic areas.

For the future good of our society we desperately need to invest big bikkies in our education system in ways which ensure that no child's educational opportunity, from child care to tertiary placement, is inhibited by their parents' income or the school's location.

Of course, some individual children from low socio-economic or difficult circumstances can succeed in schooling, but social justice requires that all children can succeed in ways which meet their abilities and needs.

If Australia is to be a socially just country then in all our policies – from those affecting refugees to those concerning economics – must recognise the claims of common humanity, as well as system and individual obligations; community, government and business responsibilities.

When individuals, communities, governments and business recognise and practise common humanity

we can build a productive and progressive nation which can achieve social justice and economic justice and environmental sustainability.

But let's not be naïve. There are interests in all societies who want to divide and distract us from our common purpose of achieving social justice. Tapping into our fear of change or retribution is their most common strategy. The second strategy is to convince you we can't afford social justice. It's nonsense.

Over the past five years we have made some great gains, the acceptance of equal pay principles and its gradual implementation being a real breakthrough in a 40-year campaign. Don't give up hope when the going gets tough. Get together, get angry and get organised.

From my long experience of politics and community, I can tell you that when community action is based on shared social justice values and benefits to the common good, and we are innovative, well organised and persistent – social justice wins.

I have been clear about my values. They are:

- People matter;
- Women matter as much as men do;
- All people deserve to be treated with respect (and treating people with respect gains respect);
- People affected by decisions should be part of making them;
- Equity before the law and in the distribution of resources underpins a successful, socially just society.

I found that maintaining your integrity, as an advocate for leaders, is a whole lot easier if people know what you stand for in words and action. As hard as it is to walk the talk, if at times you fail you can explain and account for your actions.



## Conclusion

When considering your own future, may I offer you the words of an Aboriginal leader who is one of my heroines, Lillian Holt. As Chair of the Centenary of Federation, when I asked Lillian tentatively how indigenous people might want to celebrate the Centenary of Federation, she told me.

**“Joan, I think we should talk about racism.”**

(I have to say I looked sceptical and doubtful). Lillian continued,

**“That means talking about healing.  
We can celebrate this country together  
when we understand that what diminishes me  
as a black person, diminishes all Australians.”**

So, your homework from this conference is:

- Re-state and re-commit to your values;
- Plan your individual and collective campaign to strengthen social justice in Australia;
- Be personally and collectively active in building a universal early childhood education (0- 6 years) with parent support;
- Ensure we have an education, training and employment system which has rewarding and effective employment pathways for all students; particularly those who need a second-chance pathway. Universal employment is another essential base for a socially just and productive nation.
- Insist on our collective responsibility to close the gap in income distribution and provision of services for all citizens – even if it hurts you personally a bit.
- Continue to build an Australian society which is free from violence and respects and enhances our common humanity and our common environment.

You people here today, and your children, you are the future. You can ensure that Australia is a socially just nation.

Our task as social justice advocates is to enhance humanity. Thank you for what you are already doing for our common humanity, and may you accept the challenge to keep doing it.

# WHAT IS COMMUNITIES IN CONTROL?

**Communities in Control** is the biggest annual gathering of community sector workers, volunteers and supporters - each year bringing together a stellar list of speakers and more than 1000 delegates to listen, debate, network, exchange tips and strategies, and - perhaps most importantly - recharge.

Since its inception in 2003, the conference has provided a platform and outlet for the very premise of Communities in Control – that for communities to survive and thrive, they must be in charge of their own destinies; that they must be given practical support to set their own priorities, design their own approaches, and create their own solutions; and that to do this will ultimately create safer, healthier communities.

Allowing communities to take control can be a hard pill to swallow - because it is hard, because the results can be slow to emerge, and because it raises all manner of practical questions:

1. How does a community group get off the treadmill of the old, pragmatic, one-small-problem-at-a-time approach that constrains its capacity for more strategic innovation and reform? (Many community groups and organisations are quite clearly caught up in this perennial problem of “projectitis”.)
2. What are the key criteria for building a new generation of community groups and organisations whose heritage is no longer their destiny?
3. What are the generic principles of this new community innovation and reform agenda?

Working together, Communities in Control supporters are marching towards the answers.

**The Communities in Control Conference is the result of an ongoing partnership between the Group Managing Director of Our Community, Denis Moriarty, and the CEO of CatholicCare, Fr Joe Caddy, and their respective organisations.**

[www.ourcommunity.com.au](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au)

[www.ccam.org.au](http://www.ccam.org.au)

**2012 marked the 10th year of the conference, which is now in recess. If you would like to contribute your thoughts on the way forward for Communities in Control, email to [service@ourcommunity.com.au](mailto:service@ourcommunity.com.au)**



