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Government Works: The OurSay Panel Responds

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 28 & 29 May, 2012

Introduction:

Eyal Halamish

CEO, OurSay.org

Panel:

John Thwaites

Former Deputy Premier of Victoria

Fran Bailey

Former Member for McEwen

Stephen Mayne

Founder of crikey.com.au, Councillor, Manningham Council, shareholder activist

Panel facilitated by:

Brett de Hoedt

Mayor, Hootville Communications

Eyal Halamish (Monday, May 28, 2012):

I wanted to pay my respects to the traditional owners and also thank you to the Honourable Peter Ryan for being here and thank you Joan Kirner for being here as well.

Just to kick off, I wanted everyone in the room to stand up. I want you to think about one thing, one issue that burns inside of you, something that you go home at night and you think about. Maybe it's the thing that wakes you up in the morning and gets you to work. It's the thing that burns inside of you on a regular basis and, in fact, maybe it's something you want to pose to the government, or something you want to pose to someone who can actually make a decision about it.

Think about that one thing. When I count to three I want you to say that thing out loud. One, two, three.

[Audience members speak.]

Amazing. Right now we had all those ideas, those concepts flying through the air, bumping into each other, crashing into one another.

Now imagine if we could capture every single one of those issues that you care about and find other people in this room who are about those issues, get them to promote or prioritise those issues and pose them to people in government or people in positions of power that can actually do something about those issues, bringing us together on the issues that we care about and putting them in places where we can do something about them.

That very crazy idea that I just talked about, that's the reason we created OurSay. It's a website. It's also an organisation that works offline to help organisations think about the issues that they care about, help individuals think about the issues that they care about, pose questions about those issues and then prioritise them online and then put those to people in positions of power, such as government officials or the CEOs of major organisations in Australia.

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So, as was mentioned before by Denis, we are working with Communities in Control to do that at this very conference. For the past two weeks we've had OurSay.org running, where people could write questions they cared about and then invite people using Facebook or Twitter, or, for those who don't use those social media technologies, on your emails, or even just invite people and drag them over to your laptop and get them to vote for your question.

Just outside this room there are a couple of computers set up where you can go and write a question about an issue that you care about and try to drag one, two, even five people at this conference to vote for your question. So the game is on and it's up to you to see if you can get your question into the top three.

Tomorrow, in the afternoon, we're going to take those top two or three questions and we're going to pose them to the people who are either currently or former members of government. We're going to have Stephen Mayne, John Thwaites and Fran Bailey responding to the top three questions on OurSay, the ones that you're going to prioritise in the next couple of days.

After this conference, we're going to take it beyond. We're going to spend the next two weeks enabling you to prioritise those questions. We're going to take them to three levels of government, local level, state level and at a federal level, and get them to respond either with a policy statement or just a vocal response to the questions that you have about the community sector.

To tell you a little bit about how the OurSay game works, you go to the website, you register with your email and then you confirm your email. Then you can go to the site and post your question. You get seven votes, which means if you got five people at this conference to vote for your question right now, you would be in the top three questions because the top three questions are only at about 40 votes each, plus one that's actually skyrocketed to the top with about 700 votes. If we could get 100 people at this conference to vote for one question, you'd be competing in the top spot.

It's an amazing opportunity to see how you can sow the public agenda for the issues that government are responding to. It's also a great opportunity to take that beyond this conference and continue the conversation about the issues that you care about.

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So get involved. After we leave this room post your questions, vote for them and tell your friends and family outside this conference about the issues you care about. We'll see who's winning by tomorrow afternoon.

Thanks so much.

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Brett de Hoedt (Tuesday, May 29, 2012):

It's time to have an OurSay panel. Greetings to you all and welcome back. My name is Brett de Hoedt.

We are getting political. We have not one but three politicians, current and former, ex and exiting, local, state and federal. They are about to take your questions.

You've heard a lot about the interweb and how social media is going to bring social justice. Well, I must confess, this session, 25 minutes, a short, sharp session is inspired by a website, oursay.org. Eyal Halamish, one of the founders of the site, explained it to you yesterday. Does anyone here need to get a grip on how the site works?

Who has voted on the site in the last 24 hours? Great. Do you like it? It gives you access to people who sometimes don't return your calls or write back or agree to meet with you.

They gather the powerful, pose your questions. And it's an opportunity for you to organise and not just suggest questions but campaign for them. So it is something of a meritocracy as well.

It seems now, thanks to OurSay, that the internet is about more than just online sports betting and hard-core pornography, although they're perhaps both more profitable.

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Folks, we have three speakers, three panellists, answering your questions. And I can definitely say that they are your questions. The top three at least have been voted on over the last few days alone.

So these are your questions. Panellists, these are the questions from the people in the room. Without further ado let me introduce the panellists to you.

John Thwaites is the former Deputy Premier of Victoria. Some of you might be familiar with his work with the social policy, 'A Fairer Victoria'. During his time in Parliament he served as Minister for Health, Planning, Environment, Water, Communities and Climate Change.

Since wrapping up, quite unexpectedly, his career, he's followed his passions of environmental protection, climate change, sustainability, CSR and of course these days he is a professorial fellow at Monash University.

Actually, John, we have a lot in common. I have an Associate Diploma in Writing and Editing from Holmesglen TAFE. It's just a professional courtesy when two academics meet...Later on we'll compare leather patches on our plaid jackets and drink port.

I only have a TAFE education. There have been some savage cutbacks to TAFE in Victoria. You're aware of that? I went to Holmesglen, probably the biggest TAFE in Australia, and it's going to be turned into a Bunnings, so bad are the cutbacks. They are consolidating all the academic roles of the TAFE into the helpdesk so it all comes out even.

Are there any women in the room? Any feminists of any gender? Well then you might be interested to meet the first woman to represent a rural electorate in the history of our federation, Fran Bailey, ladies and gentlemen.

During her time in parliament, she held portfolios like tourism, defence, employment services, small business. You also had a phrase grafted to your name Fran Bailey, and that was "popular local member".

And Fran Bailey, popular local member for the seat of McEwen, popular local member for the most marginal seat in the country, you had those words welded to your name in every bit of

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media coverage about you. And there was a lot, because you held the seat, lost the seat, won back the seat, showing tenacity, as you'd expect from a popular local member. And then you had about nine months in the court of disputed returns etc. because it was so marginal they had to count every vote.

Today Fran is happily, I would presume, retired from that game but is chair of the Animal Aid Foundation and director of the International Women's Federation of Commerce and Industry. Fran was very much involved in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires. Please make Fran very welcome.

No stranger to the Communities in Control stage is Stephen Mayne. Stephen Mayne is the outspoken, controversial founder of crikey.com.au, a persistent thorn in the sides of journalists and boardrooms across the country. He was once Jeff Kennett's press secretary, then he became a turncoat and ran against him in the 1999 elections. Thanks for breaking up the band Yoko.

He failed in that attempt and thus began one of the world's longest ever losing streaks. You were always running for stuff. RACV was a persistent target. He wanted the stature, he wanted the kudos, he wanted the free parking, he wanted the discount card. No, he wanted to serve the community.

And that's what he's been doing since 2008 as a councillor with Manningham Council, here in Melbourne, a position he plans to step away from later this year.

Stephen, weren't you on the tourism sub-committee for Manningham City Council? What are they going to do without you?

He's a very well-known shareholder activist and recently started a winning streak by becoming a director of the Australian Shareholders' Association. Please make Stephen very welcome.

I have in my hot little hand the hottest questions on the interweb, as voted mainly by you and other people out there. I hope you've taken that opportunity to do just that, to set the agenda and put the communities in control.

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By the way, I have been part of this site early on since Eyal conceived it with his co-founders. And it always amazes me what a small, passionate, entirely under-resourced, entirely volunteer-driven group can achieve. So congratulations to OurSay, an incredible opportunity for the community sector.

Here's question number one – and, panel, I will take your responses in any order they come. It goes a little bit like this:

“Victorian Premier Ted Baillieu supports voluntary euthanasia. So do the overwhelming majority of Victorians and Australians across all states and territories. Why isn't it law?”

Over to the panel.

Fran Bailey:

You know what they say, if you want something difficult you always give it to a woman to do. I know guys, that was shameless.

I've had a look at these questions and I think we are starting with the most difficult one. But before I respond I just wanted to take the opportunity to thank all of you. I really don't think you're thanked sufficiently for all of the work that you do within your own communities. So I'd like to place that personally on the record.

I think this is a difficult issue. I would state personally that I'm in favour of this. Recently I'm sure that I heard that the Minister for Health had introduced some legislation whereby people making a will can spell out in detail what they would accept or not accept if they were confronted with a situation where they were not able to make a determination; for example, if they needed resuscitation or if they were involved in a serious accident and they were in a vegetative state, so that their families were very clear about what the wishes are of that person involved.

The question, of course, is why hasn't government moved on this? And it hasn't moved on it because while some reports will say that a majority of the community is in favour of it,

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someone will always come up with another report that says the majority are not in favour of it.

Governments, by their very nature, can be out in front on some issues, but on an issue which is such a deeply personal issue, I don't think that any government, no matter what its political stripes, would be prepared to get way out in front.

So I think that then raises the issue, what does the community do about trying to convince a government that what they want to achieve is in fact supported by the majority of the community?

I actually have a rule, and I certainly used it when I was a minister, that people who would come to me to lobby about an issue, to test that issue, you really had to test the people who were presenting that issue, test how well researched was the issue that they were trying to convince you to agree with.

So I think, actually, there probably is still a lot more work that needs to be done within the communities to convince government that this in fact is something that government should move on.

John Thwaites:

I'd say a few things. First, as an ex-politician, ex-parliamentarian I'd make it clear that I never felt that I was bound to follow what the majority view was. The fact that the majority of people might, in a poll, say that they support euthanasia is not necessarily going to be the key factor for me. I'd weigh up the pros and cons for myself.

To give an example, I put capital punishment where, for many periods of history in Australia, if you asked, "Do you support capital punishment?" you would have got the majority of people supporting it. And you certainly have that in Canada and the US today, and I wouldn't support that.

So I do think politicians and governments have a responsibility to go beyond simply accepting what a poll says.

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And I also think that parliamentarians, in making laws, are in a different position to people who are responding to a poll because on an issue like euthanasia, you're not just giving a general view about whether in principle people ought to be able to choose to die with some form of assistance. It's also about all the safeguards and risks around that.

Certainly, for me, that's one of the things that would weigh pretty heavily. I place such a high priority on human life that I'd be very, very concerned to ensure that there are great safeguards before euthanasia were introduced.

And, as Fran said, you've got to do that research. I'm not sure that I'd be convinced that the safeguards are there. I have that position not on the basis of any religious beliefs I have but more simply on the basis of my concern that things can be abused, that laws can be abused and you have to protect people.

So that would be my answer as to why it hasn't happened. I think a lot of politicians would be like myself, they wouldn't necessarily be swayed by what the poll says and they would be concerned about safeguards and risks.

Stephen Mayne:

I think it's one of those issues, and maybe you'd include pokies, drug prohibition policies, gay marriage, where yes, there is a clear majority, but it's not in the public's top 10. So it's not a vote changer.

So when Philip Nitschke ran against my local member, Kevin Andrews, in 2007 he got 3.9% of the vote.

Brett de Hoedt:

You know what that's like.

Stephen Mayne:

I do. He got a bit more than I usually get so he almost got his deposit back.

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And when it was tested on the floor of the Federal Parliament, it was 88 to 35 when Kevin Andrews put up his private member's bill. There's only been 15 private member's bills get up federally. So the politicians felt quite strongly about it.

I think there is a bit of a skew within our political representation towards the conservative on the social issues, the religious right, the conservative Catholics within the ALP. I think you see that in the Senate and the way the voting systems get done. If you go to a Liberal preselection these days it's often the abortion, these conservative church-driven issues, that often get raised.

So I think there is a bit of a gerrymander and a skew in terms of where the political representation sits. But there isn't enough of a coordinated campaign.

I think politicians are very nervous, as John said, about making laws that can end someone's life – and, absolutely, about the complexities and the sensitivities. I remember Peter Costello's line, about the children wanting access to the cash, to the house and just the idea of politicians being responsible for that.

So I think with the rise of the Greens, the Greens are the only political party which is firmly in favour of this and they have been for a long time. I think the fiscal and demographic realities of health budgets will eventually catch up with this issue but it will probably be a long time coming before the reality of that does set in on this one.

Brett de Hoedt:

Thank you Stephen. Time is cruel. We could talk about that clearly for the entire session. I have done some work for a couple of key lobby groups on this issue, so I may be biased, but I don't anymore. According to some news polling, about 85% of people support euthanasia legislation. Can I call a snap poll in the room, who's in favour of legislation to make as an option dying with dignity, or euthanasia? Hands up if you're in favour. Yes, typical bunch of lefties, almost 100%.

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But isn't it interesting how sometimes an overwhelming majority is enough to justify law and sometimes it's not? I don't get that but we haven't got time to debate it, though I think it's a pretty deep question.

Question number two:

“One in 14 children in Australia is born without the capacity to gain, understand or use language. Without intervention they face a drastic future, so much so that 50% of youth offenders in this country have a serious oral language deficiency. Why, as a nation, are we not tackling the challenges that these children present us with?”

John Thwaites:

I'll start by saying I wasn't aware of this issue, certainly the extent to which it's set out in that question. So I suppose that's the first answer, that I don't think people in government, politics, are aware, and my recommendation would be if this is correct that there needs to be information and education for policy officers and the community and the media about the issues.

I guess the final thing to say is that I am very aware that the first and early years of a child's life are the most critical in determining the future of that person throughout adulthood. Once you get to about six or seven, if a child has had severe disadvantage or levels of abuse or other major difficulties then it's much more likely that the child will grow up into an adult that is unemployed, has mental illness, is in prison or has a generally unsatisfactory life. And so investing in those early years is probably the most important thing we as governments can do.

Fran Bailey:

Thanks John. I was unaware of those figures also. The first question that came to my mind is how do these children get through to high school without it being detected that they don't have these oral or written skills?

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And it goes without saying that the major stumbling block to any future learning, to be able to be optimising any individual's own capacities, you really must have those oral and written skills.

So therefore a couple of questions come to mind. Obviously it's in primary school where children are taught to read if they can't read, and many do of course when they start school.

Sometimes I think we expect too much of our teachers. They certainly have a very overcrowded curriculum in many ways. I guess class sizes are also an issue because once again I keep coming back to the question, how do these children keep advancing through our education system without these very basic skills?

So therefore we've got to look at what programs we've got in school, how do we test, how do we find out whether our children are getting these crucial skills? Should it be done through the national curriculum approach?

I obviously always speak from a federal perspective but I think these figures would obviously be representative across the nation, so therefore maybe we should be looking at this from a nationalist perspective.

Stephen Mayne:

I think Barack Obama is the best example of how far great oral skills can take you. I remember speaking to a top 30 public company chair in Australia and saying, "What is your greatest skill? What is the most important skill of being a chair of a \$15 million public company?"

The response was, "The ability to sit around the table and orally communicate with your colleagues."

It just got me thinking that people don't advocate oral skills enough in our society. Maybe Fran's right about the overcrowded curriculums. I'm a supporter of NAPLAN in the sense that it's the early detection, or will help with detection, and therefore with resourcing and early intervention and responding.

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But maybe there are some other programs. Councils run libraries across the country, many of them subscale. We haven't invested enough in the technology. There isn't a national heavy approach to libraries. Libraries need to be a key part of this. Young kids in libraries, reading days.

Another one we talk about is the social isolation of nursing homes. I'm on the board of a nursing home and I was reading this thinking, why haven't we got the kids coming in and reading to our residents?

Why aren't we, right across, libraries and all elements of the community, absolutely highlighting the emphasis of oral presentation? We should do Toastmasters and all those things. You don't hear much about Toastmasters these days, about the importance of those oral presentations.

So I think that statistic and that alignment of the way the question was presented was also a surprise to me. I think maybe we've just taken our eye off the ball as to the absolute social power that comes from an ability to articulate and present well. You have to be able read to do that but then you have to take that next step and to be able to communicate orally.

So I think it's great to have this issue raised because we don't appreciate the importance of it.

Brett de Hoedt:

Right, question number three, a totally different issue, and it goes a little bit like this. It's simple:

“Let's set up nursing homes for young people. Why isn't the government helping to make this happen?”

Over to you, panel. We like this question don't we? I thought so.

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Fran Bailey:

This is a question that I have had some experience with and I think it's an issue that is often hidden in society and far too few of our members of parliament, I think, are even aware of it.

I can still vividly remember going to a nursing home in my electorate and being taken on a tour through the nursing home, and I found it very confronting, I have to say, to discover that there were two relatively young people there. One had MS and the other one was a young man who had very sadly come off a motorcycle and had severe head injuries.

Now, there was no-one there to actually cater to the needs of those two people. There were no activities. Certainly the young woman with MS was fully alert to what was happening in her surroundings.

I actually still feel upset even thinking about that day because the honest answer is you know that not much has been done. And that description that I've just given you, that happened to me almost 20 years ago.

I met, just briefly before we came up on stage, I think it's Jennifer who was one of the people responsible for this question. Her Rotary Club, I think, is very interested in pursuing this. This is an issue that really does have to be brought to the attention of our members of parliament at all levels of government.

When I first read the question I didn't like the term nursing home for young people because so many of them do have their mental faculties and they're very aware of the environment in which they have to be placed.

Probably the lead has to come from the national government, the Federal Government. The states and local governments certainly have a role to play. How it can be progressed more quickly is the challenge.

I think that this is an issue that the community, and particularly can I see within regional communities who have even less access to facilities than those living in our major capital cities, this has to be brought to the attention of government. And really when each of you goes

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back out to your respective organisations, no matter which area you work in, this is an issue that I think that you would be doing our entire society a great benefit if you were to raise this issue with whoever was your local MP, at a local, state and federal level, because change can only happen in this area if all three levels of government really get on and are singing from the same hymn sheet.

It's a travesty that this has been allowed to occur for so long and so little has been done. And these people are some of the most vulnerable in our society and they deserve a much, much better go than what they're getting.

John Thwaites:

I certainly agree with Fran's point and I think it's an important point not to class it as a nursing home per se. It is a long-term place for people to live, young people who have either been injured or suffer from severe and debilitating illnesses.

To get to the core of why this occurs, it's essentially a cost-shifting issue between state and federal governments. And neither state nor federal governments have been prepared to take on the huge financial cost which it would be of providing adequate long-term places.

And partly because of their fear of the dollars, they've also shied away from coming up with some solutions which actually might be innovative and provide a much better solution than we've got now.

I know Bronwyn Pike, when she was Minister for Health, certainly started a process in Victoria of some negotiation with a Commonwealth Government, with a view to providing some better facilities. But the demand is far, far greater than the supply of places that we have.

I suppose the final thing I'd say is this is another issue, like the National Disability Scheme, where the community has to make a real assessment about whether it's going to continue to want to pay less tax and have a generally low taxing country, or whether we're going to be a community that pays a little more and provides a fairer and broader range of services to our citizens, because there will be a cost. You can't be dishonest about that. You have to be

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honest. There's going to be a cost and the only way I can see it being met is by all the community agreeing that we're going to have to pay a little bit more in taxation.

Stephen Mayne:

John's certainly right about the cost shift, because the majority of young people in nursing homes go straight from hospital, the state-run hospitals, that they've been in for six months, because the majority of these people are acquired brain injury patients.

It's the hospital looking around for somewhere to go and the nursing home is what happens. And they go straight into \$32 a day out of Canberra plus the whole bond system which works with nursing homes.

I agree that the best way to answer this is through a national system through the National Disability Insurance Scheme. If you look at how the TAC works in Victoria, for people who are specifically injured on the roads, they have done quite a bunch of good, innovative programs and provided accommodation for their clients. Because they have the billions of dollars and because they have all the data you do see the TAC can do interventions.

Now, you don't have that sort of scale in the disability sector. I think some people would agree the disability sector is too fragmented. You don't therefore get that national approach looking at the data.

Clearly, the Department of Health and Ageing out of Canberra ought to be providing an incentive, a higher day rate or bond discount or something to get a small number of specialist accommodation, supported care within major regional centres and major groupings of local government areas in the bigger cities.

That hasn't come out of the Department of Health and Ageing because their mandate is the aged. And so they don't see it as an area where they should get involved.

So I'm very clear that a well-designed scheme nationally on disability will be the answer. It will cost money but it is totally unfair that we have great cover for people injured on the roads; that if you're injured at work it's pretty good as well; but if it's something you've got when you

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were born or some other disability, then the cover is just not there, it just falls away because of the lack of political representation and power for that category of people in society.

So the NDIS, in the way Bill Shorten originally announced, seemed to have bipartisan support. I think it will ultimately provide the answer, provided they give the incentives and take a national view, look at the data and actually direct the resources specifically to all the niche areas where action needs to be taken.

Brett de Hoedt:

Please thank our three panellists, Fran Bailey, popular local member, John Thwaites and Stephen Mayne.

Thank you folks. We will set you back into the wild.

By the way, if you care about that young person in nursing homes thing, the website to go to, or the campaign, is Building Better Lives. They punch way above their weight. For the voluntary euthanasia or dying with dignity issue, Your Last Right is the website to go to.

Folks, it's been an absolute pleasure to have been a part of this for a decade. It is the best gig of the year, it is when the community is within the majority and politicians and business and institutions come to you and you get to silently judge them.

So I hope you've enjoyed this year if it's your first or if it's your tenth and thank you for your time and indulgence always.

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