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## **The Great Debate: Neighbourhoods are Dead and the Individual Now Reigns Supreme**

Address to the Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 20 June, 2006

**For:** **Jacqui Katona**  
CEO, Lumbu Indigenous Community Foundation  
**Ass. Prof. Dr Christopher Newell AM**  
University of Tasmania

**Against:** **Peter Kenyon**  
Founder and CEO, Bank of I.D.E.A.S  
**Hutch Hussein**  
Business Development Manager,  
Northern Migrant Resource Centre

**Adjudicator:** **The Hon Joan Kirner AM**  
Former Premier of Victoria and Chair  
Ministerial Advisory Council on Victorian  
Communities

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**Joan Kirner:**

Thank you Rhonda and Joe for inviting me to chair this debate.

It's great fun to be chairing a debate; I'm sure it's better than reaching over the table in Parliament House as part of a debate, especially if you had Jeff on the other side. Because he usually won any debate. But not in the long term. Of course I'm not political.

But this is a really important debate. I should acknowledge Carol Schwartz too, the chair of Our Community, who has joined us today. Thank you very much Carol for your inspiration and leadership at Our Community. It's greatly appreciated.

So looking out here it's just fabulous and we're all part of this debate. And the debate is essentially: is our heartfelt belief in neighbourhoods, is it passé, is it gone, is it finished and has the individual taken over?

And I don't know about you but I often feel challenged by the extent to which individual rights are put aside rather than the individual reigning supreme.

And my second thought on this debate is, well why do they have to be opposite? Isn't it possible to strengthen individuals in their community and the same time strengthen communities? Who actually makes it a competition? Are people naturally competitive, as some like to believe? Or to people actually want to live in good communities where their kids prosper or they prosper themselves.

I want to tell you a story that leads me to my position on this.

I took Michael, my eldest son to school, who is now 46 this year, so you can all do your mental calculations as to which birthday it is. Of course I was a child bride. And I was a bride.

But I took Michael to school at Croydon North Primary in 1965.

He'd been to kinder and we'd done the usual fight for a decent kinder bit out in the sticks as it was then. And we walked in, these young mums who were very keen that their children would succeed.

And I'd been a teacher, so I'd had a bit of a clue about the importance of education. My mum and dad had only gone to Grade 8, but they were absolutely determined I was going to have a good education and they went without things to allow me to do that, and they worked to support the state schools I went to.

And then I took him to school and the Principal stood out the front and in the calmest possible way said, "Your children are going to be in a class of 54 students." He didn't even apologise!

Mind you, it wasn't actually his fault; it was the system's fault. And in part it was the community's fault because we hadn't actually demanded quality education for every child in Victoria.

And if you think it was bad at Croydon North Primary then have a look at what it was like at Catholic schools and have a look at what it was like at Fitzroy North, where the new refugee kids then were being taught in broom cupboards. Literally taught in broom cupboards. And they were the kids who were saying to me as I went to visit as the parent activist, "What does grass blowing in the wind actually look like?"

So I thought along with the others, as I walked out of the classroom, and the Principal hadn't allowed any questions (I learnt quickly how to make principals answer questions of course after that). But we walked out to the front gate and as parents do, they gathered around the gate. And somebody said, "What are we going to do about this?"

And unfortunately the somebody was me. And I learnt very quickly in that, and this I think is the connection between the individual and the community, that if you want to change something for your own child then you have to change it for other children and with their parents, and as they get older, with the children.

And that's my biggest thought I guess about the topic of debate today. And I'm not just trying to play the role of peacemaker here.

Because I think the two arguments are connected, but it is also very important to sort these arguments through.

Because constantly we have thrown at us the competitive model, the fear model, all those things that divide us into individuals. And yet I've had the pleasure of chairing the Ministry of Advisory Committee on Victorian Communities for the last twelve months, which is advisory to John Thwaites on what works and what doesn't work in community strengthening, and our report will soon be released, based on what you've said to us and all the places we've visited.

And I note that people are having this debate, but on the other hand they're not just having a debate.

Community strengthening doesn't ever start with government. Community strengthening is something communities have been doing in Australia for thousands of years, because indigenous communities were doing it long before non-indigenous.

And what we're really talking about here is how communities can own the debate and own the process and own the progress, because that's the way for sustainable change.

Now we've got a group of terrific people here to be part of that debate and before I actually introduce them all I would like to acknowledge the Kulan Nation and pay my respect to their Elders, past and present and thank them for allowing us to use their land and for the custodianship they've showed.

And I hope we can learn from it and I think we are.

Now, we're going to do it in the proper, I think proper, proper as I can be, debate forum, and that means we'll have two speakers for, two speakers against in alternate order.

And they'll have, they can have a chip at each other as they pass through the argument, and then at the end the two lead speakers will actually sum up. I was actually quite autocratic about the leaders so I'll probably get some flak about that just because I had it in front of me really.

And then there'll be an opportunity for a short break so you can all exercise your shoulders, your tongues and anything else you wish to exercise.

And then question time, and in question time I'd be more than happy for people to formulate that additional point they wanted to make, as long as you keep it short. Because I think this is an ongoing debate.

And I'd also be very keen for people to say in Victoria particularly but across Australia as well, what you think of that government policy and practice could do to assist with this in partnership with other people, business and communities.

So we'll come to the questions a bit later, but first I have great pleasure in introducing speaker number one of the case for "Neighbourhoods are Dead and the Individual Now Reigns Supreme".

When I read Jacqui's CV here I thought there were two Jacqui Katonas. Because I can remember meeting Jacqui for I think the first time, though I'd seen her on television, at a quite social luncheon in Toorak.

And Jacqui and a wide range of women were there to talk about the whole issue of Kakadu and uranium mining. And Jacqui held us enthralled in terms of her community's stand, the organisation of that community's stand and all the almost octopus-like tentacles she was putting out to involve the broader community in making her cause and her community cause our cause.

And then I read this really modest CV and I thought, "Maybe there are two Jacqui Katonas". Well I'd love there to be two, in fact I'd love there to be 202. And there will be one day. Have you been breeding again? Well they did try to stamp you lot out, but you're the highest birth rate. Now Jacqui I'm not putting the birth rate entirely on you. But I'm going to read you the proper introduction - I've given it a real build up, but here's some facts on the matter.

Jacqui is currently a development worker, campaigner, researcher, editor and writer. She's got one of the best senses of humour, that's

not written in here. She's a member of the Djok Clan, located within Kakadu National Park. She's currently the CEO of the Lumbu Indigenous Community Foundation which is based in Brisbane.

She's worked for several Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander organisations, media and campaigns and has a broad range of experience in issues affecting indigenous communities, such as family removal and deaths in custody.

She's worked as the Co-ordinator of the National Coalition of Aboriginal Organisation Secretariat to ensure an organisational structure for information movement within a nation wide network of Aboriginal organisations, so she's been at the grass-roots and she's been at the organisational structure level.

She's represented this organisation at the United Nation's Working Party on Indigenous Populations in the area of information. In 1995 Jacqui was Stolen Generation's Project Officer for the Northern Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, providing assistance for the co-ordination of litigation on behalf of the stolen generation of the Northern Territory.

In 1996 she took up the position of Executive Officer of the Aboriginal Corporation in Kakadu, Gundjehmi, to work with family members assisting them establish organisational frameworks and strategies for land management and mitigation of negative social impacts experienced by the committee.

That means she organised to stop in past the deleterious impacts of uranium mining, in particular the third proposal. And she attracted women and men from across Australia to join her cause, including one some of you will know the 80 year old - nearly 90 year old - Molly Hatfield from Northcote, who rang me when she was over on a demonstration with Jacqui and said, "Can you go bail for me?" I said, "What?!! Where are you, what have you done in Northcote?" She said, "No no. I'm up in Kakadu."

So I don't know, getting old ladies into trouble. That's a bit much.

She's the recipient of a range of awards including the Australian Conservation Foundation's the late Peter Rawlinson Environment Award and the Island Nations' Gold Winning Environment Prize. And she's one great woman. Please welcome Jacqui Katona.

**Jacqui Katona:**

Thank you very much. Thank you all for your warm welcome here. And I argue for today that "Neighbourhoods are Dead and the Individual Reigns Supreme". But not in the way you think it might be argued.

I'm sure the other team, my esteemed colleagues and peers across the other side of the stage will celebrate neighbourhoods. They will tell you that they're part of the glue of our society.

I want you to think about neighbourhoods and what they mean to a whole range of people. Because I argue that neighbourhoods are not communities. Neighbourhoods are used, the word neighbourhood is used in a very different way. It doesn't represent the gel that keeps us together. It doesn't represent a future. Neighbourhood in fact is an economic term.

Neighbourhood allows governments to capture and contain human interaction. Our statistics are organised on the basis of neighbourhoods. I want to talk about the human beings; I want to talk about the individuals; I want to talk about the diversity that makes up the constructs that government uses to try and make us bland.

Neighbourhoods herd us into uniform lives. They make us targets of consumerism. Advertising agencies love neighbourhoods because they can calculate the amount of money that they can extract. Neighbourhoods have reduced our diversity to a polyglot. Neighbourhoods are not communities. Neighbourhoods are vessels into which governments can pump policy. Neighbourhoods allow the observation of the rat race.

Communities on the other hand are dynamic, energetic and they support individuals, individuals like you, individuals like me. Individuals with strengths, weaknesses. Individuals who work



together. Individuals who respect and support one another. Individuals who build and maintain communities. Individuals who indeed are communities.

I invite you and our colleagues across the table to get out of your neighbourhoods and get into your communities. You have individual talents. You have individual contributions. You are building a future which recognises the value of individuals and the needs of individuals, that individuals are the building blocks of communities, the cornerstones, the foundations.

Your individual courage working with your communities. Your individual inspiration. Your individual strength gathers others to communities. Celebrate the individual voices. Our collaboration as individuals is a gift for future generations. You have to listen when you hear other individuals. This is what we are reminded of when we have individual gatherings of individuals.

You have to think when you talk with other individuals. You have to give and take to build a community and grow a community.

Don't simply observe and generalise about neighbourhoods. Break out and claim your community as individuals. In this political climate we need the creativity of all individuals. We need every individual's talent. We need the inspiration of all individuals. Because it's too easy for this Federal Government to undermine the strength of our communities by using the Trojan Horse that neighbourhoods and the term similar gives to them as strengths.

Indigenous people need you as individuals to clearly understand us as individuals within our communities. Not fall prey to the generalisation which have neutralised the debate in Australia, and in fact that has painted me or other Aboriginal women and men as eternal victims.

I don't live in a neighbourhood of victims. I live with resilient individuals, vibrant individuals, individuals who want to take hold of opportunities for the future.



Individuals who inspire, connect with each other, enliven each other, lead each other to action. And build prosperity in our community, not achieve the economic outcomes that a government wants to see for a neighbourhood.

All those resources are vital and all those resources are contained in all of us as individuals who can collectively bring about change, change that's so necessary in the broader Australian community.

Following the debate that's been happening recently about Aboriginal issues, I think one thing that seemed to escape the glaze or the gaze of the media is the changes to the Aboriginal Land Rights Act that are taking place in the Northern Territory. Communities are becoming neighbourhoods, our Federal Minister is telling us.

Neighbourhoods which should be open for sale. And in fact the community of Galiwinku has been told that the services which other communities enjoy as part of standard of living, the average standard of living, services such as reasonably good sewerage systems, housing, clean water coming to you through a tap inside your house, those things aren't affordable in the neighbourhood of Galiwinku.

Galiwinku has to be open for business to access those services. They have to trade rights to land to enjoy the same standard of living as a majority of other Australians ...

The responsibility that you as individuals can take to bring about change, to join as a community, to act in solidarity with our community, that kind of change needs to happen in Australia. And that kind of change needs to happen with all of us understanding the path forward, not as a polyglot, not as people who operate under generalisations, but people who know and respect one another as individuals.

Our community includes all of us; we are all responsible to ourselves and each other as a community. Hiding behind economic terms like neighbourhood isn't going to Advance Australia Fair.

Thank you.

## **Joan Kirner:**

And how disciplined is she, she didn't even get the bell, didn't have to be belled. There you go. Thousands have tried. Contributing to a responsible community debate.

Speaker two, the first speaker "against" is Peter Kenyon, who many of you will know. He's a social entrepreneur and community enthusiast. I actually haven't met too many people who are more enthusiastic about building community from the ground up than Peter.

Now a lot of people think that community strengthening was invented in Victoria a few years ago. But it wasn't, though it has been greatly assisted by this government. Peter's been working around Australia on this issue for 15 years and I think I first met him in regional economic development.

He's also been working overseas and every time I hear him speak he puts a fresh and creative way to stimulate the debate on the twins of community and economic renewal.

He is motivated by all the things that Mary talked about so wonderfully this morning, about creating healthy, inclusive, sustainable and enterprising communities. His background is as a youth worker, a teacher, a very honourable profession, a youth education officer and a tertiary lecturer.

His employment experiences have included Director of Employment in WA, Manager of the Community Employment Development Unit in New Zealand, Co-ordinator of the Natal Job Creation and Enterprise Strategy in South Africa. His international consulting work involves assignments in more than forty countries. Heavens above, do you have a partner? You're as bad as me. Mine aren't in forty countries though!

Over the years Peter has become convinced of something that I'm passionately convinced about, as is Our Community, that one cannot develop communities from the top down. Nor from the outside in, but only from the inside out. And for their residents to invest themselves, ideas, assets and resources in the process.

In 1980 he created the Bank of IDEAS, which is an acronym which stands for Initiatives for the Development of Enterprising Action and Strategies.

The Bank of IDEAS works to promote such a shift and help with the necessary facilitation, ideas and skills. But it's more than that. It actually assists all of us who are working in and with communities to connect, because one of the things perhaps we don't do so well when we're working so hard in our own communities is actually share the stories and share what we've learnt and build on what others have learnt. And Peter is the master of doing just that.

Peter, please pick up as the first speaker for the case against.

**Peter Kenyon:**

Fellow conference attendees, isn't this an incredibly sad day. Isn't it an incredible wasted opportunity that we are spending two hours in this amazing event debating this particular issue.

Firstly, you know this conference for the last 2 ½ days has been listening to the extraordinary stories of the power of neighbourhood and community. Capped off by those amazing stories that Meredith Minkler just shared with us, that Tenderloin community. How many of us will ever forget the power within that particular neighbourhood.

And yes, Jacqui most of us are here to celebrate the power of neighbourhood and community, for which we do not apologise. We are advocates that communities and neighbourhoods are not dead, but really are the most important unit that brings together these individuals to hold hands and make a difference. Doesn't it grate each of us to listen to that word - "individualism" - keep coming through all the time.

Secondly, we've got the privilege of having someone like Jacqui here this morning and what do we do, we ask her to speak against this topic. Jacqui, you led one of the most powerful stories in the nation's history of the power of community, the way that that community in

Kakadu fought that uranium mining giant and won. It's in the folklore of the power of community, and yet we ask you to talk against it. Isn't that incredibly sad.

Thirdly, what a sad day that people like Rhonda and Joe Caddy would allow within a conference to give prominence and profile to these thoughts. And particularly to highlight the words of that high priestess of individualism, Maggie Thatcher. Those classic words that there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals. Joan, that must rankle every political bone in your body, to allow this to be happening.

And while Jacqui and her colleague Chris I'm sure will continue to share personal and community illustrations of why neighbourhoods and communities in decline, can I really share with you those stories of celebration from the half full bit of the glass.

Let's not focus any longer on the half empty bit. Let's focus on that half full bit, that experience that each of us on a daily basis see as we live and work within our neighbourhoods and communities, those stories that reinforce our belief that neighbourhood and community spirit is certainly not dead but is functioning, and in fact provides really the whole essence of hope for the future of our society and for our nation.

Firstly, can I just remind you what we've been reminded of often in this conference, that there are well over 700,000 community organisations that are operating throughout this country. Many of them, most of them working at the neighbourhood community level. What incredible organisational life for a nation of only 20 million people.

We were reminded by Phil Ruthven yesterday that levels of volunteerism are not actually in decline, that community giving is actually going up.

And in my area where I particularly want to work with young people, we are finding a phenomenal interest in the ability, the interest and the power of young people to start to actively get involved in their communities.

Go to a place like Bendigo, where that lead-on program over four years has mobilised hundreds of young people. And in the process those young people contributed over 80,000 hours of effort to building their neighbourhood through their initiatives and their programs.

Secondly, we've seen unprecedented interest in the whole area of neighbourhood economic development. For example, while we have seen the forces of corporate greed and the focus on trying to return to the individual shareholder, and the rationalisation that's seen the loss of many services in our neighbourhoods and our communities. While that's been going on we've also seen the forces of neighbourhoods coming together.

And I want to quote the incredible example of the community banking movement, probably the most exciting neighbourhood economic movement we've seen since the co-operative movement of the early part of the twentieth century.

We've seen because of this focus on the need to return to the individual profit and of the shareholders things that our opponents just want to raise all the time.

The fact that over 1000 bank branches have been closed down by those greedy little banks, the Big Four, in not only rural areas but low socio-economic suburbs of many of our cities.

But to see the response of people in our neighbourhoods and communities and today are 180 have mobilised collectively and established their own bank, where the profits have been returned back the community, where traditional services and jobs have been kept at that local effort.

That hasn't happened because of government, or corporate intervention. It's happened because people believe in the power of what they can do at the local level and within their own.

And the Bendigo Bank tell us that there are now over 2000 additional communities in dialogue with them about wanting to establish this

option within their neighbourhoods. And not just in rural areas but many of our suburbs and neighbourhoods of our cities.

And it's not a simple task these neighbourhoods have got to raise up to \$600,000 amongst themselves to do it. And yet places as small as Mukinbudin with its 400 people have managed to pull it off.

And it's not just banks but we're seeing communities and neighbourhoods mobilise to retain and establish services like the picture theatres and their retail outlets, and even airline services and thank God Rhonda the cops were rallying to keep those neighbourhood cops there.

Go to the little town at Kaniva and see where 2000 residents last year raised almost \$300,000 to keep their roadhouse and keep their garage functioning. And in the process turn it into an incredible meeting centre and focal point.

Six years ago, go to the NSW town of Yeoval where 450 residents had their hospital close down by the state government. But they had neighbourhood spirit, they rallied and those 450 people said, "Up you government; we're going to re-open this as a neighbourhood community run hospital".

And in the process staff went from four to 55. The number of beds have increased from eight to 35. Two new doctors have been added to the town and they've quadrupled the hospital held services that that community were able to provide. And we say neighbourhoods are dead? Communities are dead? Amazing!

Thirdly let me say that neighbourhoods are our incubators of intervention, of innovation when it comes to what communities can do in terms of that everlasting change of circumstances.

Let me just share with you a couple of illustrations of just what's happening around our own schools for example. This is the story of Yeoval. But you know, in my own community for example, where an intergenerational food club's been established in school where older people have come together. And there initiative has led to now over

180 other neighbourhood and schools starting to look at what they can do.

The whole walking school bus is something that's taking across the nation. People are beginning to see that at that local level we can intervene in what is just one of those fundamental things that we can actually do.

We are at the local level constantly demonstrating that we can be those incubators of innovation and that we can actually do it.

Can I just also share with you finally just the way that the spirit of neighbourhood compassion can start to actually operate. And one of the great stories is this particular woman who's suffering from this wasting disease, close to death. But needing people to be with her at every meal time to just encourage. And to be able to see how a neighbourhood could rally to find people to be there three meals a day, seven days a week just encouraging her. To me what an incredible example of that would only happen at the local neighbourhood area.

And today at the school Penny it's just great to see the difference in our lives, and she says it's that circle, she refers to that circle of support that my neighbourhood was able to create around me, has actually made, was has made the difference.

The other, Coleambally. Here is a community who said "Look we want to be an inclusive place, everyone we want to value within our community". And there they had a group of seven young women suffering from Down Syndrome. And what had the community done, it wouldn't have happened through state or corporate intervention. But those communities have created this incredible Coleambally café. It's almost thirty years old, run and managed by those young women. It's now the heart of the community.

And again an example of what a community, a neighbourhood of 500 people are able to achieve that we at that individualistic level and at that state level could never ever achieve.



And so that there are stories everywhere. Near where I live the Friendship Park that's been created because people said, "Let's create an inclusive park", where people and children of all abilities can enjoy. Again, what people are doing when people inspire to hold hands at the local level.

Can I conclude by re-stating my belief that we need to stand up strongly against this emphasis upon political and market place individualism. The way it values it individualism above all things. Nothing I can say will diminish or kill that desire by most of us to see the importance for community, neighbourhood and community connection.

And can I just leave you those wonderful words of Lief Christianson, who simply reminds us all, "All of us have a gene for community. We are yearning for that sense of connection and harmony and goodwill with others, living with shared resources and more co-operation than we do in mainstream culture."

May community, my neighbourhood live, and may we raise that flag unashamedly against those forces that attempt to reduce us to economic terms like individualism.

Thank you very much.

### **Joan Kirner**

Thank you very much Peter. You really cut me to the quick, I have to say, with the Thatcher comment. And I won't have Rhonda cut to the quick either so we both have to complain about that.

But I do remember with some amusement my daughter when I think she must've been about six or eight or something, when Maggie Thatcher became the first woman Prime Minister, although not the first woman leader of the UK.

And my poor daughter who'd been subject to the feminist movement for some time is sitting there in front of the telly, because they all had to watch the news and they still do. And she was looking quite

puzzled and I was getting the dinner, and she finally came over to me and she said, "Is she the first woman Prime Minister, is that the lady?" And I did debate the lady bit, and I just said, "Yes, yes." And she said, "Do we like her Mum?" My children grew up in such an atmosphere of freedom!

However, we're practising freedom here, freedom to reviews, freedom to debate and freedom to slide in one's argument. Have you noticed how neighbourhood slides into community and community slides back into neighbourhood? Can't resist that as an ex-English teacher. There are a few slides taking place, but fortunately not slippery slides down to being against community participation in whatever form and community rights in whatever form you describe it.

I hadn't met Chris Newell until today, I thought. But then I said to Denis (Moriarty), "No I think I have met him", we had once in WA. He's another traveller. I'm a bit worried about what he's going to say and do because he's been making noises like shooting people down at this table. Now I'm sure he'll explain that later, but when he goes "Pow!" I think "My goodness me. Watch out Hutch!" But in his real life he's Associate Professor in Medical Ethics within the School of Medicine at the University of Tassie.

He's in charge of the Personal and Professional Development theme of the Tasmanian medical course, one of five themes in the medical school's new integrated undergraduate curriculum. Wow, you mean they look at people as a whole?

**Chris:**

Well we do our best.

**Joan:**

You do your best, good.

**Chris:**

It's causing enormous trauma for my colleagues in the medical school. They actually need medical treatment as a consequence.

**Joan:**

As part of this work Chris, as you can tell, teaches, researches in medical ethics, medical humanities and chronic illness. He's got a particular interest in bringing the wisdom of consumers into academic research and teaching, and he also consults in the area of bio-ethics, health and disability.

Christopher's current board memberships include the Consumers' Health Forum of Australia, the Australian Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman Council and the Australian General Practice Accreditation Limited, and he's just been appointed to the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Christopher is also currently a member of the Australian Commission of Safety and Quality in Healthcare, a commission charged with reforming the Australian health system. Good luck Chris!

But there's a lot of people here who are ready to help, whether they're in their neighbourhoods or in their communities or as individuals. And he chairs the editorial committee of Australian Health Consumer.

Heaps of publications, seven co-authored edited books, 200 journal articles and book chapters, and one of his recent books includes "Disability in Australia", jointly with Gerard Goggin, UNSW Press, which won the non-fiction human rights award in the 2005 Australian Human Rights Awards.

So please welcome Chris.

**Christopher Newell:**

Thank you. Ladies and gentleman, it's devastating, it's appalling, but it's time we faced up to it. Neighbourhoods are dead and sadly the individual now reigns supreme.

That's right, I say sadly because which of us does not want to recount, reclaim accounts of community and the support of

neighbourhoods. Yet my sad melancholy task is to help you face a devastating reality that none of us wants to face.

Indeed, our opponents have already argued that there is actually some hope happening in on the horizon. They cite a few examples of neighbourhoods and communities working together.

But Peter avoided noting his own implicated background. He's paid to say these things! He avoids recognising the individualistic policies and economics which have funded the very work that actually talks of, the individualised funding responses to the loudest voices and the desires to get hospitals off the front page. Individualised responses.

Even Peter in your talk of people with disabilities "suffering", the language that we abhor, which supports disability as the individual's private trauma. Well of course they would affirm communities and neighbourhoods. Peter and Hutch are nice people.

But how realistic are they? Have they recognised your reality? Search your hearts and minds. Perhaps Peter, in talking of the half full glass, may well have had too many half or even full glasses. Look, I invite you at that mellow glow! The frequent reference to pubs, it comes from somewhere!

Yet much as it pains me, let me remind you of a few distressing realities. In the first place, there is the continuing oppression of indigenous peoples, where not just neighbourhoods are dead, but indeed Aboriginal nations have been wiped off the face of the earth.

How can we in any conscience take any other stance? It would be a denial of the racist relations which dominate in this country.

Secondly, we need to recognise that the current racism, sexism, disablism and ageism which is practised is a function of individualism. That's right. Maggie Thatcher won. As you know she supports this notion that there are just individual economic actors.

Right around the world individualism has swept through and blown away the vestiges of neighbourhoods, destroyed communities.

So now, despite a few revisionist policies to the contrary, increasingly we have a social policy driven by an account of individualistic economics.

We are responsible for purchasing services, we are individualised clients. Even within such areas of disability, beware! For example, the notion of individualised care packages yet again speaks again of how the individual reigns supreme.

Sadly we know the cost for individuals when we do not have the wealth, the personal resources and the skills with which to assemble and organise our lives.

Take another example: mental health. All of a sudden governments are starting to wake up to something we've been saying for some time, those individual, highly stressed, devastated voices. That we have actually helped to create circumstances that create mental illness, disability and disadvantage.

Yet even within these particular initiatives which are supposedly about resilience and community building, we also see individualism reigning supreme ...

... Strangely of course we also see in the account of individualism that of course all individuals are equal. It's just that some are more equal than others.

Then there's the stark devastating reality which denies the existence of accounts of community and neighbours.

Within Australia we are so individualised that we have a perfectly legal situation where refugees are locked behind barbed wire and out in the middle of deserts because they're so dangerous. And special laws are created to remove these odious bodies from our shores. Indeed we even lock up people, individuals, who are stateless, and it's perfectly legal. Ask the High Court.

And the appalling, devastating reality is that if we had any sense of community or neighbourhood we would've joined together and reclaimed notions of parliamentary democracy, we the people, and

demanded that our elected representatives give back and reinstate accounts of human dignity. It's appalling. It's a devastating reality that I greet you with.

Finally ladies and gentlemen, in arguing that neighbourhoods and communities really are dead, I want to remind you of the power that you have as individuals.

For Jacqui and I face an uphill battle. Which of us wants to believe that communities are dead? Which of us wants to face up to racism, sexism, disablism and ageism? More importantly, look at the disadvantage for the case that we are presented with.

This is a conference all about community and neighbourhood where we have the little, annoying, dissenting, which is Jacqui and myself. We've been set up to lose! Look at the topics on the program: the Community Sonnet! Challenge the Power of One! Perhaps even worse a conference auspiced by an organisation Our Community! The Community Leadership Oration! Even the Gala Australian Community Idol Awards.

Perhaps most obscene, showing how biased and unbalanced the whole situation is, we do battle today for a trophy that's got "community" in the name.

Even, dare I suggest, we have a bias, I'm very sad to say, on the part of our adjudicator, the Honourable Joan Kirner. She's briefed the opposition as Chair of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Victorian Communities! Not the council promoting the rights of Victorian individuals! Bias is everywhere!

So, fellow delegates, wake up. Smell what they are shovelling! The subtle and not so subtle agenda on the seemingly innocent face of Rhonda! Assert your rights as individuals.

That's right today I invite you as individuals to rise up! Register your dissatisfaction with the brainwashing of the conference organisers! Assert your rights as individuals! Today we ask you to acknowledge a deeply disturbing reality that neighbourhoods really are dead and the individual now reigns supreme.

We ask you, we demand, we plead with you, diverse individuals that you are, to join with me in recognising the devastating reality and then, and only then, once we have faced that as individuals, we can join together to reclaim and to re-build accounts of community and neighbourhood.

Thank you.

### **Joan Kirner**

Sounded like an election speech to me! Glad you weren't sitting opposite me, but then I hope you would never have been!

That was fantastic. Thank you for that stirring contribution about this whole issue which we do have to take seriously about what communities are built on. What are they built on? How do we build communities? Are they built on distinct groups? Are they built between the groups? Are they built between individuals? What is an inclusive community? Is it one where 75% of the community is in there?

I went to a Council recently, who may be here so had better remain unnamed, to talk about funding for a community plan.

And I looked at the proposal, and this is a community, a council, one of the largest indigenous communities in Victoria. And I asked where their representatives were. "Oh, we will get around to that," they said. So I thought "Yeah, and we'll get around to that grant too, a long way away!"

But the issue there was the community had defined itself by those who were in the partnership, not the whole who should be in the partnership.

So it's an ongoing challenge. I don't pretend it's anything else, having been head of a government where, while we move the retention rate along, as John Thwaites said this morning, significantly to something like 89%, the indigenous kids' retention rate, though was higher than it is now, was still just over half of that.



And so we do need to keep focusing on these two challenging issues of community, what it is? And communities, how do you make them inclusive?

And there's not much better person to do that than Hutch Hussein. I like your new title Hutch. Hutch Hussein is the Business Development Manager of the Northern Migrant Resource Centre in Melbourne's northern suburbs, which does a fantastic job.

Hutch's background is in social work, and during her career she's worked with at-risk young people, domestic violence victims, refugees and migrants and whilst in London in foster care.

And she's worked with me too, which was the hardest task of all, doing the Centenary of Federation, the Women's Meeting in the Parliament and the Women's Honour Role.

Currently she works with and for migrant and refugee communities by securing funds, partnerships and sponsorships for community building projects.

She's got a fantastic way of working with women, particularly from refugee communities. And strangely, even though her centre and other centres were doing a great job, they lost their funding in the competitive model of funding to the private sector.

In 2002 in between her social work positions, Hutch worked for 3 ½ years as Ministerial Advisor to Mary Delahunty, the Victorian Minister for Education then, and later became the Minister for Women's Affairs and Minister for the Arts, and significantly involved in getting a good domestic violence policy and practice up.

Hutch is a really passionate young woman. She is particularly passionate about empowering young people, in particular young women at the individual and at the global level. In her spare time she also volunteers with a number of organisations aiming to empower women to stand up, make a difference in public life, know they can and get on with it.

She co-convenes Emily's List in Victoria, of course a very important organisation, and was also a founding board member for the Women's Rights Action Network of Australia. She's also an active member of ALRA, the Abortion Law Reform Association, which is committed to taking abortion out of the Criminal Act in Victoria.

And in between her activism, she enjoys making short films. She dusts off scripts waiting in her bottom drawer. Currently she is writing a script about setting up Emily's List and she's a hard task master, because I want to keep talking and she wants to keep stopping me, and into her little scripts.

But it's a considerable range of skills she has and she truly believes in empowered communities. Please welcome Hutch Hussein.

### **Hutch Hussein:**

Thank you for that lovely introduction Joan.

Neighbourhoods are not dead. The crowd here today is proof against Chris' thesis. Some of us here today are representing or organisations that have grown from neighbourhoods or fighting for neighbourhoods.

But some of us are also here representing organisations just of common interest that bring us together. We've come together in these organisations to advance that community of interest needs. Because together as a collective we do better.

Neighbourhoods are not just physical neighbourhoods. They're spiritual, they're bound together by an allegiance, a connection or an identity. To say that we are individuals only is to say that we're not human and don't have an interest in what's happening locally, nationally and globally.

As well as being the adjudicator's birthday, today is actually World Refugee Day. Separate from the wonderful work that organisations like the Sanctuary for Refugee's Network that we heard about yesterday do, and the neighbourhoods that support them, Australia is

part of its humanitarian program settles 13,000 refugees. Even the government, which some regard as fostering the individual, undertakes its UN obligation and does its bit as being part of the global neighbourhood.

At the Northern Migrant Resource Centre, where I work in Melbourne's northern metropolitan suburbs, new arrivals gravitate and seek local connections.

They come to us and tell us they want to meet real Aussies and feel part of the community. The NMRC facilitates this community connection through a variety of programs and I'll allude to two today to demonstrate our case.

One is the Bridging the Gaps with Basketball program, where refugee youths want to connect with their local peers, to feel like more than just a passive member of their neighbourhood. And then through our Aged Care program, older migrants thrive on the social interaction they have with their peers. Everyone needs and gravitates towards their neighbours.

The Bridging the Gaps Basketball program, and there are three young woman there in our basketball team in Coburg, is about refugee youths connecting with their peers and their fellow citizens.

We have off-duty police officers recruited from local police stations who are engaged as volunteer coaches, which translates to improved relationships with police via the mentoring for the young people and breaks down negative perceptions of the police force, and police officers having a greater understanding of these kids and their situation.

The kids understand the importance of punctuality at training and games, commitment and discipline to playing in a team sport, and the values of fairness, teamwork and friendship, which all have wider application in their everyday lives. They know that as individuals they can't even play a basketball team, let alone make change in society.

They also have increased cultural awareness amongst themselves. In that team we have Somali, Tongan, Sudanese, Timorese,

indigenous and Anglo Australian young people. There's increased social connectedness that comes and a sense of belonging, because fundamentally we are in communities.

The Aged Care program that we operate have cultural groups coming together, with themselves, amongst themselves and community groups or multicultural groups sharing their culture and customs. These older people come together because they know that as individuals their life span is reduced.

They keep their minds active with activities, art and craft and they socialise and we organise day trips. We foster this by facilitating and hosting these groups and creating a neighbourhood and community each day of the week.

We are also part of a national neighbourhood. We come together as a nation when it comes to being brought together by sporting events. As you saw from the last program I mentioned, sport breaks down many barriers. We barrack for our national team, we show strength in the face of danger or a crisis and we bat with them for the underdogs.

The Commonwealth Games recently was a great example of us as a community. Even cynics and not-so-sports-mad Melbournians got into the jovial mood that took over Melbourne. I met some of them like myself who got patriotic and let themselves be dragged to, yet enjoyed, the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony. Even if collectively they were scratching their heads about the duck, but they were doing it collectively.

The volunteers, they were the Commonwealth Games' greatest asset, 15,000 of them in their unmissable aqua and orange uniforms, who made Melbourne feel like a neighbourhood where there was someone was looked out for them or the lost tourist.

Those 15,000 who took annual leave, some of you are here today, or put their lives on hold for the amazing experience, demonstrated that there is such thing as society which is far greater than the sum of anything individuals can achieve on their own.

And as *The Age* observed at the time, fears for the loss of community spirit were banished, the goodwill spread, the Games were a rebuke to cynicism.

These are photos of soccer fans, Australians and Brazilians, one in Munich in a beer hall, the other in Federation Square. It was standing room only yesterday morning, as 10,000 people braved the cold and cramped conditions to watch the World Cup match against Brazil.

Why didn't they do this at home as individuals in front of their TV? It was much more fun doing it this way. If that isn't proof that neighbourhoods are alive, then I don't know what is.

In *The Age* it was reported that one guy George Peoples, 41, an Irishman living in Melbourne, said, "A year ago no-one in Melbourne cared about football. I was depressed to be in this country. Now it's 4.00am in Fed. Square and it's full. Now I'm thinking about taking out citizenship".

He's finally felt part of the neighbourhood, even though this closet bonding happens in soccer communities every day of the year. However, he and many others have been able to see the passion that's been given a public outlet within the World Cup. Australians come together bound by their allegiance and their connection.

The countdown to the rescue of the Beaconsfield miners in Tasmania was something that galvanised the country and all types of neighbourhoods. It was the first thing we wondered about in their walking groups and their swimming groups and workplaces. And in fact in my own home for twelve days in a row the first thing my partner said to me each morning, knowing that I'd read the paper and listened to the radio, was, "Are they out yet?"

But we also come together to show concern for events and for people overseas, because we're part of the global neighbourhood. We care as a nation, we show that we're all connected by our humanity, and we have an interest sometimes in just living vicariously in knowing how the other half live.

If the individual reigns supreme, the media, in particular magazines, wouldn't exist. Even Rupert Murdoch has an interest in making sure neighbourhoods are not dead.

Australians came together and donated a record amount to our neighbours in the South Pacific region as they struggled to re-build their lives after the tsunami. We also volunteered to assist in tsunami-affected areas. We do care about people, even those who are not in our immediate neighbourhood.

You're probably wondering why I'm even drawing on Kylie to put our case. News of Kylie's breast cancer diagnosis led to a flood of notes from well-wishers. People took stock and made time to have their own checks done. There's no irony in the *Neighbours* star still being cared for by members of the global neighbourhood.

In Pitt and Jolie's baby is the last argument I give to you to demonstrate that we care about other humans, even those whose lives are far removed from our's. In fact, Pitt and Jolie themselves as US citizens, having a baby in Namibia showed the international borders are no barrier for feeling that we all live in a global neighbourhood.

If the other side wins this debate then the audience are saying that, as Peter said, Margaret Thatcher is right and that after today we know longer care about our mates in our local, national or global neighbourhood. Doesn't it make you wonder when there's a former Labor Premier mediating this debate?

**Joan Kirner:**

Oh well, if she's appeared to a Prime Minister she's learning well how to drive the wedge between the various groups in the community. Fantastic, Hutch, well done.

OK, now I'm going to ask Peter to sum up for the against side, and to do any rebuttal he cares in his neighbourly way to do.

He wants the last word! No I'm the adjudicator. And anyway I'm more scared of Chris than I am of you.

**Peter Kenyon:**

Fellow conference delegates, can I just ask you to just reflect on a sober moment. Can any of you remember really anything of the content of our opponent's presentation? There was nil content, absolutely nil, and I'm sure there's not a person in the audience can reflect on what their content was.

Sure there was extensive use of denigration, there was humour, there was an appeal to the sympathy as the underdog, that pathetic effort Chris. Fancy dragging poor Rhonda in saying that she'd biased this whole conference against you! A sign of a desperate person.

And Chris, your appeal to the audience was purely on the basis on the grounds of bias. Even dragging in my alcoholic problem, as part of the audience, I mean how low can you drop?!

Ladies and gentlemen, really think about it, was there any content at all? What can you remember? The humour, the denigration, the sympathy votes, but beyond that nothing.

Can I say today neighbourhoods are alive, community is what draws us. We all long to be part of the village. We all want a greater sense of it, including our opponents here today. They all want to be more involved in that village of life, both at that local neighbourhood and that worldwide neighbourhood that Hutch has reminded us is so alive and well.



Can I, like Hutch, just remind you today - don't let Maggie win!

**Joan Kirner:**

And now may I ask Jacqui to sum up the case for.

**Jacqui Katona:**

Maggie isn't here. Individuals in this country wouldn't allow someone like Maggie to determine how we spoke to one another. Individuals here today have far more respect for one another. My opposition hasn't addressed serious issues that relate to our vibrancy as a community. Our vibrancy resides in us, as individuals.

In fact the misguided tirade that Peter went on about how disabled I was in this debate being on this side. Let me tell you the common understanding in Kakadu at the time we started the campaign was, "Give up, you'll never beat them". My relative, Yvonne Margarula, as an individual, stood up and said, "We'll give it a go because I believe in the things that my parents stood for, my grandparents stood for and all the generations before us".

As an individual she had to inspire her family not to oppose, but to believe that we could win and as a group of individuals accommodate each other's needs in a very difficult campaign with very few resources.

But we were able to inspire other individuals. And we'd make a beeline for them. And yes, we would draw them to our cause. Because we would understand that women, like our adjudicator Joan Kirner, also had something to lose if uranium mining went ahead in Kakadu. Joan and her peers were able to recognise that in our fight, in the pursuit of our individual needs we were prepared to take responsibility and that was the source of inspiration.

There is a strength in celebrating the achievements of individuals, the achievements that individuals facilitate amongst one another. I don't believe that our opposition really addressed the issues of sexism and racism, disablism and ageism. In fact we got a description from Hutch about the underlying funding approaches which facilitate her

programs and I can guarantee the funding approaches use the language of clients. They group people together; they have a polyglot approach. It's one label that they deal with.

I'm sure none of you here were romanced to think that a bureaucracy can recognise the needs of individuals within communities. Individuals don't achieve through individualism. Individuals achieve because we can respect our differences.

And as for recruiting Kylie, the singing budgie, what a great success story for many young women to know that other women like Kylie can achieve international success, fame and wealth.

Kylie has inspired as an individual, it's her resources, she took the risks, she put herself on the line. She was the one that was able to show other people that it was possible. Individuals open up the possibilities.

Don't let our opposition tell you that Margaret Thatcher rules over all individuals. She doesn't. I'm an individual and I know all the individuals here are building a better future by ignoring Margaret Thatcher and listening to each other, joining together and creating a future that we can all individually benefit from.

### **Joan Kirner:**

Fantastic. Isn't it great to have in this broad community where debates are so rare, to have actually a debate. Gets us out of our comfort zone.

But guess whose debate it really is? It's really your debate. You don't have to own this debate if you don't want to. Some of you probably don't want to; you think it's a waste of time.

But it's now your chance to contribute to this debate, either by asking questions or by simply saying what you think are the issues, quickly, and ways forward in resolving this ongoing tension between the individual and the neighbourhood or the broader community, that was the other slide, neighbourhoods kept sliding to communities and back again.

So who's got the first question?

**Question:**

I wanted to actually make a statement...

**Joan Kirner:**

Don't forget to identify yourself.

**Question:**

Richard Brown, the Co-ordinator of the Friends of East Timor Partnership at Moreland and Hume Councils. I guess it's a comment but it might provoke some response.

I just wanted to make the point that neighbourhoods can also be fragile and can be threatened in many ways. And I'm thinking particularly about our neighbourhood, our immediate neighbourhood and our relationship with East Timor at the moment. And the way that the conservative agenda can capture the national imagination of images like failed space and the focus on individuals, like the East Timorese Prime Minister, has been at the root of the issues there.

And I guess what I'm saying is we really need to be vigilant about preserving and strengthening neighbourhood rather than, if you like, wolfing at the first threat. We have a very strong friendship, relationship with East Timor at every level in the community.

In fact Victoria can be very proud that we have the majority of the over fifty friendship relationships between local government and community organisations in East Timor here in Victoria.

But I guess my plea is be vigilant because neighbourhood is potentially fragile and we need to be very wary of what I would call these threats. We need to, in a sense, be prepared to identify with the pain of our neighbours, particularly in East Timor, and take some risks to preserve and enhance this neighbourhood relationship.

So that's I guess a comment and a plea rather than a question.

**Joan Kirner:**

Great comment. And that reflects back to complexity. Next question, comment. Yes, in the front.

**Question:**

Yes ... I'm here as a community representative. I do actually wear other hats but I'm proud to be here as an individual.

Having said that I strongly concur with the thrust of what Jacqui said which was all about the power of the individual and the power to take responsibility for our actions and the effort that we put into believing and making our communities work.

Because sometimes, some of the examples that we all notice is that it's almost that six degrees of separation, which is what community is. And it's almost waiting for some crisis to then jump on the bandwagon or get involved, because somehow we are going to be affected.

So I think it goes back to all of us really thinking about and taking responsibility and I certainly feel we've all got to be in it and step up to the plate.

**Joan Kirner:**

Thank you.

**Question:**

Claude Ullin, City of Stonington. This is to Chris and Peter - how can we think that communities can exist when individuals can't get into their buildings, people with disabilities?

Then how do we cope with the problem with have with neighbours who also have problems in relation to having people with disability in those buildings?

## **Christopher Newell:**

You actually create a very significant point I think. Every day people with disabilities know the exclusion that knows no name in the public face of our social policy.

And the exclusion which means that largely because of the way in which we view people with disabilities as other, outside of the nice, the normal and natural, outside of our moral community, that we have laws where there are so many exemptions, we have codes where disability is seen as too expensive.

Instead we need to reclaim a communitarian account of disability and we need to reclaim one in five of the population. We need to reclaim the fact about 30% of the population benefits from actual codes of access, and we need to reclaim like, the people use prams and things like that.

So firstly, I would say, we need to use the stories of people who live with disability and secondly we need to translate those into policy.

And crucial to that is the formation of relationships, which actually mean that I am daily confronted if I'm a politician. If I'm a business person, I'm daily confronted by some of those realities, because I assure you I constantly reflect if the members of boards and the members of parliament were actually people with mobility impairments, I don't think we'd have the hold up that we're having at the moment.

## **Joan Kirner:**

Thank you Chris. Peter?

## **Peter Kenyon:**

I think it's an excellent example of why I believe that the power of community and neighbourhood is so important. If we're waiting for government, corporates or individuals to solve some of these things, I think we'll be waiting until the cows come home.

I think we wait for all those policy directions to come out and for people to suddenly realise the lack of connection and the way that people in our communities really struggle.

It's not until people at that local level begin to sense those issues and come together and say, "What is it we're going to actually do until we see change". I mean in terms of particularly people who do have disabilities and struggle against those things on a daily basis, it's about awakening at that local level the challenges that people face there. And it's about local people starting to do audits and starting to come up with practical illustrations of what they need to do.

Last weekend I was in Cunnunurra and had the opportunity of spending the weekend with 16 families who have a child that has a physical disability, and how can they collectively come together and support.

And as people that weekend just talked through what is it that we but also the neighbourhood of Cunnunurra can start to do.

And they started and they brought in people from other groups and other people interested in that community.

By the end of the weekend, it was interesting to see the practical solutions that were going to be put in place from Monday on that could actually make lives much more interesting, less challenging for families.

And I suppose that is what I don't want to see us lose, this whole thing that we've got to wait for governments and we've got to wait for the cavalry, we've got to influence that. We've got to wait for powerful individuals to rise up. Crap! What we need are people at the local level to sense that we've got to become much more connected once again as a community.

And it's what can happen at that local level is the powerful changes in terms of facilities and signs and people starting to care about living together as a connected and whole community.

And that I think is an incredible example of where it can work.

**Christopher Newell:**

Actually, can I say one of the challenges that people with disability face I think is, and my experience has been from childhood, has been that we are so awkward, that we are so dangerous, that we are so reminding of human frailty and mortality. My experience has been many people at a local level find me enormously awkward. They obviously find me awkward at a variety of other levels as well.

**Joan Kirner:**

If you debate like you debated today, it's not surprising!

**Christopher Newell:**

Why do you think I was deported from Tasmania?!

And so our very lives become so awkward that in the major policy debates our realities become so disconcerting that people don't want to know. And that's why, we're talking about the same thing really, we're talking about reclaiming our membership of community, when actually our lives are so disturbing.

Most writers these days talk about disability as the last human rights type activity. And I think we've still in Australia got a long way to go. I talk about stories and relationships; you talk about community. I think we're actually talking the same strategies.

**Peter Kenyon:**

I think it's about how do we influence the next door neighbour, not just the politicians.

**Joan Kirner:**

It is too. Next.



**Question:**

Hello my name is Saskia and I work in child safety and I just have a question for this table. It seems like you can be part of a community or something but as long as you reflect the dominant paradigm, like Brad and Angelina and Kylie and we can aspire to do that.

But as long as you talk and live and see the world a certain way. And I wonder if you have a comment on that.

**Jacqui Katona:**

Absolutely. Belonging to a community must empower the individual. That's the way communities are built; that's the vibrance that individuals bring to communities. Communities can't, and we've seen communities through history, grow to be all-consuming, all-powerful, moving in one monolithic direction.

Unless they accommodate individuals, unless they accommodate our needs, our values, our inspiration, our courage and our strengths, unless we continually recognise and reinforce the contributions of individuals, we're always in danger of simply following and not leading.

**Joan Kirner:**

Thanks Jacqui.

**Question:**

My name is Alida Nemsis. I'm from rural Victoria, in Mildura. And I hope that I'm a vibrant individual and I'd like to thank both parties for making it very clear that we are individuals that belong to a community.

So I think you're both right. I think you've pointed out so many things this morning that we sometimes we lack to identify. And I believe you can't have one without the other.

**Question:**

John McKenna for Wheelchair Media. I think the words have been stolen out of my mouth actually. I was just going to, if I may, echo on that. I'm a person with a physical disability and I work with communities to achieve goals. Thank you.

**Question:**

Hello, I'm a volunteer from Ballarat and we do a lot of work for the community. I'm a little bit disappointed with you lot on both sides, that you haven't attacked the main issues that I believe are really strong, about the youth all over the country and the young mums and the stigma on communities.

We've got youth and young mums on drugs and whatever. We haven't even touched on that, and it's the stigma which takes individuals to stand up and make communities recognise this for anybody to be listening, you know.

**Joan Kirner:**

Tell us a bit about what you're doing; I happen to know, so just tell us about it.

**Volunteer:**

We do a little bit of work around town. We're trying to pull the kids out of houses that the governments don't want to know about.

They don't want to know about the parents on drugs and the kids have left school at the age of twelve and their kickback. And the parents won't get them out and get them to school, they've got no money, they're doing better things with their money. And the kids miss out on programs; they miss out on everything because the parents don't care.

And I think we need to target them areas before we go targeting the areas that are already being done. We've got to look after the youth,

because they're our next generation. We don't look after them, we're doomed.

**Joan Kirner:**

Well done, thank you. Now there was a gentleman...?

**Question:**

I'm Reverend Steve Tyrell with Coatesville Uniting Church, and I noticed a couple of you either explicitly or implicitly belong to some sort of faith community. But I also noticed that none of you referred to that in your arguments.

I wonder if you would briefly like to say something about the role of spirituality and faith communities in both the individual and neighbourhood dimensions of what we're talking about.

**Christopher Newell:**

I've written books on the topic so, I can't say anything briefly! Thank you, it's actually a very important that you make.

I think that firstly I would say that spirituality I need to distinguish between religiousness. I would actually argue all people have a spiritual dimension to them. They don't necessarily have a religious dimension.

But I think that spiritual dimensional life is very important and that many of the important reasons why we do things in life actually have a spiritual dimension.

In my case I'm actually a convinced theist and a member of the Anglican and I'm actually a priest in the church. And I did that arising out my own experience of mortality and coming to terms with many times almost dying.

And I guess actually I'm actually still a believer of God despite the Church. So that's actually both an individualistic type journey.

But I think that when for example we touch another human being, when we touch them, when we're privileged to be with them when we're dying, when we touch them in solidarity, when we come to experience the exclusion and the degradation of the human spirit that so often actually happens in community. All the -isms that we actually know that exclude people from moral community.

When we come to touch people in a deeply spiritual way we cannot but actually recognise the inherent dignity of the human person.

And so for me I come not from a doctrinal type sense, but from a lived experience of exclusion and then a recognition of the fact that every human person is actually inherently worthwhile.

And for me the constant test associated with my spiritual journey is do I in my everyday life actually recognise the beauty of people, or do I in certain ways actually exclude. For me that's the really fundamentally spiritual question.

**Peter Kenyon:**

Can I just add that, like Chris, I also am a strong believer in God, despite the Church.

And I suppose to me the challenge on two fronts that I'm interested in, particularly in my interest in this asset-based approach to community development. Simply I think there's a spirituality of place and of neighbourhood that we've got to again start exploring.

And part of the most useful work that I do, particularly with young people in communities, is actually in helping them to explore that whole spirituality of place, the stories behind it, where have we come from and how we are connected and what can we learn from that and where can we actually go.

And secondly within our communities, faith communities are a community within the communities, incredibly asset rich in terms of people, connections, programs, buildings and whatever.

Some of the most exciting work now is where many of those faith communities are starting to look at how is it that we can use those incredible assets we've got as a community within our neighbourhood; and how do we make those available, and for them to become catalyst in building our broader neighbourhood as more interesting places for all people to live.

And I think that's one of the great challenges for churches today to begin to re-connect with their neighbourhoods. And there's some amazing examples of that starting to happen across the country.

And I'm really inspired with that as one of those great organisational assets made up of people who do want to use their personal and organisational assets in much more creative ways.

### **Hutch Hussein:**

I actually define myself as a cultural Muslim, and by that sense I enjoy the festivities of my religion, particularly those that bring that those families around food, which probably explains why in my work we recently held an Easter dinner.

So it was during Ramadan we brought together some young people who were non-Moslems and some young people who were Muslims and we worked with principles so nominate kids who would benefit from the interface connection that this would create.

And over dinner kids learnt about each other's religion or spirituality, however they defined that. And we found that a really positive way to increase awareness and de-mystify what Islam was about for the kids who weren't Muslim and to de-mystify what Christianity or Buddhism or Hinduism or whatever spirituality these young people brought to the table was about over food, which was a great way to break down barriers.

### **Christopher Newell:**

Actually can I say it's very interesting is actually central to the narratives of the world's religions. It's very central, so that each of the major world's religions has a communitarian dimension to it. It

actually uses the basics of life and it actually claims the spiritual they've found in the very basic things we often take for granted.

**Joan Kirner:**

And it's the basis for much community celebration and much neighbourhood development. Food is a connector, providing of course you understand the different cultural connections.

**Hutch Hussein:**

I forgot to add if the meal is around the end of the day during Ramadan we're breaking the fast.

**Joan Kirner:**

And I must say I will maintain my cultural connection with Hutch's as long as her Mum keeps making me hummus.

**Question:**

I work in community based provision of education, lifelong education in the city of Whittlesea.

The challenge I think we have, and I would like to strongly subscribe to, is to take a chance on de-mystifying some of what means community and individual.

I am a strong individualist, but I hold community values, or values of benefit to the community, and I think that's what we need.

One of the most disturbing news this week was that Australians are more afraid of our privacy, credit card details etc., to be out in the open than we are of other forms of physical danger, terrorism, invasion, cataclysms, tsunamis or whatever.

It says something about this culture, and the challenge is to those who hold the purse strings. It should be us through the vote, but in fact there are a lot of filters in there. To take a chance on programs that will change the culture.

I know we value our culture we say, but there are lots of barb wires in this culture that need addressing, and without necessarily measuring this in grants etc with outcomes and the like, because it's a long term thing. It's like putting seeds out of a packet that has no name; there will be flowers, but you don't know which flowers they will be.

We are facing now at an international level, in an international year of neighbourhood or whatever name it will take but it's coming; you'll see it within the next year or two.

So perhaps we need to prepare for that. Local government is a good venue for that, a good conduit, but not necessarily the only one.

Churches could be except that churches, and I am, I subscribe and in fact I'm a delegate to the Victorian Council of Churches, that once we so engage in delivery of service, we have more clients than congregations. And that's not a very good way to relate.

So in a nutshell, the challenge is to work on a cultural turn in which we are not afraid to meet our neighbour.

I'll give you a very, very brief example. One of our students of English who has spent a long time in a refugee camp, she's actually an asylum seeker more than refugee, in tears last December acknowledged to me that she's very alone, that she grew up in a household of thirty or more people.

And here she was afraid of knocking on the house next door after baking a cake to invite her neighbour to have cake and coffee.

So I told her to put the kettle on when she got home if she saw the car and I would come around. And I actually did. And I knocked on the door and it was a Macedonian neighbour.

She didn't know what nationality she might be. And said, "Look I'm so and so, I work in this capacity. I'd like you to come next door with me." And she looked very puzzled, but she laughed and said, "OK". And so I introduced them.



Now I can't frankly go around and do these things more than once every now and then. If half of you did that, but you've got to be bold and take a chance.

**Joan Kirner:**

OK, we'd better wrap it up there and you're certainly bold. Thank you for that and all the work you do in neighbourhood houses, which I thought you were going to name as the new church.

**Christopher Newell:**

The question raised a very important issue, the issue of fear, which I think is absolutely central to much of what actually, I don't know about you but for me, I think there's actually the fear of the other.

And it's via the relationships that we have in community and neighbourhoods that we can actually encounter the other and discover in a profound way that they are actually us. That via neighbourhood and community we actually can create the "us" and that's absolutely profound and it's actually it disrupts many of the neo-conservative agendas that I think have actually been highlighted.

May I suggest that also the fear of our own mortality, the fear of acquiring disability, the fear of not being actually affirmed as being wonderful, the fear of not being famous, all of those fears that we have that are so devastating, how do we actually tackle those?

We can't tackle them adequately as individuals. Individualism is rife and that's why there's so much fear. It's via community that I, for example, had three months in hospital at the beginning of this year. I was expected to die. I was sure that the only reason I didn't was because of the number of the people that would have been at the funeral just to check I really was dead.

And I was able to address all of those fears via the relationships of people who came and sat and were with me, and we were together able to actually work through some of those devastating realities and the fear became actually the celebration of life.

**Joan Kirner:**

Carmen Lawrence has just published a book, as some of you may know, on fear and what it's doing to our society, which hopefully will be a best seller. Maybe a speaker at our next Our Community's conference perhaps about moving from fear to trust, and mutual respect, which are two of the big values of communities.

Yes, I'll take two more questions and then that's it.

**Question:**

I'm the co-ordinator, Springvale Neighbourhood House. I just would like to comment on the debate. I think it's very healthy to have an idea to debate about it.

But I think to be able to maintain and to achieve the power of the neighbours, you definitely need an inspired individual to lead the community and show them the right path. Thank you.

**Joan Kirner:**

Any comments down that end? No. I noticed as our debaters are commenting in answer to your question they're actually coming closer together, have you noticed that? And that's what community is about, isn't it.

**Christopher Newell:**

It's the power of us as individuals to make those choices, yes.

**Joan:**

He's determined to have the last word but I'm an expert at it, I can tell you.

We'll see at the end of it, because there's no last word in this. There is no last word; it's an ongoing dialogue. Yes?

## **Question:**

My name's Catherine Ellis. I'm the General Manager of the Reach Foundation and we work with teenagers.

And I think that probably we need to talk about a little bit here is that there is a new generation coming through, which we heard yesterday, and my observation of Generation Y, who I work with as colleagues and also as participants in our programs, is that they have a very high sense of individuality and this is coming out through research as well.

And there's a longitudinal study that's just come out from Melbourne University saying that this generation, one of the things that identifies them is that they see themselves as a project, the self as a project.

And this can be a fabulous thing, but I think it can also be a dangerous thing because where a lot of it is leading for some of them is towards consumerism and a pursuit of celebrity.

It explains a lot of why *Big Brother* is so successful, those sort of silly shows. And I think that what we need to look at is the fact that this individuality and individualism that they are all focused on can be used really powerfully to create stronger communities if we can encourage them to understand and believe that the way that they can fulfil their purpose as an individual is to make a difference in society and in communities.

They're a very tribal generation, and they love to get together with their friends and they think that they rule the world, which they will one day obviously.

So if we can encourage them to use that community that they are already creating as friends to actually make a difference to our society, I think it would be a hugely powerful thing. And I notice that the group here, no offence everybody, is pretty middle aged. So I think that maybe next year...

## **Joan Kirner:**

And some!

**Question:**

... so maybe next year at the conference what we ought to look at is having some more youth delegates, whether they're sponsored places or some other way.

**Joan Kirner:**

I'm sure Rhonda and Denis will be happy to work with you and Joe. Hutch I'm sure you'd like to have a go at that statement, as you're constantly telling me not that I'm old, but that we need more young people, which is a much more tactful way of saying things.

**Hutch Hussein:**

Yeah, I really agree with the comment made about engaging young people and also giving them an opportunity to drive the debate and communicate what their experience of things is.

Because if we're talking about the future of communities, they've got a lot to offer and especially given the presentation yesterday where they're going to be leaders and driving that agenda and they're going to be the majority of the population in decades to come.

So I concur with the recommendation as well...

**Joan Kirner:**

And you'll help.

**Hutch Hussein:**

And I'll help yes. Joan always dobs you into things, beware!

**Joan Kirner:**

That's true! OK, that brings us to the close of our questions, but, sorry did I miss someone? And you qualify for under 50 too so that's good. Off you go.

**Question:**

I'm Anita and I'm from Chigwell Community House, also known as a neighbourhood house made up of individuals who come together for a purpose, much like our two teams, who come together, obviously the purpose is that lovely trophy there.

But what I would like to bring out is that this whole conference has been about the power of people and our business is to listen to the people, listen to their vision, their idea and help them achieve it through support.

So, in doing that, we need to acknowledge that, well this is my suggestion, where there is thought, an ideal or vision there is life. So should we really be deciding what is dead or alive or should we actually let the people choose their own terms of reference as they demonstrate where there's life.

**Joan Kirner:**

There's a piece of philosophical question. Would you like me to demonstrate that in a way we decide the debate?

**Christopher Newell:**

Yes, we should actually do it by power of thought actually!

**Joan Kirner:**

God, next he'll be wanting me to debate bio-ethics with him!

I'm going to do what I've been told to do for a change which is actually ask you by acclaim to decide who won the debate.

If I think the applause is a bit lukewarm I think you know which way I'll decide don't you, and that is I won't.

So please indicate if you think that team for Neighbourhoods Being Dead and the Individual Reigning Supreme, being the wonderful Jacqui and Chris, won.

[Applause]

I think I need the Channel Nine worm. Not Ray Martin, just the worm. And against, Peter and Hutch, can I hear for them please.

[Applause]

It's like trying to decide to sell the State Bank. It was a seriously bad idea, but I had to do it!

I think ... I think we all win!

Thank you.