

Senator the Hon Ursula Stephens

**Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the
Voluntary Sector**

**Parliamentary Secretary Assisting the Prime Minister
for Social Inclusion**

Speech to Volunteering NSW Forum: Diversity & the Volunteer Workforce

'Towards a 2020 Vision for Volunteering'

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Introduced by Hon Linda Burney, NSW Minister for Volunteering

Thank you also to Minister Burney for your kind introduction and for the invitation to address you all today.

I would also like to acknowledge the work that Minister Burney and the NSW Government are doing to increase the level of volunteering and diversify the volunteer workforce and build volunteering as part of the NSW State Plan. This includes a preparedness to look at the barriers facing volunteering.

Today's forum presents a great opportunity to consider how we can build a 'golden future' for volunteering.

What do we want volunteering to be like in 2020?

What future role can it play in building stronger communities?

How can we best grow and foster volunteering in our communities and strengthen and diversify the volunteer workforce?

There could not be a better time to be having this discussion, not only from a local or state perspective, but also from a national perspective.

The Australian Government recognises the important role of the millions of volunteers, who make Australia a fairer, safer and more sustainable place and is committed to building a new partnership with the non-profit sector.

For the first time, the Federal Government has appointed a Parliamentary Secretary with special responsibility for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector.

In this role I support both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister on developing a social inclusion agenda.

I am delighted to be here today, in that capacity, to share with you some of ways that we can work together to build a social inclusion agenda for our nation, and foster a new wave of innovation and inspiration in volunteering.

A 2020 Vision for Volunteering

Volunteers are the backbone of the non-profit sector: for every paid staff member in the sector, there are six volunteers.

The ABS reported that in 2006, 5.2 million people – 34% of the Australian population aged 18 years and over – participated in voluntary work. They contribute 713 million hours to the community. But this is just the tip of the iceberg and does not include a lot of other activity not currently identified with existing datasets.

The Government recognises the role of the non-profit sector in the 'social economy' and wants to understand its contribution to economy, as well as our communities, and will be exploring the use of new tools to achieve this.

And volunteers make a major economic and social contribution to our society. From keeping our communities safe from summer's bushfires, to organising little athletics, to running community arts facilities and providing our young people with opportunities to get involved in their local community – volunteers are the glue that keep our communities going.

All the research I have read also shows that volunteering has significant public health benefits for those who involve themselves. Like St Francis once said, *'it is in giving to all men that we receive.'*

Volunteering also extends beyond the typical stereotypes. It now also includes corporate volunteering, participation in social ventures and enterprises, the

sharing of professional skills with non-profit organisations and boards, advocacy groups, self-help organisations like *Men's Sheds* for example, which have been instrumental in supporting many people to participate in their community.

We believe that active participation underpins community wellbeing and fosters strong, inclusive communities.

Volunteers are important actors in our social inclusion agenda which is about recognizing that the whole nation benefits when everyone has equal opportunity to participate in social, cultural, civil and economic life. And that it is not acceptable for people to be excluded from it.

Disadvantage, poverty and exclusion all divide communities. Volunteering unites communities, tackles issues of disadvantage and provides all of us with a way to be engaged and give something back to our society.

Let's imagine the future where volunteering efforts are being harnessed in all communities.

In 2020, volunteering is reaching out to Australians and the world in inspirational, innovative and imaginative ways:

- We have a national strategy and approach to volunteering;
- All Australians are participating in their community in a range of exciting new projects – it's even part of every school student's education;
- Corporate volunteering is built into all business plans and acknowledged as genuine public service for the public sector;
- Australian educational institutions play host to international training and accreditation for volunteers through clever online programs;
- Volunteering is viewed as a viable, genuine and valued pathway to sustainable employment;
- Australia is a world leader in local-specific solutions and development, demonstrating how volunteerism can build peace and sustainability in our region;
- and, as active citizens, volunteers from diverse cultural backgrounds are strengthening local ties, preserving their culture, supporting the young and the old across the nation.

Such a 'golden age' of volunteering is possible. While it requires political will to make it happen, it depends on your organisations not giving up on your effort to contribute to an inclusive and sustainable Australia.

Challenges to sector: What can be done?

The Australian Government also understands that the voluntary sector is facing a range of challenges. Challenges which are directly impacting on the sector's ability to grow, diversify and adapt.

Some organisations lack the necessary physical infrastructure or workforce to continue to provide the same level of services they had in the past.

Often the demands on them are greater than they once were due to social changes, such as the ageing population. Sometimes organisations lose their relevance as alternative community priorities emerge.

It is important for organisations to be organic and continue to respond to their communities, rather than existing for existence sake. The non-profit sector must be a partner in achieving identified policy priorities.

But there are some challenges that are the result of government actions. Often the negative consequences are not intentional, but with some considered steps, we can reverse these consequences and harness the opportunity of volunteering for our nation.

Some of these include unnecessary regulation that does not represent the level of risk voluntary activity represents.

The collapse of FAI insurance was disastrous for some organisations and the States had to bring forward a solution which now must be revised.

Public policy approaches which have led to the increased use of competitive tendering, contractual arrangements and purchaser-provider relationships often mean that voluntary management committees and boards need new skills to manage increasingly complex relationships with Government.

And for voluntary organisations which apply for government funding, they often find themselves deep in complicated application forms, contracts and conditions. Some organisations give up when the process is too draining on their minimal resources, resources which could be going into providing services and input into communities where they are needed most.

Regulation of the sector needs to take account of the nature and operations of such organisations, and should be simple, clear and consistent across jurisdictions.

This does not mean less accountability and transparency. What it does mean is that the process should be simplified, while ensuring that services being

delivered with government funds put clients at the centre of service delivery, focus on outcomes, rather than outputs.

The Government is aware of the restrictions that red tape associated with sourcing and keeping government funding, unclear and inconsistent tax treatment for different parts of the non-profit sector, including the vexed question of DGR status.

To develop new governance for the non-profit sector, there must also be a better understanding of the sector itself, and its contribution to Australia's society and economy. To do this we will be looking at new tools to understand the productive input of the sector.

In coming months we will be talking further with the sector and the State and Territory Governments about some of these challenges and how we can resolve these issues as part of our commitment to constructive Commonwealth/State relations.

These discussions will also include exploring options for developing a compact between government and the non-profit sector to build a new and strong relationship.

We have announced a number of key commitments to improve the partnership between Government and the non-profit sector:

(1) Ensuring the non-profit sector can have their voices heard. This includes changing contracts with the voluntary sector by removing clauses that prevent non-profit organisations from advocating. It is essential that we restore independence and the right to advocate to the non-profit sector as you have an important contribution to make to civil society. This should be at the centre of our relationship. I am currently working across portfolios to remove these provisions within contracts and develop exemplar clauses for all government contracts.

(2) The implementation of our election commitment to commence on 1 July 2008, to launch a significantly revamped and expanded Volunteer Grants Program and help community volunteers meet the soaring cost of petrol for the first time. Almost 27,000 voluntary non-profit community organisations will be eligible to receive financial assistance.

The expanded three-year \$69 million program will make it easier for volunteer community organisations to claim the financial support they deserve. The *Volunteer Grants Program* will:

- Inject \$15 million of additional funding into the program over three years to ensure an estimated 6,000 additional organisations benefit from the program;
- For the first time allow volunteer community organisations to apply for funding to purchase petrol vouchers; and
- Roll the two existing Federal Government community organisation support programs into one streamlined, expanded and improved *Volunteer Grants Program*.

An expanded *Volunteer Grants Program* will allow community organisations to apply for grants of up to \$3,000.

The Volunteer Small Equipment Grants, while important, do not allow organisations to use this assistance to help volunteers with these costs. This needed to be changed and this funding will be redirected to increase the total amount available to organisations by \$15 million over three years from 1 July 2008.

We simply cannot have Australians stop volunteering because they can't afford to fill up the tank. The increasing cost of petrol for volunteers who drive to the organisations they assist, or drive others to and from events, is one of the most significant cost increases for volunteers.

Other equipment and facilities also be funded including:

- Tools
- Computers
- Microwaves, kettles
- Sporting equipment
- Uniforms

These announcements are the first stages of the Australian Government's commitment to build a new relationship with the voluntary sector and to remove the barriers volunteer organisations face so their efforts are most effective.

There are some other steps we can take at the national level to build capacity in our voluntary organisations and start on the path to a National Voluntary Framework.

I think the most useful and constructive achievement would be national volunteering policy framework – for consistency, accreditation and skills transfer. I will be talking to States and Territories about this soon.

For example, how can we build a framework for relevant training and accreditation that encourages, not hinders participation in volunteering?

What can we do to better recognise and acknowledge the voluntary contribution? We must continue to celebrate and give praise to those who work so selflessly and tirelessly for their communities.

How we can raise the public profile of volunteering and get away from enduring stereotypes of what it means to 'volunteer'? This includes considering ways to support business to build corporate volunteering into their work plans so it is of benefit to their triple bottom line, their staff and for the communities in which they do business.

Voluntary sector organisations must also be willing to recognise that there are significant external changes that will continue to influence the way you work in the community. All organisations can be more successful by considering these changes and using them to develop strategic direction.

We have been tardy in Australia about investing in our volunteers and we have a lot to learn from other countries. The US, NZ, South African and Canadian volunteer sectors can teach us a great deal.

For example, the UK's National Council for Volunteers has produced a very insightful toolkit to help voluntary organisations plan for the future and become stronger.

It explores how opportunities like the shift to more professional volunteering can be used for the benefit of organisations. Challenges like the ageing population, a time-poor society, weaker geographical communities, and how public perception of volunteering can be changed for the better.

Conclusion

Increasing participation, not only through work, but through civic, cultural and voluntary effort is of great significance to build inclusive communities.

To achieve the golden age of volunteering I spoke of earlier is possible. The opportunity it presents to tackle disadvantage and exclusion is exciting and challenging.

But it, like a true social inclusion agenda, cannot be delivered in isolation by one entity, department or sector. It is a society-wide challenge.

An important step is the willingness to build a new relationship with the voluntary sector and remove the barriers preventing non-profit sector organisations from evolving to make an even more significant contribution to our community.

Volunteers and their organisations are already responding to disadvantage, exclusion and providing the social glue to our communities in profound ways.

We must harness the opportunity for every community to realise the benefits of volunteering and build a golden age for volunteering into the future.