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2010 Community Leadership Oration:

What Really Matters?

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 1 June 2010

Presentation by

Christine Nixon

Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction & Recovery Authority Chair, former Victorian Police Commissioner

Introduced by:

Carol Schwarz AM

Chair, Our Community

Carol Schwartz:

Thank you so much Denis. I found that session with Anne absolutely inspiring. Both she and Joan are just really true leaders and have really paved the way for Australian women and so thank you very much. It was such a great session.

It is now my very great pleasure to introduce another great woman leader, Christine Nixon.

As Chair of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, Christine Nixon oversees the largest recovery and rebuilding operation Victoria has ever undertaken.

Under Christine's leadership, the authority works with communities, businesses, charities, local councils and other government departments to help people and communities recover and rebuild.

Christine's priority is to help communities recover and rebuild in a way that is safe, timely, efficient and respectful of each community's different needs.

Prior to joining the Authority, Christine was the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police, leading 14,000 staff, operating across more than 500 locations and overseeing an annual budget of $1.7 billion.

Christine is now a non-executive director of the Fosters Group and is also an advisory board member for the Alannah and Madeline Foundation and a patron of Onside Soccer, Victorian Soccer Federation Incorporation, Operation Newstart Victoria and Phoenix Club Inc.

Christine Nixon is a woman of courage and a true leader. Welcome Christine.

Christine Nixon:

Thank you and thank you for the opportunity to come along and be a part of today.

To Carol and Anne and Joan, wonderful women and great people of encouragement, and I thank them for asking me along today and allowing me to share some of the learnings from the Bushfire Authority and I guess from my life in policing.

Can I pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land, the Wurundjeri People, to any elders who are here and those who have passed.

Can I also thank the organisers and the sponsors of this kind of conference. When they said there was 1000 of you I was really surprised. But I was impressed because it says an enormous amount about our community. And I think it also confirms what I've seen in our communities over the last 16 months and the eight years before that when I was Police Commissioner.

I want to talk in two different parts. The first is to talk about the bushfires and to talk about the kind of things I've seen in communities. This address was around community leadership. I really want to emphasise the community piece.

I know that many of you have far more experience than me in this process and have worked with many, many, many communities. But I wanted to share with you what I've seen about community leadership because I think it's just a fabulous thing to see and it's been enormously encouraging for me to see and to see the results of what those communities can do when we support them to achieve what they want to achieve.

As you all know, the bushfires had an enormous devastating effect on Victoria and I think across the whole country and in fact many parts of the world people understood the impact that it had on the 173 people that we lost who were mums and dads and sisters and brothers and children and grandmothers and all of those that people lost in those fires.

We lost 2133 homes, and 1500 more were damaged and many, many facilities. One hundred and nine communities were actually affected by those fires. I think somewhere in the vicinity of about 60,000 people were directly affected. I think all of us were affected but others were directly affected as well.

And so what I've seen in working with those communities from the very beginning, from the day after when I first went and started to talk with those communities, until last night when I was up at a place called Christmas Hills that some of you might know, a place too that was touched by the fires, and talking to a community group of about 30 about what that group wanted to do.

From the very beginning what we wanted to do within the authority was to work with communities, to actually ensure that we had a community led recovery. Those of you who have ever read literature about disasters and about recovering will know the importance of having communities as part of that recovery, having them take the leadership. This has turned out to be the best way that communities recover.

I wanted to tell you some stories about some of those communities. One community is a little community called Hazelwood Giralang. Some of you may know it. It's a small community up in Gippsland, up in the mountains.

One of the people who became the chair of the Community Recovery Committee said, "We didn't even actually know we were a community until someone told us." He said, "We didn't ever talk to each other. We didn't even really nod when we passed each other as we drove by."

It was houses, quite isolated, obviously in the middle of the bush. They had one community asset and it was a hall. It was built, I think, in 1939 after a fire that had been in that area. So that one community asset became really a significant part. It was partly burned but it became the centre of that group coming together.

They were very clear. A man called Tony Ferguson was elected as the chair of their Community Recovery Committee. Tony was a person who was very direct, he had a fairly senior position in his business but was very direct and said, "Christine, I think there's five things we want you to do for us."

So we worked with them on those five things. When the fifth thing was done Tony sent me a letter and said, "Thank you, we're done now."

He said, "We're going to have a meeting next week and we'd really like you to come because we want to just tell you about something." He wanted obviously to thank us for the work we'd done and the way that his community had been able to come together as a community but achieve many things.

He said, “Now, Christine we’re going to take the R out of the Community Recovery Committee. We’re just going to be a Community Committee. We’re going to go on because we’ve learned an enormous amount about how to get things done and we’re not about to lose those skills.”

He’s just one example of the 33 committees that we’ve worked with. It was about letting communities lead. Now, I know that many of you believe that. But let me tell you I’ve seen it and I’ve seen it in the most difficult circumstances, when people have been traumatised and lost family and lost homes. But those people in those circumstances tell us how to do things and tell us how to lead.

Other lessons that we’ve learned through this whole process is that communities are different. I know I’m not telling you anything about that, but they very much are different and some of the things you should think about when you’re working with communities, as we’ve had to along the way, is that there are no what you’d call ‘normal’ communities. All the communities that we’ve dealt with are very different.

And they’re different in different sorts of ways. I remember being in the very early days in Kinglake. It was a community meeting in a tent because there were no halls or places, really, that you could take 700 people to a community meeting.

We’d asked to come along to this meeting. It was a community meeting they were holding themselves. They weren’t really sure whether I should be allowed to come because they wanted to think and talk amongst themselves.

I said, “That’s OK, I’d like to come and besides that I’ve got some money.” So they let me come.

We just wanted to talk and explain some of the things we were trying to do. But mostly we wanted to listen.

They were quite an interesting group and they didn’t all agree. I know that you know that better than me, that communities don’t all agree, and they will have their say. This went on for some time.

It was cold outside and people were getting a bit unhappy and different people would yell at each other. I was sitting and thinking I was glad I used to be the Police Commissioner. We watched what happened for a while. Eventually I watched a process that I watched in many other communities. That is, they argued it through until they came to a place where eventually way up the back of the room a woman got up and said, “Now let me just get this straight. What we’re talking about is this and this and this.” And everybody went, “Yes.” Then she said, “I think we can go home now.” And they did.

What I learned in that process was it’s OK for people to argue. It’s OK for people to have a different opinion. And if you let the group work their way through that, what I’ve found in so many instances in incredibly emotionally times is they work their way through it.

Now, that group of people had an election for their Community Recovery Committee and they went to the Australian Electoral Commission to run it, which was amazing. But they did and they came with a group and that group is the most diverse range of people I’ve ever seen.

It has a very strong community activist about sustainability. It has a Buddhist nun. It has a woman who’s never had a leadership position in her life before but decided she was going to stand up and actually be part of that community and help them recover. It has a management consultant who has a lot of skills.

So I think what I’ve seen is diverse communities.

And we should not forget about their histories. None of us come personally without a history and none of those communities come without histories either. You need to think about what those histories were.

If you take a place like Marysville, it has a long history. Those histories, in some ways, become part of the future and become part of the way these communities want things done. But they’re important.

We’ve had a great adviser during the whole time in the bushfires and his name is Doctor Rob Gordon who’s a world expert on recovery. He said to us a while ago, “Christine, you need to acknowledge the communities, the groups within the communities, you need to acknowledge

their identity. It's a very important part of giving legitimacy to people." And we've understood that.

We've also seen other communities where they describe themselves as the 'black belt' part of the community, the part that was burnt, and the 'green belt' part of the community, the part that wasn't. I was a little unhappy about that kind of way to describe it but it is the way they are and the way they will see themselves.

I think that part of the way we work with communities, what we've learned, is to listen and accept that difference which is a pretty important part of the process.

Also what I've learned from communities is they won't take no anymore. And I think that's fantastic. They've understood in many ways how to get things done.

There's a great little community called Straths Creek and they now get the language. They now know how to put a bid in for funding. The know how to scope a project. They know how to get legitimacy for that project. They know all the language and they're never going back to where they were before.

I think that's important that communities get that power, get that knowledge and know-how to get things done.

I was up at one in the North East in the Alpine area, they have just one hall. It's a pretty old hall and it's full of asbestos. Around the area they had the fire. They said, "Do you think, Christine, it's possible for us, that maybe the Red Cross Fund or maybe someone else might be able to help us just fix that hall up? It's the only thing that we have."

We were able to go back to them and say, "Yes, we've taken your bid, we've gone forward with it." And it was the greatest thing that you've ever seen. They invited me for lunch, the whole 50 people who live in the community. It was a great experience to see that community that had struggled and didn't realise that it would be able to make that and what it would be able to achieve.

I also learned about communications, about talking to people from the very beginning. Just using Kinglake again, in the very, very beginning 600 people would come at lunchtime to the

CFA station to understand what had gone on. You can't over-communicate. It's a very important part of the reason that you're there.

It's also important for someone like me in the role that I had and have within the Bushfire Authority to say to people, "It will be OK. We will get there. We will be able to achieve these kinds of things that you want to achieve." And then to see people become part of delivering on that process.

Those daily communications were really important. They need to be respectful, they need to be honest and they need to be informing people about where things are up to as their whole lives are falling about them. It needs to be local communications. It needs to be empowering.

The Flowerdale community has a community blog. Flowerdale is a wonderful community, incredibly diverse, with a range of people who I'm sure never wanted to be found by most of us before in some cases, and are very unhappy that they now have been found. But they are a great community and they have a blog that anybody can be part of.

There's a newsletter called the *Bridge Connection* in a place called Mia Mia and Redesdale out of Bendigo. They have a newsletter that used to be small. It's now got a distribution of 800. I went to the unveiling of the most wonderful asset that that community could ever have and it was a photocopier. And we did unveil it. And they were all there and they just thought it was a wonderful thing. It's a very expensive photocopier, I have to tell you. I was delighted to go to one of the converted garages that someone who'd lost their house had actually built. This is now where this new *Bridge Connection* newsletter is being published from.

Then there's the Kinglake Ranges Radio. A lovely woman called Kath Stewart just never let up in saying that Kinglake needed a radio station. There's also one in Marysville and there are others that are in the process of being delivered. Those radio stations are really important and they were able to be funded along the way. And community websites were set up for many of the communities along the way.

They're the kind of things that I've seen with our community. I've watched enormous courage from so many people who have done so much.

I was telling some people earlier about the kinds of people that you meet. I remember there was one group of people. Some women came to us and said to us, “We’d like to have a workshop. We’d like a retreat for women who have been affected by the fires.” I said, “How many did you have in mind?” They said, “About 600 women.”

I said, “Have you ever run that kind of an occasion for 600 women?” They said, “No, but with you we think we can.” And in fact they did. Three hundred women came to the first at Lorne and 300 women came to the second at Lorne. It was the most emotional and amazing experience to watch that group of women come together and support each other. It was a wonderful thing to see about how they were able to do that.

I’ve told a number of people before but I was sitting talking to a woman. She was just delighted to be there. I said to her, “This is a wonderful weekend.” She said, “Yes, I’m looking forward to lots of things.” The chocolate therapy she thought would be great, as well as yoga and a whole lot of other things. She said, “Do you know what the most important part is Christine? I don’t have to wash up.” I thought that was pretty important.

Those are some of the things that I’ve learned from the bushfire communities. And I’ve also learned other things and I’ve learned it from the police, I’ve learned it from the time back when I first got involved as a young police officer, back in the 1970s. As Anne was talking I was thinking about books she’s written and things I’ve read, they’re very much part of me and part of where I started off.

One of the early lessons I learned was about trust, about trusting people, and, I think, about a respectfulness for people as well.

Going back to Anne’s book, *Damned Whores and God’s Police,* when I used to work at Darlinghurst Police Station, they used to arrest 80 prostitutes a night. I got to know most of them and I got to understand where those women came from. I got to understand in a real way the kind of difference that we had in our community. But I also got to understand that you had to be respectful in the way you treated people, no matter who they were.

I think the trust part is important too. You do have to trust communities. You have to trust the people who work with you. And for a vast amount of the time that trust will be rewarded.

People have said to me recently, “What about the trust you put in people?” I haven’t lost that trust. I think we should know that our communities can be trusted, that they are able to make decisions, that they’re really pretty smart. Sometimes we forget that.

Communities, as I said, are different and respect is important. I think there’s another part of respect as well and that’s probably about a respect for you. It’s about what you do and the way you go about your role.

During my time at Darlinghurst I did some things that weren’t terrible but they were, I think, personally damaging to me in some of the behaviours. This was just one: I found myself at a pub at 6am in the morning drinking beer. And I don’t even like beer! Given I’m on the Foster’s Board that is interesting but there it is. I was drinking beer because I wanted to fit in. I just wanted to be like the blokes. This was back when I was 22. I wanted to just be like the blokes and behave like the blokes. And I was just thinking, “I don’t want to do this anymore, I don’t want to be like people that I don’t really want to be like at all. I don’t want to have to do things to fit in.”

And I think that it’s a really important thing for us to think about. So I said to the blokes, “I’m not doing this anymore.” And they said, “Fine. Big deal.”

But I started at that stage, and I was really pretty lucky, to say I wasn’t going to do things that in any way damaged me. I think it’s an important part for us and for communities as well to think about that respectfulness for yourself.

I think I also learned about listening, just listening to what people have got to say. I often said when we were trying to reform Victoria Police – and I think we did a pretty good job actually in many ways – I used to say, “Christine, what you should do is shut up and listen.” It was the best thing I ever did was to ask the people in the organisation, ask the community what they wanted done and then work to have that achieved.

We had a visit from a Professor, Ed Blakely, during the bushfire recovery early times. He said to me that one of the things that governments need to do is to listen to the communities about what they’ve got to say. He said in New Orleans in the early days the government said, “We should restore essential services. We should get the police stations back and the fire stations,” when in fact what the communities wanted was somewhere for the kids to play.

So we should listen to what the community's got to say about what's important to them and I've learned that.

There is also the issue around being honest about what you can do and what you can't do. I've had to do that. I remember a man came up to me in a meeting. He said, "Christine I've lost $3 million worth of the business and I have no insurance." I said to him, "I'm sorry to say to you I can't give your business back to you but you've got the one major asset that created that business and he is standing in front of me. You've got you and you're the one who can go back and try and work through how to go forward." He said, "I don't like that advice." "Well it's the best I'm going to give you."

I suppose in some ways I've learned to be far more pragmatic about people having to think about what they're doing. The other things I've learned in life and in lots of different ways is about courage and about commitment. You do have to have some courage.

I've watched Anne and Joan and I've watched many, many of you that I know who are here who have stood up and said things that people didn't want to hear. You do actually have to have some courage on occasions. It may mean that you're under the spotlight and I'm not used to the spotlight ... much.

But there it is and if you're heart tells you it's the right thing to do, if your beliefs tell you it's the right thing to do then, I'd tell you, do it and have the courage to be able to see it through. A commitment, that resilience to stay and to continue, I think, is a really important part.

I think you also have to have a belief that something's possible. People said to me you can never reform Victoria Police but I knew it was possible because the members of that organisation and the community wanted it to be possible. I think they are important parts.

Our communities that have been damaged by the fires have a belief that they can't get back to where they were but they call it the 'new normal'. Those who lost family members are struggling to get back to that point about what they see is their new normal. I think that's an important part as well, a belief that you think it's possible.

I want to finish on a couple of issues. One is about an event I went to a while ago. It was the FINA World Swimming Championships. It was held at the Rod Laver Arena, you might remember they made it a swimming pool.

I remember going along to this event. We'd done the security for that. Victoria Police was very happy about that security we'd done and everything was in place. They invited us along to the opening.

I remember sitting there with a lot of other people at the opening and the process was that each country was introduced and they would bring in their flags and they'd play the music of the country. Then each of the swimmers who were there would have a big float with a flag of their country on board. The flag was sort of attached. They'd come over to the pool and put the float into the pool. Well this went on and on and on and on. There were a lot of countries there.

I remember watching the floats in the pool. They were doing kind of what floats do – you know what that is, they bob about. The floats went from one end of the pool and they floated back and sometimes they gathered together but they basically had no real direction at all, just floated about. That's what floats do. I remember thinking, "Yes that's interesting. They're floats."

Then they'd asked us to come back the following day and we watched people get on the edge of that pool, the same pool of course. They did the very, very best they could do to win their races, to achieve medals, to do whatever it was. But they had goals. They weren't floats bobbing about in the pool. They had a go.

I think the most important part I've learned about big organisations and about communities and about people is that you can actually float, just go with the tide, or you can get out of the pool, you can get the knowledge and practice, and you can get on the edge and you can have a go.

It doesn't mean you're always going to win. In fact you're going to stuff it up on occasions. But because you've had a go, that is the most important part.

And I suppose what I've learned in life, and I've had great parents to help me with that in many ways. I have a mum who says, "If all else fails come home Christine." And I have a dad who sends me emails recently about a whole range of issues. My point is I think that it's really important to have a go. And that's what most of you have done in your communities, to have a go. It's not always going to work out, that's OK. You win some and you lose some.

My Mum has this wonderful line, she says to me, "You've got yourself into it, get yourself out of it." And I feel like pulling the sheets over my head.

You know, you have too much to give, all of you. You've got so much knowledge and so many skills and these two days that you've been part of have given you additional skills and great capacity to continue beyond, to lead our communities to the place that those communities want to go.

Thank you for having me.