Challenges for Community, Government, and Business

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
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The Hon. Peter Costello MP
Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Australia

(*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the
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The Australian Citizenship Pledge is recited on a regular basis by those taking out Australian citizenship at ceremonies across the country. It is accompanied by a statement on what citizenship means, usually delivered by the local Mayor.

The pledge is an attempt to define what it means to be Australian. An Australian can be of any race, or religion, or age, or sex. If they are born a citizen they will not be asked formally to adhere to these principles. But if they are not born a citizen and wish to become one, they will be asked to make this pledge. It is an attempt to distil the essence of Australian citizenship. In a formal sense this is the answer to the question: "What makes a person Australian?" It reads as follows:

From this time forward [under God]
I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people,
Whose democratic beliefs I share
Whose rights and liberties I respect
Whose laws I will uphold and obey.
- *The Australian Citizenship Pledge*

The pledge can be taken as an oath, in which case the pledge is made "under God". Alternatively it can be taken simply as a pledge, in which case reference to God is omitted.

This tells us that belief in God is not an essential part of being Australian. However, belief in democracy *is*: "…whose democratic beliefs I share". Loyalty to the country and its people is essential, and so too is respect for the rights and liberties of others. The pledge also makes it clear that respect for the rule of law goes very much to the heart of being Australian.

When travelling overseas people are frequently asked to identify themselves. The answer will invariably be in terms of nationality. The question: Who are you? brings the answer: "I am an Australian." It is the largest group that we belong to and it gives us identity in the international sphere.

What does it mean to be Australian? In a citizenship sense it means to pledge: "…loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share etc etc." Of course people do not take their identity solely from a citizenship pledge. People have multiple layers of identity deriving from all sorts of circumstances and associations.

If you are asked about your identity back in Australia then there will be other answers. In Australia a person might identify themselves by association with a State or more likely by the town or city where they live. I'm from Sydney etc. Where it is a big city the person might identify themselves by reference to part of the city eg. I'm from the North Shore or I'm from the Blue Mountains. If it's a

small town the statement of the town a person comes from is usually sufficient.

A person from an ethnic background might identify themselves by that background – as Aboriginal, Greek, Jewish etc. A person from a religious background might identify themselves in terms of that background – eg. as Muslim or Buddhist.

Networks develop identity

The point of this is that we are all part of overlapping associations – geographic, ethnic, religious, national, and each of them gives us identity to greater and lesser degrees.

These associations, these networks, these communities are part of explaining how people look at themselves, as well as how they look at the world. Our communities to some degree define us. To a large degree they help us define the world.

Edmund Burke called these networks "little platoons". In Reflections on the Revolution in France he wrote:

"To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society is the first principle (the germ as it were of public affections.) It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind. The interest of that portion of social arrangement is a trust in the hands of all those who compose it…"

Few of the networks that are really important to us are instituted by the Government. Nor thankfully are they run or controlled by Government. Where we live, what our ethnic heritage is, what our religious faith is, who we choose to associate with are all part of the non-government sphere of life. It is the citizens and their associations that give character to society and ultimately government. It is not government that gives character to citizens.

The most basic community: the family

Of course the first and most basic community to which we belong is the family.

Every person has two parents. The family has a biological basis. The family is the natural arrangement for protecting the young, rearing and nurturing them. In a family a person learns how to interact with others and form their first community. The family should also be an institution for protecting the aged.

I do not know how much of this conference on communities has focussed on the most basic and natural community of all. But if those communities break down then the strain on other communities in our society will be much greater. According to the ABS publication, Marriages and Divorces, Australia, if a

newly born group of babies was exposed to 1997-99 rates (marriage, widowing, divorce, remarriage and mortality) 32 per cent of marriages would end in divorce.

The rate of divorce in Australia is about the same as New Zealand, lower than the United States and Britain, higher than France and Germany. The Commonwealth believes that stronger families would make a stronger society. And it believes that the non-government sector is better placed than government to deliver programs to strengthen the family.

In four years since 2000 $226 million has been allocated to fund 660 local projects, a quarter of which are in indigenous communities and more than half in rural and remote communities. Over the next four years the Commonwealth has allocated $365 million to this program. These grants will go to councils, shires, religious bodies, community groups and citizens groups amongst many other institutions of the community sector.

The Government could spend this money on Commonwealth public servants to run programs to strengthen the family but it believes that the community sector is likely to deliver better assistance with more motivated personnel.

The Stronger Families and Communities Strategy has also worked to encourage volunteering in Australia. More than 6,400 small grants have been provided to voluntary organisations.

Outside the family individuals form other associations or networks – the street, the neighbourhood, the town, the suburb – these are geographic networks. Then there are the networks of common interest – religious, sporting, service clubs, playgroups, schools, political parties, self-help groups.

Whilst the object of the common interest is usually the reason for joining these groups, a large part of the benefit of these groups is not actually the object or the end result but the activity of working together on a common project. This association develops relationships and deepens interdependence and trust between people.

I have used the example before. Suppose the Government were to say that it would make a grant to every school that has a fundraising fete on the understanding that as a result of that grant the fete was no longer needed and would no longer be held. That way the school would have exactly the same resources without the fete as it did with the fete. The parents could save themselves all the time of setting up stalls and serving on stalls. The children could stay home and watch TV and no-one would be worse off. Or would they?

A large part of the benefit of running the school fete is found not just in the money it raises but in the way it brings the parents together. It introduces the parents to each other, it gives them a common interest, it builds relationships and interdependence, it builds trust. It develops community.

In all these associations or networks formed around a common interest it is the activity as much as the end result that delivers positive benefits.

These associations, networks, communities give identity to individuals, they form support networks for individuals and they build trust between individuals.

The network of support

The Age newspaper on 15 March 2003 reported the discovery of a lady who had died alone in her home in the Melbourne suburb of Bentleigh. Judging from newspapers and mail inside the house police estimated she had died nearly two years previously in May 2001. Police concluded she had died from natural causes. But when police were called to investigate the body had largely decomposed. Police were called by neighbours.

Apparently this lady had deliberately cut herself off from family, had erected corrugated iron barricades around her house warning people to stay out. It is a fair bet that she did not attend a bowling club, a local church, a Probus club, or an elderly

citizens activity where she was part of a network where she would be missed or that would, in a time of need, seek her out or seek out help for her.

A bowling club does not exist to provide medical or health care for older members of society. Nor does a Probus Club. But they do provide a network that can identify when one of their members needs assistance. They can provide support. If families fail these networks may, partially, step in and fill some of the gap.

Regardless of their original purpose networks form a valuable support for individuals at a time of need. And not just in old age.

Young people too can be assisted by overlapping networks or associations. Schools are of course a strong community influence on young people. Sport can be another.

Engaging young people in sport will give them physical exercise – something that is important for physical health and wellbeing. But in addition to this sporting teams develop confidence. Turning up on time and learning not to let down the other players down develops reliability and commitment.

It is estimated that 40 per cent of children in Australia play no sport nor participate in organised physical activity. This is not a good record.

The Government is advanced in discussions with National Sporting Leagues in cricket, AFL and netball as to how their high profile representatives can encourage sports participation by young people. An announcement on this will be made shortly. The point here is that this is not just an issue of physical fitness. It is extending the range of our children's participation and networks.

The goal of the Olympic Movement is to use sport to build trust between athletes and eventually their countries. At a local level team sports aim to build trust between the players. Hopefully too, in the spirit of intense competition, teams will come to respect each other.

We have all seen parents at children's sporting matches who lose their temper and turn on the referee. Nothing could be more calculated to undo the positive value of these sporting associations. The poor Ref is doing his or her best usually on a voluntary basis to give children the chance to exercise and learn team-building skills. If the Referee gives it away there won't be a sporting match. The children will miss out. It has been suggested that parents having a go at the Ref, yelling abuse, is "part of the Australian way." It is not. It should never become so. And responsible people, far from encouraging it, should unequivocally discourage it.

Networks develop trust

Trust between citizens is a very big part of preserving peace and order in a society. It is a very big part of creating the conditions for a prosperous economy.

Trust can come from a shared religious or moral framework. It can come from a mutual respect for law and the rights of others. But in fractured societies without a history of trust it takes a lot to build it. And you need to build it from the ground up.

This is a major problem in Iraq at the moment. There is no trust between the general Sunni population and the Baathists. There is little trust between the Sunni and Shia. There is no history of trust between the Kurds and the Sunni. And it will take a lot of confidence building measures before it develops. And until it develops, not just group to group, or community to community, but individual to individual there is hardly the basis for a well functioning democracy.

A democracy requires a high level of trust to function effectively – not the least is the trust that is required in the integrity of the ballot box. And trust is required to believe that political rivals will allow the outcome to be determined by the Ballot Box.

I am suggesting here that there are pre-conditions for the running of a successful democracy, that the overthrow of a tyrant doesn't automatically usher in liberty, the rule of law, public confidence in the ballot box, and acceptance of majority rule with the protection of minority rights. Those countries that operate successful democracies show high levels of trust between citizens usually borne out of a common history or a common world view or moral framework.

And where this is absent it is necessary to build confidence and trust between the associations or communities that do exist. In the words of Edward Burke it

is necessary to develop a confidence and trust between those little platoons. And in those societies where there is a high degree of trust between citizen and citizen it is necessary to preserve it.

Australia's successful experience

By international measures, Australia is one of those successful societies. We have a functioning democracy, we have a strong tradition of the rule of law, we have no significant civil strife, our economy in recent years has performed strongly.

We have strong non-governmental institutions that provide identity, networks of support, and protect our freedoms. But many of the "joiners" are ageing and a lot of these voluntary associations are finding it hard to attract members. We can't afford to lose these associations. It may be that younger people will form different ones. What we cannot afford is if they form none at all.

As I have previously said the Government should whenever possible work through community organisations. But I would not want these organisations to become totally reliant on government funding. If they do they will lose their edge. The best way of addressing need is to have the commitment and the passion of the volunteer, the support of government where appropriate, and to leverage the financial resources of the private sector as well.

I believe that the engagement of the private sector is growing in Australia in community partnerships. Business leaders are members of the community and they want to live in a stronger community. They want their children to grow up in stronger communities. They know that stronger communities provide better employees and prosperous societies support prosperous businesses.

And the strength of our economy will determine the level of services we can provide in health, education, aged care. It will determine whether people can find work or have to live in unemployment. Nothing saps a community like prolonged stubborn unemployment. Unemployment multiplies social problems and divides the resources available to tackle them.

So we should not lose sight of the importance of a stable growing economy. Nor lose sight of those networks which can flourish in such an environment to promote participation, support and trust – which in turn should feed back into our capacity for improved social and economic outcomes. In the words of this conference these are communities in control.