



**The 2007 Community Leadership Oration**

# At Home and Away: Now More than Ever, Global Issues Need Local Community Leadership.

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Presentation by


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Thank you very much. I'd like to start by thanking the Wurundjeri for the opportunity and the privilege of being on their land.

It's an enormous pleasure to be part of this remarkable gathering to celebrate Australian community and here in Moonee Ponds in particular.

I get to stand here because of the generosity of Rhonda, Joe and the other organisers of the conference and for that I'm very grateful. I hope you as the audience at the end of two stimulating days will also be kind to me and tolerate this last go at challenging ourselves to embrace community and all of its power and possibility.

To be honest, it's quite intimidating to be here. You're very impressive, both by sight, by presence and by the authenticity and the authority, the power of what it is that you represent.

So I want to pay honour to you today by, if I might, drawing some connections between what you do every single day, how you go about it, what you uphold as you go about it, and what others just like you are doing the world over.

I want to lay out this idea of connection between us all, and to suggest, as indeed I think the debate just raised, this connection is an opportunity and it's a threat. It's a responsibility and it's a right.

Because it's not just interesting to talk about global connections between us all, it's factual. Those connections are there.

What's really challenging is to surface them, to make a compelling and consequential case that our lives as community activists should be lived in a consciousness of connection with global community and with a global community of communities.

Perhaps now more than ever if we think of community only as a specific or geographical construct, perhaps we're part of the problem. Because as the economy integrates and electronic communications stretch across national borders and flows of information and money speed up and intensify, power, influence, control is shifting. It's changing and relocating. It's de-linking from the physical alone and the geographical only.

The nation state's power is shifting to business, shifting laterally to corporations, upwards to super-structured systems like the European Union, International Monetary Fund and downwards to civil society organisations.

These sources of influence are acquiring new and more disbursed powers, bringing with them impacts on our lives and our life choices, and sometimes in ways that are unseen and therefore unaccountable.

Globalisation means economic growth and wealth, at breakneck speed for some, but leaves many more marginalised – marginalised from their realisation of rights and from meaningful choices in life.

We are at genuine risk in a global market economy of security, financial and environmental integrations that outpace the possibility and capacity that we have for genuine social organising and for genuine social justice.

In this world the truth is there isn't a single country or government or actor – or even a group of countries or actors – that can hope to resolve on their own – global problems. But nor can any one local community hope to hold back the tide, even though many are trying to. In fact, people the world over increasingly are impatient with government. They're demanding justice and freedom and accountability. In small places and in large, in troubled times and in freedom, in creativity under violence and in repression, people are insisting on their right to organise.

And despite the efforts of governments to silence human rights defenders, social activists and others just like you, people power, people pressure remain and will be forces to be reckoned with.

But in these times and in the times ahead there is a real human cost and casualty in separation, in division and in distinction, which too frequently have been the by-products of many approaches to community.

Pragmatically, not ideologically, at the close of this day we should think once more about the place we can give to the global and to the universal, even as we defend the local.

Of course, we agree that action within the formation of local community is the key to relevance, the key to effectiveness and to authentic purpose. Local organising, local action is a sure and certain antidote to the alienation that breeds rampantly under the force of a globalising economy, world politics, transnational commercial communications, monopolising multi-media. And local organising is essential in the face of public policy making that sublimates the identity of the citizen to that of mere consumer.

At its very best, localism tailors and details solutions for specific contours of local reality. It's humanising, accessible, self-empowering. It involves and it dignifies.

It can mean the silenced speak. It can mean the hidden are seen. It can mean the forgotten are remembered. However, just as we celebrate community, to reduce it to the local only would be a wrongful and even reckless confinement.

What if we were seen to be judging another community to be less important just because it belongs to the other? What would it mean for how we organise locally if we were to discover that our localism is but a pretender for sustainable solutions when problems extend far beyond local borders?

What if in our local community struggles to be heard our voices were unintentionally some kind of free formed silencing of the voice of communities elsewhere?

Is there a price being paid by others that we don't even know of because we have clung community to smaller more confined places than ever our own values and principles required?

This is not a cautionary tale; it's a tale of hope and of opportunity. But it is a call for a renewal of that faded message: think global, act local. It's a plea actually for 'think and act global, think and act local,' for irrefutably here you are mirrored and reproduced in your millions the world over, the same urge, similar courage, a common irrepressible instinct for community in control.

The differences between you and these others are not substantial, and nor are they of your own making in the first instance. They become substantial only because of the public perception we enjoy here in Australia as compared to the reception you would receive if you were organising, for example, in Brazil.

In Salvador in Brazil similar meetings just like this are held. Here, for example, is a meeting packed with residents to protest local violence which is destroying their community, gathering to protest the casualties of that armed violence, holding aloft pictures of their children killed.

They're gathering here to expose and protest the otherwise invisible crimes of violence against women. In Salvador local community activists refuse to

accept the death of their family members and refuse to accept that these deaths should be met with impunity.

Many women of the poorest Brazilian neighbourhoods, the favelas, now devote their lives to the pursuit of justice. Their activism is relentless. They protest, exercising their right to community. In the favelas of Brazil you would organise too, provided you had the stomach for guns on all sides.

In a village in northern Bangladesh a group of women sit on bamboo mats in the dusty village. They're here as participants in a legal literacy program, even though most can barely read or write. They listen attentively as their teacher, using pictures and symbols, explains the laws that prohibit child marriage and require the informed consent of the woman to marriage.

These women have organised themselves to receive loans from a micro-credit scheme. One woman has bought a cow to make some extra income selling milk. Another plans to buy a sewing machine to set up a tailoring business. Why does she come to class? "Well," she says, "I want to know more about my rights. I don't want my daughters to suffer the way I have. And so I need to learn how to protect my rights."

You would want to organise locally if you were in Bangladesh, it's only natural, provided poverty and deep seated gender-based discrimination did not prevent your access to the most basic civil tools that you need to claim public space.

In Latvia at the beginning of June there was a struggle locally to do something with flair and abandon that local activists in Sydney now take for granted, and that is to take pride in something which others would have regarded as a shame.

Taking their pride to the streets, Latvians marched first in 2005, only to be physically attacked while police stood idly by. They turned to Amnesty International for support, and in 2007 members of Muzika, Latvia's only gay organisation, were joined in a march of solidarity by activists from eight other countries, and this year from 26 countries.

You would feel a desire to organise in Latvia, but you'd have to brace yourselves for the spittle, the spite, the clenched fists of misanthropy borne of bigotry.

In Guatemala, December 1982, an army-led unit slaughtered more than 350 indigenous villagers in just one of a number of massacres. It was to clear their land for a hydro-electric scheme. The clothing and remains recovered from that 1982 site reveal that many of the victims were children. Seventy-seven were aged under 12. Many skeletons bore milk teeth.

Throughout the violence directed at the indigenous population in Rio Negro, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank continued financing the Chicacao hydro-electric dam.

Today, the sons and daughters of Remembrance against Silence is a collective of young people who were children when their family members were massacred or disappeared during Guatemala's civil war. And they won't forget.

You would want to organise too, organise for resistance, if you were indigenous people in Guatemala. You'd organise initially to resist forced eviction from your land. And then you would organise because you would never forget how you were treated.

But you would have to be willing to face the violence of unacceptable government, of unaccountable government, the injustice of corrupt courts, and be ready to be betrayed by key international bodies.

On the 10th of October just last year Wang Ling was assigned a 15 months re-education in China. She had organised petitions and prepared banners in protest against the demolition of her home, this time for Olympic construction. Beaten, detained and imprisoned, Wang Ling is currently being held in a re-education through labour facility in Beijing.

You would wish to organise if you were in China. But if you spoke out, if you tried to meet with others to share your experience or sought access to government information, you'd want to be prepared for criminal charges.

In Zimbabwe, meetings just like these are being held. Women for Zimbabwe arise, meet and organise so that Zimbabweans can articulate together issues that otherwise they would be too afraid to raise alone.

Standing for strategic non-violent action, women, or WOZA as they're known, suffer because they want to exercise their constitutional rights and fundamental freedoms.

Since February 2003 when they were first formed, WOZA members have been repeatedly arrested by Zimbabwean authorities. As recently as two weeks ago, WOZA activists were arrested and beaten because they'd marched peacefully to call for the end to the violence plaguing Zimbabwe.

As we prepared to meet here in Moonee Ponds, these peaceful community activists were being held in Harare Central Remand Prison in deplorable conditions, arrested and detained purely because they were attempting to exercise their right to freedom of assembly and association, their right to community. And they're founded, and I quote them, "to prove that the power of love can conquer the love of power".

You would want to organise locally if you lived in Zimbabwe, provided you were prepared for arbitrary detention for unfair trial and you were willing to be subjected to cruel and degrading treatment.

The world over, local community organising is to society what water and air are to the environment – essential, intrinsic and yet, through crude exploitation, also being trampled on, under attack and under siege, a human rights footprint stamping down claim and entitlement for people who like you would stand up.

Its absence inconceivable, community gives substance, character and glue to society. But if community organising is not universally respected then we are all under threat, because the principle of entitlement to community is a fundamental human right. It's not just a statement of personal belief, it's a binding fact under international law, derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and protected under law.

This year, in 2008, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights turns 60. For six decades it has been the foundation stone of the community of states. The UN was formed expressly for the affirmation of fundamental human rights. And the global gift of the Universal Declaration is its capturing in words universal longings, shared values and common entitlement.

At the beginning of the decade in which it was drafted, Franklin Delano Roosevelt described freedom's four anchors as this: freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom of speech, freedom of worship – the hope of humanity.

And by the end of the decade Eleanor Roosevelt stood before a nascent United Nations with a recipe for respected individuals, sustained community

everywhere – the essence of justice, blended with the elegance of equality and the protection of shared personhood.

For in between times in that self same decade we the people had turned in upon ourselves, denying the sacredness of humanity as a condition shared, an entitlement held in common. The world's political and local community leaders alike presided over deepest division, caustically conjuring up out of our otherwise common connection an artifice of diabolical distinction, stratifying apart our local and global communities with the social cyanides of bigotry, prejudice and oppression. This was a fatal failing of the fathers and its price extracted through years of overt and covert violence was paid by countless millions.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was not a product of great times or hopeful times or privileged or optimistic times. It was not a product only of its times but it certainly was shaped by those times. Its drafting took place in a very specific 1948, over which hung the shadows of Treblinka and Auschwitz, the horrors committed in the Burmese jungles and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, clouds hovering hard, dark and dank in a world excavating from Nuremberg to Tokyo the full horror of an all too human legacy. Sheer palpable disgust in the face of the harshest imaginable evidence made of the UDHR an authentic and definitive standard.

The UDHR describes and defines human rights but it does not invent them. This is a modern declaration of age-old values and it sets down power's contract with powerlessness.

The Declaration's articles combine to black-line a socio-political silhouette of the universal citizen. Jointly, human rights set out the boundaries to the human being, over which no political ideology, no cultural norm, no religious tome or whim or fancy of local or global urge can be or should be allowed to step.

When any one of us stands up or speaks out for something, for a belief, or expresses any opinion, or seeks to be treated fairly and free from discrimination, when we organise ourselves into groups, or form a gathering, or establish associations, when we demand information from those who hold it, when we insist on proper care for our children, when we call for decent housing, health or education, when we form a union, demand a working wage, when we argue for a free media, and against media monopolisation, when we want and demand fair trials, an independent judiciary,

independence in our pursuit of art and science – in each and every one of those we are using human rights.

This places human rights, taken for granted or not, liked or loved, consciously or otherwise, at the centre of the community project. Community depends on human rights. Without human rights, whether they name them as such, community is neither possible nor plausible nor sustainable.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has as its heart the engaged and active individual, who gathers together with other engaged and active individuals in communities of endeavour.

On this, the 60th anniversary of the UDHR, we have both rhyme and reason, not to mention responsibility, to recall its rationale, its purpose and its principles, and to confirm that we are standing sentinel to its intent.

At 60, the UDHR is not up for retirement. It's as relevant today as ever, and deserving of renewed commitment. It doesn't need to be renegotiated, rewritten or scrapped. It just needs to be respected. And it needs rigorous defence.

For in this decade there has been a sustained assault on the values of human rights. The US administration with the connivance of other governments has condoned, supported or imitated unlawful practices, has globalised human rights violations.

Guantanamo Bay detention camp is the capital city of an illegal largely secret network of black hole detention sites, denying 25,000 detainees in Iraq, 800 in Bagram Prison in Afghanistan and 270 still in Guantanamo their right to freedom from torture, to fair trial, to challenge the lawlessness of their detention.

This has been a decade of opportunity, then, for the repressive. For states like Russia and China, Iran, Sudan and Zimbabwe, it's an opportunity for labelled dissent and public debate and community organising terror. In this decade the liberalist agenda, the market economy and the political democracy has betrayed the poor, the marginalised and the silenced.

For the shroud woven by the rhetoric and practice of the war on terror cloaks and confounds the real threats to human security – violence against women, xenophobia, HIV/AIDS, poverty and a planet under pressure of extreme consumption.

In this world, in this decade and for the next, acts of local engagement, local connection and local action will be acts of great humanity. But they won't be enough. Food, oil, climate change, armed conflict – our greatest social challenges today and tomorrow – are not contained by and held at national borders. Being global they reach beyond the local only.

And in the meantime, the moral authority to lead these global solutions to global problems, of the world's most powerful leaders, the UN, the US, it's in tatters. We know that the system of global governance, the institutions we need to address global problems, are not up to the job. We see it every day. The capacities and the political will needed do not yet exist.

Our international institutions are riddled with ineffectiveness, resistant to innovation, co-opted by divisive state agendas. And those who bear the heaviest burden of globalisation, and will bear the brunt of climate change, are absent from processes of deliberation in their decision making.

And yet we have the secret here. We know too well how consequential social movements can be, how powerful non-governmental organising is. Through different evolutions it has imagined and reimagined and gone on to redefine human social and political relationships.

Tim Flannery reminded us at the outset of our meeting that global social movements eradicated slavery, achieved the eight-hour day, enfranchised women.

The head of the Women's Policy Unit, Rhonda Cumberland, told me this week that a hundred years ago the global influence of the local women's suffrage movement here in Victoria was such that when Vida Goldstein went to the US, President Roosevelt asked to meet with her.

There are modern examples of this power that linked up local activism can release for global impact. In the last few years, over one million people worked locally to call for global action to prevent weapons falling into the hand of local communities. And under force of their pressure, the international community has now agreed to start drafting an international arms trade treaty.

In October last year, 43 million people in more than a hundred countries around the world stood up for a global action day against poverty.

Today, because of the technologies of communication, and the relative ease of information exchange and travel, we have far greater possibilities and access to the resources we need to build a global community of local people, bound not by the borders of nation states whose policies are fickle to our rights. We should aim in this less bordered world to build a robust, resilient web of interconnected commitment to human rights for all people everywhere.

It's not only urgent but it's possible to seek a new balance between global and local, to form broad churches, not only small chapels. As local and community groups we can, and the world needs us to, connect and work with other communities nationally. Just as this wonderful and remarkable gathering has done nationally, we must replicate it internationally.

And it's just a matter of simple action, not nearly as challenging as perhaps we fear. For example, on your seats you found a community Code for Good Governance. It recommends, and surely we could make this commitment, to put universal human rights explicitly in your organisation's statute or purpose statement.

Why not review your vision statements and make explicit your commitment to being active for a multi-dimensional sustainability, a sustainable individual, a sustainable community, a sustainable globe.

Why not look at your mission statements. Do you include there a purpose for solidarity in community that extends your gaze beyond the local only, and that understands that in this globalised world if one of us is attacked for community, we are all injured?

In your strategic priorities, in your role statements, are you seeking connection and assigning responsibility to people with authority in your organisation to explore how connection might be developed? In this information and communication age, are you taking to yourselves a new twinning agenda for community organisations, seeking out other organisations with whom to partner, where you can connect, exchange and collaborate?

Perhaps I am asking too much or not enough. I just try to remember Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks in the southern states of the United States of America, in the worst of the segregation years, shook an entire nation and changed the world because she would not sit at the back of a bus.

This year we celebrate 60 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Let's give it a birthday present of global shattering consequence. Because only the happenstance and the privilege of the rule of law and a community here observing universal principles, not just Australian values, saves you from the self-same fate of activists in Brazil, Zimbabwe and China.

You have your rights – use your rights to defend the rights of those who are denied them.

In this day and age we have many more reasons to be far more than perhaps we ever imagined, to aspire for a hope that is larger than when you began and bigger than what you see today. Being big and strong is not essential. Being courageous is.

Because somewhere, sometime hope always stands up. It is hope that is the conduct of the active and the power of the engaged. Hope is not indifferent. It is not neutral and nor is it only for the self.

The true heroes of hope don't bear arms, they extend them.

Thank you.