Speech by Adam Graycar:

"Managing the future"


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MANAGING THE FUTURE

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Volunteering is an essential and necessary component of life in a modern industrial society. Volunteers, those individuals who freely contribute their services without remuneration to public or voluntary organisations, or informal networks engaged in all types of social activities, number in the hundreds of thousands in Australia. Volunteering is essential and necessary because it does what governments cannot do. Apart from the obvious, that of delivering services, volunteering is about networking and about understanding.

I said volunteering does what governments cannot do. Government is hierarchical, bureaucratic, and often very slow. Governments - believe me - usually mean well, they have the expertise but often not the understanding that is required to do all that is necessary. Both governments and volunteer networks need each other. Both work in harmony, both deliver different things, both have a different part of the action, and my message today is that building a collage for the future does not involve fast-fix futurology or hypotheses about who will or won't do what might or might not need to be done some time other - now or in the future. The collage of the future is to paint a canvas of substance and process focusing particularly on the process. The future I would argue, is about knowledge and networks. We in government need you - we need your knowledge and we need your networks. There is nothing selfish or underhand about that - we need you to further enrich the lives of all - to build the sort of community we all strive for.
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I am continually amazed at the rate in which change impacts on every part of our lives. It may sound like a cliche to say that we are continually, regularly, unremittingly and mercilessly inundated with changes that affect for better or worse, but nevertheless profoundly, every aspect of our lives. We have seen unprecedented socio-economic, demographic, and technological change in recent years. These changes alter our social relationships, they alter the balance of young and old, fit and well in our community, they alter the way in which we go about things, and they alter the way in which we get things done.

For our generation there is no such thing as life without trouble. There are only good kinds of trouble and bad kinds of trouble. The bad kind of trouble stems from apathy, stagnation, the kind of hypocrisy that refuses to admit the existence of problems, the kind of structural rigidity which very often interferes with the quick solution to those problems and the kind of vested interest that gets in the way of institutional change. The good kind of trouble comes from being on the move, from being acutely aware of problems, from the confusion of too many people trying to solve the problem in too many ways all at once, too many critics talking too loudly, too many things changing too rapidly.

A generation does not have much choice in the problems that the forces of history throw in its lap. It does have a choice as to whether it will face those problems honestly. We need continuous and candid debate as to what the most important problems are, and whether we are turning our back on them or solving them or making them worse.
As we have seen what some writers describe as the premature arrival of the future we have also seen that many of our formal structures don't work terribly well. We find ourselves faced with an information explosion. We are drowning in information but often we are starved for knowledge. We don't know how to organise the material we have to organise. In my office I am continually losing the battle against paper, but my knowledge is not expanding at anything like the rate at which the paper I get expands.

The welfare state, a political mechanism which could hope for the elimination of want, ignorance, squalour, disease, and idleness has not succeeded in eliminating poverty in Australia. It has not brought about distributive justice, it has not brought about maximum feasible participation, and it has not brought about a sufficient range of social supports which would maximise self worth and dignity and minimise stigma and create an equitable and just society. The reasons are many and varied. Very large amounts are spent annually in Australia on income maintenance - yet large numbers of people are still in poverty.

We live in a modern, affluent, industrial society in which most people enjoy a standard of living that is envied the world over. We nevertheless have 22% of the population dependent on social security benefits for their income. There could be no clearer evidence that our affluent society is unable to deliver, through the market, a living wage to all. The factors are structural and it does nobody any good to turn around and blame those victims, blame those people who miss out - people who find they cannot get an income in the labour market; people whose education does not buy them a place in the job market; people whose skills have been undermined by technological change; people whose occupations have been rendered obsolete by structural adjustment; family heads who receive insufficient
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infrastructure support to maintain their families; women whose productive value is disregarded and who are confined to a state of dependency; people who have difficulty in achieving life satisfaction, and young people who believe they have no worthwhile place in a competitive industrial society. In addition there are many adults, who through loss of a spouse find themselves in dramatically changed circumstances, circumstances which require tangible resources, effective services, efficient delivery systems and close companionship.

It is the combination of these four things - tangible resources, effective services, efficient delivery systems and close companionship that your work and mine needs to address. And we can make an impact by better understanding our society and forging better linkages within it. There are two things we need - knowledge and networks.

Who would have thought at the turn of the century that something like 4½ million Australians have retired from the paid labour force, many of them in their fifties. In the area in which I work there have been two notable and significant changes in recent years. One is longer life for many people and the other is early retirement for many people. I won't blind you with all of the statistics, as that is not what you came for today. When we start to think of these two things, longer life and earlier retirement as integral parts of our social structure and of our volunteering structure, then we find ourselves with challenges of service, humanity, and social cohesion.

We keep hearing predictions that we are going to be swamped by a geriatric tidal wave, we have heard predictions that our changing population structures will eat up all our resources, cause inter-generational conflict, and that by the year 2011 the whole of our
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gross domestic product will go into our social security payments. We have to be careful not to be alarmist. In the 1890s a study was done in New York City when New York, as it always seems to be, was at the forefront, was facing dramatic change, was reeling under the congestion of an enormous amount of traffic. The traffic at the time was horse traffic and the rate of growth of that horse traffic was monumental. The study that was done showed that if the growth of the horse traffic were to continue at the same rate for another 40 years, then all of Manhattan would be buried under about eight feet of horse manure by 1938. Did that happen? No. The world changed. Things changed, the future was managed in a different way.

When the retirement age was set at 65 life expectancy was much shorter than it is today. At age 65 today a female on average can expect to live another 17 years while a male can expect to live another 14. Of course these are averages and of course many do not survive for that period of time, but on the other hand many people do survive for 25 or 30 years beyond retirement. One overwhelming challenge is to ensure that the people who stay alive for many years after retirement can live those years with dignity, can contribute in the way they want to contribute, and can have their needs met when they have needs to be met.

The act of retirement is no longer the source of poverty, isolation and poor health that it once was. Old age does not mean sickness, senility and sexlessness. It is important always to remember that. It is important to remember the contribution that people can make and it is important to remember the contribution that has to be made to people who ultimately find themselves faced with many of the disabilities and disadvantages of old age - the most obvious health ones of course are things like greater immobility, dementia and incontinence.
With people leaving the workforce earlier and living longer, we are finding a situation unprecedented in history where people are likely to be out of the paid labour force for longer periods than they are in the paid labour force. We are faced with two explosions, an explosion of perceived uselessness as people who find they may have no place in the paid labour force often struggle for a place in society, and an explosion of care. Focusing on these two issues I think we can build very important networks to try and ensure that our humanity and our social structure do not come unstuck.

This is why the process of volunteering, is so necessary for our broad social integration. As we look to the future it would seem to me that the issue of networking and self help are the two principles that we can start to build on. In this talk I don't want to try and develop a grand collage for the future, but rather focus in particular, on networking.

When we think of all of the things that we never would have anticipated a few generations ago one of the most profound is the impact of government. Government plays a very important regulatory and planning role yet it doesn't do all of what people have come to expect of it. There is a great debate about whether government should be the ultimate protection and the ultimate insurance policy against all social ills. I personally believe in a strong role for government - with government showing its extractive regulative and distributive capacities. Government has not always been successful. It has not eliminated poverty when we had expected that it would, it has not found jobs for all who want jobs, it has not provided appropriate care for all who need care. Sometimes there hasn't been enough money, sometimes there haven't been the skills or structures.
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For centuries we worked with the pyramid structure, and that was the way we organised and managed ourselves. From the Roman army to the Catholic church and to organisational charts of our big corporations like BHP and CRA and Telecom, power and communication have flowed in an orderly manner from the pyramid's top down to its base, from the high priest, the general, the chief executive officer perched at the very tip, down through the wider ranks of lieutenant and department managers clustered in the middle, to the workers, foot soldiers and true believers at the bottom.

The pyramid structure has been praised and blamed but it hasn't answered all of our problems. We are faced with a situation where the hierarchies remain yet our belief in their efficacy does not.

Many organisations have a structure that was designed to solve problems that no longer exist. An organisation must have some means of combatting the process by which people become prisoners of their procedures. The rule book grows fatter as the ideas grow fewer. Almost every well established organisation is a coral reef of procedures that were laid down to achieve some long forgotten objective. As a society becomes more concerned with precedent and custom it comes to care more about how things are done and less about whether things are done. There are plenty of old pros who use their skill and experience to block progress rather than to advance it.

The failure of hierarchies to solve major problems has forced people like yourselves to talk to one another - and that is the basis of networking. Networks are fundamentally important to our future and to our whole social structure.
In a sense we have clustered together among the ruins of the tumbled-down pyramid to discuss what to do. We have begun talking to each other outside the hierarchial structure, although much of our previous communication has been channelled inside.

As friends, as individuals, as members of small groups and large organisations we have exchanged resources, contacts, ideas, service ideals, and information. Networking is a powerful tool for social actions.

The Women's movement for example emerged in classic network fashion. All around the country women clustered together in small groups - usually friends or friends of friends to reinforce their new self concepts and thereby alter society's traditional view to women. The environmental movements, the anti war movements that we have seen have had networking starts as well.

You don't need me to tell you what a network is. Simply stated networks are people talking to each other, sharing ideas, information and resources and getting things done quickly and efficiently. One very important point is that networking is a verb and not a noun. Of equal importance are both the finished product and the process of getting there, the communication that creates the linkages between people and clusters of people, and the achievements that result.

Networks exist to foster self-help, to exchange information, to change society, to improve productivity and work life, to provide human contact and human service, and to share resources.
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Networks provide a form of communication and interaction, and as such they can come to grips with the unimaginable, they can come to grips at a grass roots level with massive industrial change, social change, and that human search for a place in a complex, fast moving and often unimaginable world.

Networks offer what bureaucracies can never deliver in this world swarming with too much data and too little knowledge - the horizontal link. Networks cut across the society to provide a genuine cross-disciplinary approach to people and issues. Whereas bureaucracies look like conventional organisational charts with a leader at the top, networks are quite different. No matter what the cause, the goals, the service ideal, or the beliefs, whenever people organise themselves to get involved in change or to provide a service we often see a non-bureaucratic, very effective form of service beginning to emerge.

This is not to say that networks are going to solve all of our problems. Networks that you can create yourselves can make an enormous impact but they have to be part and parcel of our whole overall service delivery system. Government machinery finds itself faced with a range of issues that it often does not have the expertise to deal with. Government is staffed almost entirely by experts with knowledge and skills acquired theoretically or academically. Rarely is it acquired in the field. It is organised bureaucratically and hierarchically, and this has meant that the concentration of power within the social services has increased while the ability of outsiders - like yourselves - to question it has been diminished. By becoming part of the bureaucracy the professions often tend to lose their roles as independent social critics. Unless there are
This is not to say that governments don't want to listen. Governments have attempted to overcome the problems of centralisation by creating sets of consultative arrangements encouraging the participation of people with various interests in the development, implementation and review of government activity. But that is still a long way from the work that you are able to do.

Over the years I have done a lot of research on different aspects of voluntary activity and volunteer work, and I had thought that I might share some of that with you today. But you can read that in the literature and the only point I really wanted to make was that predicting the future is one of the most difficult and often fruitless activities. I can give you countless examples like the projection that Manhattan would be covered in horse manure, or numerous demographic projections that have not come to fruition. Expertise alone does not predict the future or even cope with the present.

The one point I want to get across is that it is more important to try to identify the process than the substance. The substance may change when one starts to look our demographic and economic futures and at the rigorous implementation of scientific change. But the fundamental is that people are people. They love, they laugh, they cry - they want to be happy, they want to live in peace, they want to be wanted. And any collage for the future takes that as a starting point and builds onto it appropriate knowledge and networks, a contribution from government and a solid dose of effective and empathetic volunteering.