

2022 Royal Society of NSW and the Learned Academies Forum: “Reshaping Australia: Communities in Action”

Official Opening

Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC

Dr. Pond, President, RSNSW: As President of the Royal Society of New South Wales, I’m delighted to welcome you to the 2022 Royal Society of New South Wales and Learned Academies Forum. The Society has convened this forum every year for several years, and it’s always a highlight of the calendar. The Academies with which we partner are focused on health and medical sciences, humanities, science, social sciences, and technology and engineering. And the Forum epitomises the Society itself, which has been a nexus of ideas and discovery for 200 years. Always challenging the population to think differently, always reporting on the latest research and facilitating solutions to some of the major challenges confronting humanity.

Celebrating, as we have this year, a 200-year milestone of our existence pales into insignificance compared to the long history of Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In paying our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging of the Gadigal and the indigenous nations across New South Wales, we recognise their deep knowledge, care, and custodianship of land, seas, and waterways. I’m delighted to invite Her Excellency, the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC, Governor of New South Wales, Patron of the Royal Society of New South Wales, and host of the Forum today at Government House to open proceedings. Her Excellency is an eminent Australian jurist, currently 39th Governor of New South Wales. Immediately before this appointment, she was President of the New South

Wales Court of Appeal, the first woman to hold that office. Her Excellency was made Companion of the Order of Australia in the Australia Day Honours List in January, 2020, for her eminent service to the people of New South Wales, particularly through leadership roles in the judiciary and as a mentor for young women lawyers.

The Governor, Hon. Margaret Beazley:
Thank you, Dr Pond.

Bujari gamarruwa

Diyin Babana Gamarada Gadigal Ngura

As I welcome you to Government House Sydney in the language of the Gadigal, the traditional owners of these lands on which we meet, I pay my respects to Elders, past, present and emerging, and thank them for their custodianship of this land and nearby waters.

Research in Western countries over the last decade indicates a diminishing trust in institutions, and sometimes seriously so. The causes for this are manifold, complex, and, more often than not, inter-related. Whilst survey results provide a sound enough working guide, deeper analysis is required. Hence, the 2022 Forum topic, “Reshaping Australia: Communities in Action,” is timely and will be thought-provoking.

Having at the outset cautioned about the limitations of survey results, I have nonetheless found it instructive, as an introduction to your Forum, to have brief regard to the results of the Scanlon Foundation Research

Institute's figures for the years 2018 to 2021.¹ I have used this source as it has wide credibility and is a reference point for many institutions, including Government. In response to the question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?", it will come as no surprise that in 2020 and 2021 the response that was far and above any other issue was "COVID-19." During those two years, Australians were faced with an existential health crisis that left many feeling uncertain, fearful and isolated. It was a time when, due to governmental regulation of association and movement, communities were missing in action.

In the years immediately prior to the pandemic, "economy/unemployment/poverty" were identified in the Scanlon Foundation's research surveys, as the most important problems facing Australia. For the 18-month period from January 2020 to July 2021, the economy, and its related features of employment and poverty, has tracked as the second most important issue. In July 2021, the environment began to track on the same level of importance as the economy. "Quality of Government/politicians" always scores well in the sense that it sits third, equally with "social issues," as the most important problem facing Australia, and has done so throughout the five-year period from 2018. During that five-year period, "immigration and population" has not been rated of significant concern.

There is one other statistic which I will mention, namely the extent to which there is trust in Government. The specific survey question is the extent to which "the Government in Canberra can be trusted to do the right thing for the Australian people." Interestingly, in the years since 2007, the results for

2020 and 2021 were the highest of the whole period. Having said that, trust never rose above 50%. Like the other statistics to which I have referred, these figures are indicative of issues affecting people, mostly on a daily basis; reactions to — and the effect of — governmental decision making and, more broadly, a current "mood" in the community.

This raises the question of the extent to which perception and reality are running along parallel paths or are diverging. It also raises the question of where government and communities sit in relation to each other and what that means in terms of how we are governed and how we might be best governed. Increasingly, Government policy is to outsource significant areas of care, allowing communities to identify the areas of most need.

Government then becomes a source of funding for those areas of need, although, as we know, there are always funding constraints and, again, the community becomes a necessary and vital funding resource.

Another emerging trend is the extent to which specific communities are taking control of issues that affect them directly or affect society more widely. I have encountered recent examples of the former coming out of the flood disasters, especially in the Northern Rivers. As the representative of one Indigenous business organisation said, as she worked long hours in a Recovery Centre that the organisation had set up: "we know who our people are; where they are; and how they are. We can and need to look after ourselves." In her words, it was all about "self-determination." That vision was neither short-term nor merely reactive to the immediate needs of the community. A strategic

1 <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/mapping-social-cohesion-2021/>

picture was in the frame. There were similar stories in the little towns scattered across the regions amongst different communities with different constituencies and differing needs.

In many ways, those responses to the disaster captured the core meaning of community, which derives from the Latin root word, *communitas* or “public spirit.” However, and as I suspect you are thinking, no group in community lives in isolation. How do these smaller pockets of community, in particular, fit into the bigger societal questions of education, health, transport and employment, much of which, out of necessity, involves government?

The other trend, of specific groups in communities driving larger societal agendas, is particularly apparent in the corporate field with the focus on ESG principles: environment, sustainability and governance. Much of this has been a response to shareholder and consumer pressure as well as to legal advice. But its impact is unquestioned both on communities and on government.

My remarks thus far have been essentially observational. Whether we are talking about how community organises itself, how government works, or how both work together, the topic needs good data. What we saw and heard in Lismore was a community responding to a crisis in a community already in great need, obvious from the existing data. According to the NSW Council of Social

Services, in 2019, 21 per cent of Lismore residents were living in poverty and the Northern Rivers communities, in general, have higher rates of poverty than both the state and national averages.²

Moving away from Lismore and community responses to disasters, the Australian Council of Social Service’s 2022 *Poverty in Australia Snapshot* report³ found that 3.3 million people in Australia (13.4% of the population or more than one in 8)⁴, and 16.6% (one in 6) children live below the poverty line.⁵

Communities and community needs are not only about poverty, although that we have any poverty, let alone to the extent revealed in the figures I have mentioned, is sobering. Community is about the greater good for everyone. Improvements, collaboration, research, met needs in any one sector, should — and, I would suggest, must — trickle both down and up, including to Government.

The words of a postdoctoral student come to mind, who wrote: “Social change requires that we rewrite our communal narratives.”⁶

This year’s Forum raises some challenging issues which affect us all.

Congratulations to the Royal Society and Learned Academies for taking on the challenge and for the contributors today who are instrumental in analysing the problems and directing us towards a solution for the betterment of all.

2 NSW Council of Social Services: <https://www.echo.net.au/2019/11/quarter-kids-ballina-bruns-ocean-shores-poverty/>

3 <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/a-snapshot-of-poverty-in-australia-2022/>

4 Defined as 50% of median income: <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/a-snapshot-of-poverty-in-australia-2022/>

5 *ibid*

6 <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/insights/what-is-community-and-why-is-it-important>