

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

### Welcome and Acknowledgements

Susan Pond

President, Royal Society of New South Wales, AM FRSN FTSE FAHMS

Thank you, Your Excellency, for your insightful remarks, which clearly reflect the experience you are gaining across the community as governor of New South Wales. It’s very good to have the personal reflections of what you are seeing across the state.

I need to present some thanks at the beginning of the day and not having the opportunity later. I’d like to thank the Office of the Chief Scientist and Engineer and each of the five Learned Academies for their sponsorship and support again for this forum. Without them, we could not hold this important conversation about Reshaping Australia Communities in Action. Welcome to the hundred of you in the in-person audience today. In addition to our speakers, our in-person audience is made up by representatives of the Society, each of the five Academies, the Office of the New South Wales, Chief Scientist and Engineer. We are also joined by 16 undergraduate students, who should be easy to identify, from seven universities extending as far as Wollongong and Newcastle, and some members of the public. Welcome, one and all. Welcome also to the online audience which is watching the forum across Australia via our live streaming, and also to those who watch it later on our YouTube channel.

Days like this are not conjured up by magic. They do require the sustained and dedicated input by a band of volunteers. I

take this opportunity to thank the members of our program committee so ably chaired by Professor Steven Garton, our moderator; Julianne Schultz and members of the planning committee; our webmaster Professor Lindsay Botten; and Robert Marks, Editor of the *Journal & Proceedings*. We will have several mechanisms to make the proceedings of today available to you: in person; live stream on the YouTube channel; and later in the written word, which may be what survives longest and will be available for people to read in a 100 years’ time. Stephen Garton and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of New South Wales, the Australian Academy of Humanities and the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. He is Professor of history and former Provost and Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Sydney. He has written extensively on many subjects, including the history of mental illness, social policy on a range of its issues. And, interestingly, the History of Harlem in New York between World Wars I and II. Stephen will take the stage in a few minutes.

The aim of today is to bring together learned societies, government, and communities — all necessary, as Her Excellency said, to work together to help tackle some of the urgent relevant problems that we face nationally and internationally. By listening to communities, learned societies can find out what the communities need and appreciate the work they need to do at the

front line and at the cutting edge to address the most pressing problems and the shared problems. Communities engaging with learned societies and government enables them to gain access to information that is otherwise somewhat hidden from them, in particular in the minds of the scholars, but on a more operational sense, behind paywalls, on technical websites, or written in language that needs to be deciphered. We

welcome the convergence of communities, government and learned societies today. To add to Her Excellency's and my own welcome, I now invite the Honourable Andrew Leigh MP, a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury, and Federal Member for Fenner in the ACT, to say a few words via video.

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

### Introduction to the Program and Moderator

Stephen Garton

Chair of the Program Committee, Office of the Vice-Chancellor, The University of Sydney;  
AM FRSN FAHA FASSA FRAHS  
stephen.garton@sydney.edu.au

As Susan mentioned, I was the chair of the program committee and I have a few people to thank. But before I do that, I want to acknowledge that we’re on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to Elders past and present, and also say that it is humbling to understand that research and teaching has been occurring on these lands for tens of thousands of years. I also have a few thanks before we begin. Governor, we are very grateful for your continuing support of the Society and for hosting this Forum yet again. Susan, the Society President, is a bundle of energy and forcefulness and her commitment and enthusiasm made sure that the Program Committee delivered on its brief. The representatives of the Learned Academies who were on the program committee were a fantastic group of people to work with — Philippa Patterson, Hala Zreiqat, Bridget Griffin-Foley, Tony Cunningham, Annabelle Duncan — it was a great team.

One sad note for the Program Committee was that Robin King FRSN, an integral member of the Committee and a great contributor, died in a tragic family holiday accident just as we were in the final stages. I also want to acknowledge Lisa Jackson Pulver, who at the very last minute agreed to

substitute for Marcia Langton, who unfortunately was too ill to come down. Lisa is stepping into the breach at very short notice.

The committee came together in the wake of fire, flood and pandemic, where the resilience of Australian communities came to the fore. Our thinking was that the issue of community resilience needed to be seen in the longer and larger context of the profound transformations in Australian society over recent decades. One member of the committee pointed us to a recently published book, *The Idea of Australia*,<sup>1</sup> written by Julianne Schultz, which shaped our thinking as we planned the Forum. We joked that if nothing else we might be able “sell some more copies” of this insightful book.

Given this inspiration we were very pleased when we were able to secure Julianne, distinguished academic and social commentator, Emeritus Professor at Griffith University and former editor of *Griffith Review*, as moderator for the day. *The Idea of Australia* is a thoughtful, beautifully written reflection on issues in our public culture; historical, sociological, cultural in its analysis. It prompted us to think more critically about issues in our broader public culture and the evidence of growing disparity of outcomes and growing disparities

---

<sup>1</sup> Schultz, Julianne (2022) *The Idea of Australia: A Search for the Soul of the Nation*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

in access and equity. While there is much written on these themes we wanted to shift the focus away from what is going wrong to issues of resilience and cohesion rather than disparity. If we look at elements of our public culture, particularly the media and particularly social media, it's too often a culture that looks more interested in declaring and defaming rather than listening and collaborating. We were determined to make our focus more about listening and partnerships to find solutions.

If we take our lens into the broader culture and look at what's happening at local levels, we can see extraordinary innovation and contribution. The Minister is rightly concerned about the decline in volunteerism, and I think this is a genuine issue that hopefully will come out in some of the themes. But if we look at what's happening in the community sector, we have over 50,000 not-for-profits. We have over a million Australians working in the not-for-profit sector. We have 3 million Australians who are volunteers. This is an extraordinary resource doing so much for our community. Some of it is about plugging gaps in broader services. Some of it is about addressing the specificities of local issues and local aspirations. While some commentators conceptualise this as governments outsourcing to the community sector, it is equally communities taking charge of their circumstances.

This is an opportunity for us to think through the innovation that happens at the local level. We know that in the past,

some academics have claimed to speak for communities, but we are moving into a culture now where we better understand the need to listen to communities. We need to listen to the voice of indigenous Australians; we need to listen to the voices about what's happening at that local level. One of the things we want to do in today's Forum is explore some illuminating case studies, where academics are working with local communities, helping drive innovation, learning from those communities for their own research, and through partnerships contributing back to those communities. Communities themselves are also coming up with innovative solutions to endemic social problems at the local level. There are green shoots in the community.

One of the things we want to do is look at some of these green shoots and create an environment where we can think through the issues of how we harness local innovation and support it, so we can build greater community cohesion, greater equity in our society, and a political culture of community collaboration: listening rather than declaring. I think there are many papers and contributors today that will give you insights into some of the key areas that are important around climate, indigenous access, health and education. We're not covering everything. It is about highlighting green shoots from researchers working with communities and communities themselves coming forward. I hope you enjoy the day. Thank you.

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

### Moderator and Rapporteur

Julianne Schultz<sup>1</sup>

Emeritus Professor Griffith University; Chair, The Conversation Media Group; AM FAHA

julianne.schultz@griffith.edu.au

Thank you, Your Excellency. Thank you, Stephen, and thank you Susan, and thanks to the Minister. I'm Julianne Schultz. Stephen, thank you for talking about my book, *The Idea of Australia: The Search for the Soul of the Nation* and explaining why I'm here. That gives the reason for why I'm going to be in this chair for the day trying to facilitate this discussion. One of the things that I was very conscious of and was trying to grapple with when I was writing that book, was to try and figure out how change happens and why it happens. I was trying to tease out the tendrils of cultural practice, history and institutional design that may enable us to adapt and respond, but also keep us trapped in ways of seeing and doing that make it difficult to move on. Indeed, that process of change, I think, is really one of the important things that we are grappling with. We are starting to think about not only reshaping, but also the important way in which communities are engaged in the sort of public life of the nation.

One of the scholars that I read during that time was the Anglo-American historian Linda Colley, who's a very great historian. She had written a lot about the British Empire and the process of constitution-making in nation formation. One of her observations, was that change generally

takes three-score years and ten — that is, a lifetime. Occasionally she argues that there are things which hurry it up, or turn old behaviours on their head: a war or a pandemic or some other major crisis. But that's the exception. Generally, change takes a long time to emerge and become consolidated in a society. That is a really on one level a sobering insight because it seems to be an awfully long time.

But the other part of it is that it suggests that change is an iterative process, it's happening all the time. I think there are two really strong examples of that which we have just experienced today. One is the welcome we have just heard. I'm always amazed and terribly impressed when the Governor speaks in this place in the language of the Eora people. One of the languages that the new arrivals over a century or more tried to criminalise and eradicate. When you think that what Government House represents in the history of Australia — the tangible embodiment of the link to the Crown — to have a governor who is able to speak so fluently and so genuinely in the language of the First Nations people of this land, really says something enormously important. It is something which I think we should hang onto as a source of the sort of change that is possible.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is an edited version of a transcript of the presentation.

The other is in our social relations, and this ties back into the community focus that we are discussing today. The campaign to enable same-sex marriage was a long time coming, but when it happened, it happened overwhelmingly, and then people picked up as though life had always been thus. There's been some pushback at the margins in some religious communities, but all those bakers who thought they were going to go out of business for cooking cakes that said "she and she" actually seem to be doing okay. Our capacity to absorb change in our most intimate relations seems to me a good sign that we can do it in other spheres as well. It's a pattern of slow adaptation and change. But bitterly resisted by those who fear they have something to lose. One of the things that we have been very conscious of, especially in the academies over the last 25 years or so, has been the viciousness of the culture wars and how unexpectedly hard and nasty this fight has been. I don't generally like to talk "culture wars" because I think the label pushes more important issues into a box where complex issues are reduced to winners and losers. But we've seen the process by which experts in all sorts of areas have been marginalised and demonised, have been made to feel that they've got something to hide, that they can't really be trusted, that they have a vested interest, that they shouldn't be contributing to a public discussion. It's been a very concerted activity, and it's weakened people and institutions. It's made many academics feel nervous about engaging in the public domain. One of the really important things, one of the unintended consequences, that's come out of that is that the hostile public environment sent many scholars back into their studies to do more,

harder edged historical research. This and the other research that has been done over the past twenty-five years has thrown up different ways of understanding this place and the world in which we are. It is also contrary to what the Minister said, that people are retreating from community and public engagement, and I know his numbers are right, but I think that on the ground at a deeper there's something else happening. We saw that in the election where the community organising model upended the old orthodoxy in some of what had long been considered the safest Liberal Party electorates in Australia.

One of the unexpected impacts of COVID, where people were forced to stay in their neighbourhoods in a way they had never done before, was the emergence of a strong sense of people being forced to find their own community of interest with which they engage. This happened in person — remember those suburban Anzac Day street parties — and online. That may not be in the traditional forms of joining a club or going to a church, but it's through other forms of social activity that is enabled by the digital environment. What I think is interesting is that community activity that is around, that is digitally enabled, is really a counterbalance to the narrowing that we've been having to live through. I think now we're obviously at a flash point: people have talked about the challenge of climate change, globalisation, geopolitical uncertainty, and the economic and security impacts that that's having on us all. Institutions that we used once to trust, to navigate our way through this, have imploded. Partly through their own shortcomings, as we saw in the royal commissions into institutional

abuse, for instance. Partly through just the changes that have happened as a result of technology and other economic factors.

The media, which once acted as a sort of unifying platform, no longer operates in the same way; under intense economic pressure the media is demonstrably less committed to its fourth-estate and nation-building role. Unions have obviously become a much less potent force than they once were, although they may be coming back. Political parties' numbers have fallen. Membership of political parties has fallen dramatically — that they still have control of much of the electoral process is a minor miracle. On the one hand, big old institutions have crumbled, but on the other we're becoming more connected through the digital processes. There's an interesting tension there.

As the Governor and others have said, trust is waning in government. But it's a two-way thing, trust. People's trust in government has weakened, but what I'd like to see, and I guess this goes to what the Governor was talking about, I'd like to see more evidence of government's trust in people. In trusting communities to actually do the things that they set themselves the challenges to do and respect the solutions that they come up with.

The old model, the mass media model of the post-war years and big political parties, was very hierarchical. What we are now seeing is something which is tipping that order upside down. The process of trust must work both ways. And so, getting governments to learn how to trust people, and public servants and academics and others to learn how to trust people, is a very big part of the challenge that we face in this reshaping.

Before I introduce the first panel, let me point out that the political change of the last election, without my being partisan about it, showed that more than half the population voted for what would loosely be described a progressive party of one form or another — whether it was the Labor Party, the Greens, the Teals, the other community independents. There's a whole range of people who were being voted for, who had a different agenda than the one that has been around for a long time. I think that that is a sign that the community and the public are looking for these ways of moving forward.

My feeling is that we are at one of those phases of the “three-score years and ten” where a whole raft of change that has been building may get to a point where it tips over and becomes manifest. I'm interested to see how that plays out in looking at the case studies that we'll be hearing about today, and the examples and the great leadership that our speakers will be bringing to this discussion. Two final things: Robert Putnam, whom the Minister talks about very enthusiastically, for whom he was a research assistant, wrote a very famous book called *Bowling Alone*, which was about the collapse of community in America. In 2020 he wrote a new book which is called *The Upswing*, which was about how things were starting to change and how things could change through moving from a period of cynicism and detachment, to one of on-the-ground activism and a desire to rebuild communities, cities, and states. It's not in the meta narrative of presidential politics that we hear here. The data and cases on the ground is quite something. James Fallows from *The Atlantic* found the same thing when he and his wife returned to the US after years abroad and we excited to see

a revitalisation of civic and economic life in some of the most unlikely places. Their book, *Our Towns: A 100000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America*, and the accompanying film, are a powerful testament to this change.

What Putnam was doing in his most recent book was looking historically at the good and bad over the last century 125 years. His starting point was 125 years ago in America, a time known as the Gilded Age. It was the age of individualism. It was age of corporate excess. It was an age not unlike our own in many ways. The process by which the society went from being about “me” to about “we,” to use that horrible jargon, is one that he found very instructive. He sees in the green shoots the United States moving back to a “we” society through the activism that’s happening on the ground in community areas. Now we shall see what that produces. It’s a much more complex world than it was even 120 years ago. I’d like to hear the Minister’s reflection in a way on where Putnam is getting to now, because he’s much more optimistic about the possibilities of change.

I’ll just say, finally, that anyone listening to the ABC News coming here today would have heard that the lead items were ones about community activism. The lead story was about the big rallies that have been held in every capital city protesting about the

death of Cassius Turvey, a young Noongar schoolboy, in WA a couple of weeks ago. Big rallies all around the country were making it clear that this is just not acceptable in this country. The next story was about floods and the way the communities in Western and Central New South Wales were rallying to support each other as they faced yet another environmental catastrophe. There are green shoots around, they might be under a lot of water, but there are green shoots around and that’s what we will be discussing today.

I’d like to invite our first panel members, Richard Holden, Allison Frame, Kalinda Griffith and James O’Donnell, to join me on the stage.

### References

- Colley L (2021) *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World*. London: Profile.
- Fallows J and Fallows D (2019) *Our Towns: A 100000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Putnam R (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Putnam R (2020) *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Schultz J (2022) *The Idea of Australia: A Search for the Soul of the Nation*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.