

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

Ministerial Address

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Good day. My name’s Andrew Leigh, the Assistant Minister for Competition Charities and Treasury. I’m speaking to you today from the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. Let me begin by acknowledging Elders past and present. The theme of your discussion today — Reshaping Australia Communities in Action — is a topic that is close to my heart. This is an issue which is fundamental to the trajectory of our nation. Over recent years, Australia has become increasingly disconnected. We’ve seen a fall in the number of volunteers and a decline in the share of Australians playing a team sport. We’ve seen a drop in the number of Australians who have joined a local community group or a social club or a political organisation. The number of churchgoers and attendees of other religious services has declined.

The union membership rate is down. Compared to the mid-1980s, Australians know half as many of their neighbours and have half as many friends, but we can work together to turn that around. What I love about your discussion, just opened by the distinguished Margaret Beazley, and including my friend Richard Holden, is that it will focus on some of the big questions as to how we fix our democracy. This has got to do not only with institutional changes,

but policy reforms too. Making sure that every school is a great school, that there are opportunities for people to engage through a workplace that allows work-life balance. That we ensure that we have an Australia that is providing prosperity for all. And so people aren’t so time-crunched and money-poor that they can’t engage with their communities. The attempt to get there will involve pushing on many different levers, but the end goal is an exciting one.

A reconnected Australia will be a healthier place because people with more friends tend to have better physical and mental health. It will be a happier place because we know that wellbeing and spending time with friends and family are so closely intertwined, and it will be a more economically productive place because we know that markets work best in high-trust environments.

I wish I could be with you today for these important conversations. There are always topics that have been roiling around in my head since I worked as a research assistant for Robert Putnam in 2000. They are topics that are fundamental to the future of our nation, and I thank you for convening this important discussion today.

¹ This is an edited version of a transcript of the presentation.