

After COVID-19: Creating the best of times from the worst of times: Rapporteur's summary

The Royal Society of New South Wales and Four Academies Forum
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Abstract

The Royal Society of New South Wales, with the Four Academies, held the Forum “After COVID-19: Creating the Best of Times from the Worst of Times” on 5 November 2020, live streamed from Government House, Sydney. The Forum examined how the COVID-19 pandemic has become a wake-up call for all of us to drive a wide-ranging, national program that will create a more resilient, self-sufficient and prosperous Australia. This paper is a summary of the day's proceedings, that draws on the verbatim record of the Rapporteur's summing-up on the day, modified as appropriate, for inclusion in the *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*.

Introduction

Thank you very much to the panellists. It falls to me to close the proceedings with thanks to Her Excellency and the Royal Society for organising the Forum and in particular to Susan Pond as the chair of the programme committee, who takes the credit for today's event.

This is something of a fraught task for me as I am a student of Professor Duncan Ivison, who was my former boss at Sydney University, as Deputy Vice Chancellor of Research. He was a master of being the rapporteur and summarising, but maybe the way to finish is to go back to how we started.

I think if we reflect on this particular annual forum of the Royal Society and the Four Academies in future years, it will be worth knowing that it occurs in the shadow of two significant events: one being COVID,

both here and globally; and the second, amidst a US presidential election where the result is not fully clear. I think that was palpable when we came into the room today. It is still yet unclear how both of these events will unfold. These things hang over today's forum, though it was implicit throughout today. Dr Peter Hobbins made a small reference to it when he referenced 1776 and the significance of that date: both the Declaration of Independence but also the year Edward Gibbon published the first volume of the *Decline & Fall of the Roman Empire*. His reference there was to *Ouroboros*, that ancient symbol which brings the God of Life, Death and Reincarnation together.

Omnia quærere

So, with that context in mind, how do we approach this as the Royal Society? Well, perhaps motivated by its founding motto

“omnia quærite,” question everything. A motto inspired by enlightenment philosophy, scientific method, progressivism, some notion of humility and hypothesis in how we venture into the world. It was in this spirit that both Professor Ian Sloan opened today but also Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley motivated this year's forum with the question “how do we build back better”?

Rather than summarise all of today's sessions one by one, perhaps I can have a go at thinking about that question of how we build back better by piecing together the building blocks. Let me think about this in terms of three blocks: a kind of inverse pyramid, if you will, from the largest number of people involved to the smallest number of people involved.

The Community

The largest building block might be how we think about community. Dr Martin Parkinson talked about the global commons, and community is both international and national. Dr Peter Hobbins, in his keynote address, helped us think about community in historical terms. The kind of community we have been, the kind of positivism and progressivism that motivated 19th Century idealism in this country and the bringing of Commonwealth traditions to this country. Anderson Stuart, who left Edinburgh to become the founding Professor of Medicine and Dean of Medicine at the University of Sydney, when facing a pandemic or an epidemic, realised a community apathy towards immunisation and so Dr Peter Hobbins' charge was, “Are we immune to history? Do we learn from history?” Do we follow the virtuous cycles that he saw in the aviation industry, where we improve

on what has happened before? Or do we somehow build up some immunity which resists us from learning?

Community can also be considered in the sense of local communities. The regional communities and hard-hit communities that Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt talked about in “The Weaving Power of Indigenous Storytelling” such as the Oak Valley Indigenous communities who are seeking to close the gap on life expectancy and poverty. From Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt we heard both of the challenges but also of the pride and resilience from those who were beginning to find empowerment in that local decision making. This is something that Professor Anne Tiernan also touched on in her remarks on decentralized government, and Bethwyn Serow in her reflections on Australia's artistic community.

The State

Community is one way in which we are beginning to build back better. State is perhaps the second building block, a second organising principle for community, as in the national state but also state in the federal sense: New South Wales, Victoria, and others. State governance was a theme that came through in the second session on “Sweeping Changes to Australia's Healthcare System.” Dr Theresa Anderson and Professor Gregory Dore spoke to this. They described that governance process as “agile,” and I think that was a term that Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt also used. “Tiger teams,” “flying squads” and the pride of these teams coming together was how Theresa characterised the NSW response to COVID.

My own observation from this was not simply the process of agility but also the risk appetite. The risk appetite to determine when do we shut down and when do we leave things open? And it is on this that Theresa Anderson gave us some sense of the accountability that she has in mind. She referred to the notion of the needs of the individual and the needs of society coming together and informing those decisions. Risk appetite in some sense being a calculus: a calculus that is calibrated both within democracy but also in partnership with the premiers of state and here we find our state premiers finding their voice in different ways within the Commonwealth.

Now, I suppose in that session we were talking about governance and state in a health sense but in our last session, "Reshaping Australia's Institutions," we also talked about it more broadly in terms of economics. So, we can also reflect on how we organise state. How we build back better in the context of an adverse job market for our future generations, the gendered impact of workforce participation and how we begin to find the right balance in higher education and creative arts, and other parts of state organisation, or at least ways in which the state organises our community.

Here, Professor Julianne Schultz talked about "the making" sectors and how we co-create. I think this is a second approach to how we build back better, and how do we bring the state into the community.

The Individual

Finally, the third building block is the individual. Each of us — and how do we build ourselves back better? Here I am perhaps informed by some of the thinking that Dr Jordan Nguyen brought to us and also

that we had from Distinguished Professor Genevieve Bell. She referenced Arnold Van Gennep's "rites of passage." I am talking about sense making and liminal spaces, the ways in which we begin to reconceptualise our own sense of time, embodiment and identity amidst the pandemic and how we begin to form cultural practice out of that sense of self.

For me, this made me think about COVID-19 through the lens of Hippocratic corpus. This work raised the question "when do we know we are in a medical crisis?" If COVID puts us in a liminal zone, then when do we know it is also a pandemic crisis? When have we reached its peak? When is it at fever pitch?

The answer, from Gennep, might be: that depends on our own individual choices. In this respect, science is not immune from society. Instead science is a social force, and we must determine its limits. Science and technology can constrain us in the way that the pandemic and science has limited what we can do. But science also has the potential to enable what we can do and here I think Dr Jordan Nguyen's thinking about the ways in which technology can enable those who are disabled really comes to the fore. I am thinking about how we make sense of *ourselves* and our role amidst crisis to find new meaning. What Jordan was able to show was stories about the ways in which people who he worked with were able to find lives that they had reason to value for themselves and use technology as a force for good.

How we build back better

Where does this bring us? What is the answer to this question of how we build back better? Well perhaps in the spirit of Van Gennep and ambiguity and liminality — and indeed the

motto of the Royal Society of South Wales to question everything — maybe it's not about the answer so much as about the question. For, as Professor Greg Dore said to us, life will return and as Distinguished Professor Larissa Behrendt also said to us, stories do matter.

So I think if we were going to apply the kind of *ouroboros* philosophy to today's forum, if we're going to think about how we bring the end back to where we started, how we bring the individual back into the community, we have to ask ourselves the question: how do we build back better, not so much in society but also in self. How do we both seek to embody the history that is

come before us in how we act but also how do our actions of self enact the history that we want to see in the future?

So with that, I'd like to draw the 2020 annual Forum of the Royal Society and the Four Academies to a close, to welcome you to refreshments, and to think about how we build back better in society and self. Thank you.

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