

Australia's "friendship recession"

Andrew Leigh

Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury, Canberra

andrew.leigh.mp@aph.gov.au

Good day. My name is Andrew Leigh, the Assistant Minister for Charities, and it's great to be speaking to you virtually at the Royal Society of New South Wales Forum. I acknowledge all First Nations people present and commit myself as a member of the government to the implementation in full of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which starts with voting Yes on October the 14th.

You've asked me to say a few words about the "friendship recession" that Australia finds itself in today. A challenge which is in its way as stark as any other that Australia confronts. Over the course of the past generation, we've seen Australians step back from engagement in formal community organisations. Membership as a share of the population in Scouts, Guides, Rotary, and Lions has waned. We've seen a decline in the share of Australians playing an organised sport, with participation rates in sports such as cricket or football or netball declining. We've seen a decline in the share of Australians who are actively engaged in political movements, a drop in the share of people who cast a valid vote, and, most troublingly in the context of a friendship recession, we've seen a decline in the number of close friends that the typical Australian has.

Back in the mid-1980s, surveys asked Australians, "How many close friends do you have with whom you could share a confidence?" and got answers around 10. Now the answer is around 5, meaning the typical Australian has shed half their close friends over the course of the past generation. Wor-

ryingly too, the share of people who say they have no close friends has declined over this period. This has occurred at a time when Australia has become more unequal, meaning that in both economic terms and social terms we've moved from being a nation of "we" towards more of a country of "me."

Reconnecting Australia will involve a full court press work from civil society, government, and from us as individuals acting together in our local communities. It might involve actions as straightforward as making sure that you're the one who welcomes the new neighbour into the street and puts on street drinks at the end of the year. My wife and I do it in our own street, and I've got to tell you the time it takes is tiny and the benefits are immense. But we also need to inspire community organisations to encourage Australians to join, participate, and engage in local communities.

As a government, we've set a target of doubling philanthropy by 2030. We're working with the Productivity Commission to bring down a report on practical ways we might achieve that. A better connected Australia will be a more affluent Australia because commerce works best when networks of trust and reciprocity are strong. It'll be a healthier Australia because Australians tend to be fitter and have fewer mental health challenges when they're part of healthy communities. And it will be a happier nation because friends are essential to living a good life. Thanks for the opportunity to speak to you today and all the best for the conversations in your important forum.