

## **SA CONGRESS – CLOSING ADDRESS**

26<sup>th</sup> October 2002

Mr Andy Fryar – President – Volunteering Australia

It was with great pleasure that I accepted the invitation to close today's State Volunteering Congress and I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to add my voice to the great dialogue that has occurred here today.

I'd like to do three things in my address this afternoon;

- **Firstly**, I'd like to take some time to reflect upon exactly what a compact is – or more precisely what a compact *should be* all about
- **Secondly**, I'd like to focus a little more on the notion of partnership – and try and draw out the responsibilities we all have in creating a compact process that endures beyond both the consultation process *and* the signing of the final document
- **Finally**, I'd like to leave you all with a few thoughts about where I believe we can go from today – how we take the things we have spoken about and heard at this congress and make them a reality

Let's begin however by taking a look at exactly what a compact is – and the significance of the unique situation we now find ourselves in.

Without trying to be funny or smart – it is certainly a true observation that a compact document is exactly that – a document.

At the end of our entire consultation process we will in fact primarily have a document to show for all the hard work that everyone is putting towards the development of a compact.

A piece of paper filled with words and most likely signed by several people of some importance

The sceptics amongst us would even go so far as to suggest that the development of such a document is nothing more than a political exercise

That at the end of the day, when the process is complete – that the compact itself will do nothing more than adorn the bookshelves of our politicians – to be dusted off ceremoniously on special occasions for reasons of nothing more than political advantage

Again – I *do not* say this to be contentious or critical – but rather to acknowledge one school of thought that is ‘out there’ – and which has the potential to sabotage the long-term effectiveness of our South Australian compact.

You may be interested to know that it was only 48 hours ago that I returned from a two and a half week trip to the United States – where due to time constraints and the anticipation of jet lag I wrote much of this afternoons address.

Amongst the places I visited were the city of Philadelphia – birthplace of US independence – and Washington DC – the current seat of both US power and democracy.

For those of you unfamiliar with US history, Philadelphia was for a short time around 1776, the capital of the USA and at one point was actually the second largest city in the British empire - after London

I don't tell you these things simply to give you a history lesson, but rather to draw some parallels with our own compact process.

The relevance in what I am saying comes with the understanding that Philadelphia was also the city in which that famous US document – *the Declaration of Independence* - was signed by the leaders of the 13 colonies of the United States on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1776.

Some years later the US Constitution was also written in Philadelphia

The creation, signing and subsequent public reading of the Declaration of Independence was a radical move borne out of a common desire to achieve goals that were only possible in unison - goals which would have surely failed had any of the 13 colonies had desired to ‘go it alone’

One of the great quotes of the time was made by Benjamin Franklin, who said of the Declaration of Independence “...*we must hang together or we shall surely hang apart*” – such was the risk those great American pioneers were willing to make in the pursuit of a better future.

As I stood in Independence Hall, where these great documents were created, I could not but help admiring the courage, commitment and dedication these people exhibited for the benefit of the broader American people.

While our own compact may not be on the same grand scale as the Declaration of Independence, the development of a compact here in SA certainly does have characteristics that can be aligned to the events that occurred in Philadelphia a little over 200 years ago.

We too stand on the precipice of a process that has the potential to change the way in which we deal with each other for the benefit of the volunteering community as a whole

So let us firstly acknowledge that we want **our** compact to be more than just a nice glossy document adorning the bookshelves of our powerbrokers.

Instead, let us commit to making our own '*declaration*' one that breathes life and which truly changes the status quo and the way we do business with one another

The second thing that I wanted to talk about today is the importance of us having a commitment to partnership.

From my perspective, partnership is a word we too often bandy around without ever really properly discussing or understanding what the term means when put into action

For me – a *true* partnership **may or may not** be equal in terms of the amount of work each party accepts

A true partnership **may or may not** be equal in terms of what all of the partners can bring to the negotiation table

A true partnership may *in fact* **not even be equal in the amount of resources** invested into a partnership venture by all parties

**However**, regardless of all of these factors and inequities, a true partnership **will** bring mutually negotiated advantages to *all* partners

A true partnership *will never* do anything to jeopardise the basis of the partnership

It will always value the contribution of all other partners, regardless of the investment they may or may not have made in the partnership

And a true partnership will *at all costs* be mindful of the importance of communication within the partnership

For us, in the process of developing a state compact, this means a number of things for all of the proposed partners.

I'd like to mention just a few of these.

*For government*, it means needing to acknowledge that the voluntary sector brings with it a unique set of skills, values and knowledge that simply *cannot* be '*learnt*' or duplicated.

More importantly, it means that the government needs to be able to *trust* non-government partners to use their knowledge and skills base to uphold their part of the compact partnership

For government, this requirement does not always come easy – but *it is a critical* step in developing a truly effective partnership as a result of the compact process.

Inherent in this concept is the idea that government needs to be willing to let go of the 'steering wheel' it has inherited over the years in its role as both a tax collector and money distributor.

Government needs to be willing to sit in the back seat at times, recognising that other partners in the compact process can also drive – and allowing *them* to navigate the roads they already know so well.

While in Denver, Colorado at a conference a fortnight ago, I had the opportunity to meet with and discuss aspects of our compact with Christopher Spence – CEO of the National Volunteer Centre in the United Kingdom and chair of the European alliance of volunteerism.

Many of you will be aware that the UK compact model and process is the one that we in South Australia have most closely looked at as being a favourable model to try and follow.

Yet Christopher's comments – both in his keynote address - and later during a private conversation were a chilling reminder to me that the very best of intentions mean nought, if they are not carried through to implementation via a true partnership arrangement based on truth, respect and equity.

Despite the UK compact now being in place for some time, Christopher reported that there has been very little change in the status of Volunteer Program Managers within their respective organisations.

In fact, he reported that in some areas of volunteerism – health being one of those, there had actually been a *decline* in the number of Volunteer Manager positions since the implementation of the compact

More specifically, Christopher felt that there had been no increase in the follow through by government to local volunteer agencies – and he cited figures that indicated that some 60 of 380 local development agencies were now at risk of closing due to lack of funding. Despite an injection by Government of 500,000 pounds during the past 12 months to support 'at risk' Volunteer Bureaux's there are still few strategies in place to address the issues of long term core funding for these essential groups.

It is little wonder then that volunteer management practitioners in the United Kingdom have been critical of the UK compact they once so richly embraced.

Allow me to read to you some comments posted on the UK Volunteer Management newsgroup (UKVPMs) recently by Tracy Ryan - a past worker of the UK Home Office's Active Community Unit and a current worker in one of the UK's various Volunteer Bureau's.

She wrote;

*"I **can** confirm that a coherent voice to Government is what is needed. My experiences show that government may know what they **want to happen**, but they have little knowledge of how to get there, about what we already have in place and what already works well.*

*We **don't need** continuous new initiatives – they need to support the **existing infrastructure** to do what we do best.*

*Around £800,000 of government money was spent here in Warrington for a 3 year project and I am not convinced that it had any real impact on the levels of people volunteering here.*

*If this money had been given to support the existing infrastructure to do what we do best – I know we could have generated a better result".*

Allow me to continue by quoting another e-mail, sent to me recently by a friend of mine from the United Kingdom – international trainer, consultant and Volunteer Manager – Rob Jackson.

In a recent e-mail to me about the UK Governments newly proposed “Experience Corps” – Rob wrote the following;

*The Active Community Unit of the Home Office announced the creation of the Experience Corps a little while ago.*

*If I remember the figure correctly, they are funding it with about £90 million pounds of public money, which is to be spent on developing a new infrastructure of local ‘animators’ – whose job it will be to source opportunities of volunteering **and** potential volunteers aged over 50 – and match the two together.*

*Meanwhile, we have a network of volunteer bureau’s as well as organisations for and of older people who have a wealth of skills, experience, knowledge and contacts in this area of work – who have to sit back and watch 19 million pounds being wasted whilst their own experience is ignored or, at best, plundered by others for political gain.*

*All this while some organisations are being forced to close because of lack of funding – thus stripping communities of any form of volunteering infrastructure, whether geared at the 50+ age group, or any other age or demographic group.*

*...and what do we they taxpaying public get for our 90 million pounds?*

*250,000 volunteers aged 50 years and over by March 2004 – whether we need them or not*

*The Experience Corp may as well tear up our UK compact between government and the voluntary sector, replace Tony Blair with Jesse Ventura and rename the initiative the ‘Freedom Corp’*

For those unfamiliar, allow me to explain a couple of the references in the last paragraph.

Jesse Ventura is a State Governor in the USA, who last year, *quite literally overnight*, shut down his state’s major Volunteer Office to save money ...and yes, for those of you who are fans of World

Championship Wrestling, this *is* the same Jesse Ventura who was once the title holder!

Rob's other comment refers to the 'Freedom Corp' – a new initiative dealing with homeland defence announced in the US earlier this year by President Bush – again overnight without *any* consultation with the voluntary sector. In fact the day after he announced the 'Freedom Corp' the group's website was already live – stating that interested parties should contact their local volunteer centres for further information

The only problem was that these Centres had not even been notified that they were to be a contact point for all of this – let alone having any information to give to potential volunteers!

Now with those clarifications, allow me to read Rob's final paragraph once again;

*The Experience Corp may as well tear up our UK compact between government and the voluntary sector, replace Tony Blair with Jesse Ventura and rename the initiative the 'Freedom Corps'*

Again, allow me to reiterate that I am not trying to be a scare-monger or to be controversial – however, *we have* been quick to hold the UK model up as being one possible desired model for compact development.

The words of Christopher Spence, Tracy Ryan and Rob Jackson need to serve as an important reminder to us all that a compact that *is not* built on the shared values of trust, respect and equity is a compact that will ultimately be relegated to the realms of being simply a '*nice try*'

If we are to *learn* from the UK compact development process, then surely we must also be willing to learn from it's mistakes.

We must be willing to put aside our tradition, personal differences and notions of territory in order to pave a better way forward together.

The other major compact that is in progress at the moment is the Canadian Volunteering Accord.

Again, while in Denver recently, I had the chance to briefly meet with Suzanne Lawson – the chairperson of one of the many committees that helped to formulate the Canadian accord document.

Like the UK process, the Canadian situation is one we should monitor closely as they enter their implementation phase.

Let me move on now to the role that I believe the voluntary sector needs to play in this process

Firstly we must all be willing to *our part* in this process. Whether you are a volunteer, a Volunteer Manager or a Volunteer Centre employee – our role in the SA compact process is critical to its success.

Our role must be one of action.

I believe that our State Government needs to be congratulated and applauded for their willingness to create a partnership document of this kind – and think tanks like today are a good indication that they are willing to listen to us all.

However, they can only learn from us (*and indeed we can only ever learn from one another*), if we speak up about the things we believe are important to us all.

Never has the saying “*Speak now or forever hold your peace*” been truer than it is now. The taskforce *want* to hear your comments and I would certainly encourage you to give your feedback to them – either today in person or by phone or mail after today’s event is over.

Further to this, I believe that the voluntary sector also needs to be willing to put aside the ways we have worked in the past and be willing to try and do things in more creative, innovative and dynamic ways in the future.

As a sector we need to be willing to be *educators* however, we also need to be willing to be *educated*

We need to recognise that the knowledge we possess is only a part of the final solution – a solution we cannot reach alone

As a sector we need to be willing to be *leaders* – to use our wealth of knowledge to explore exciting and innovative new ways forward.

In this however, we also need to be willing to be *led* – recognising that we don’t necessarily know our way down *every* trail

And finally, as a sector we need to be willing to be *visionaries*. To recognise that the hard work we *are* doing now *can and will* have a profound effect on the way that volunteering operates in this state well into the future.

As visionaries, we must also always ensure that our sights are firmly set – not only on our long-term goals, but also on the small things that are important, immediate and short term.

When Benjamin Franklin and his co-horts signed the Declaration of Independence all those years ago they did so *not only* with long term visions in sight – they were also well aware of the short term obstacles that needed to be overcome in order to proceed – the most notable of these being the British Army!

As I stood in Washington DC recently and saw all around me the results of the courageous decision to sign the Declaration of Independence, I was reminded of the words of Thomas Paine – whose writings were one of the things that inspired the Declaration of Independence in the first place.

With the Declaration of Independence signed, the British Army defeated and the US nation borne, the leaders of the day gathered together in Philadelphia to draft what would eventually become the American Constitution.

Paine wrote;

*"...we (America) has a blank piece of paper upon which to write"*

In closing today, I put it to you all that we too have a blank piece of paper on which to write.

The level of involvement that *you* all choose to have and the feedback *you* all choose to give to this process, is ultimately what shall determine the quality of *what is written on that piece of paper*

In the words of author Peter Block, *"...we need to act as authors and not as readers"*

I am confident that those involved in the development of our compact truly do want this to be a success.

I believe that this same group of people *are* committed to working towards the same end *and* I believe that the journey from this point forward is for us all to learn from one another and to develop a compact that is truly representative of us all

Thank you