

National Citizenship Benchmarks
A Contribution to Discussion
on
**Participation and the Quality of
Community Life**
from
RUTH CROW AM.
June 1995

In the 1990s the Australian nation is embarking on a crucial debate about its future. On its surface that debate is about formal questions of constitutional change, but the underlying issues are much wider : they are about our national identity, the quality of community life and the kind of society we want Australia to be. (Page 6 "Discussion Paper on a System of National Citizenship Indicators". Senate Legal and Constitutional Reference Committee, May 1995)

INTRODUCING THE CONTRIBUTOR

For more than fifty years I have been involved in community organisations. In June 1993 I was appointed a MEMBER IN THE GENERAL DIVISION OF THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA FOR "Service to the community through the promotion of participative environmental and social planning."

One of the main ways I have promoted "participative environmental and social planning" has been to encourage those with whom I am involved to work out and clearly state their value judgements. This has always been a time consuming but very creative task.

MAKING CITIZENSHIP RELEVANT - THREE SUGGESTIONS ON ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION.

A debate about what kind of society we want Australia to be necessarily implies an attempt to reach some common understanding about its practical components. The failure to develop clear and relevant content (alongside a strong participatory process) greatly increases the chances that the debate will deteriorate into symbolism and generalisation, thus be more easily derailed or manipulated. (Page 7 in "Discussion Paper.")

Here are three suggestions for promoting an exchange of ideas about citizenship :-

1. Putting "life" in to the UN Declaration of Human Rights
2. Popularising Value Judgements of community organisations
3. Community education about community organisations

Dealing in more detail with each of these three points :-

1 a. Putting Life into UN Declaration of Human Rights. The Discussion Paper lists the International benchmarks for Civil Rights (page 59) and the International benchmark for Social Rights (page 62). This sets the stage for the community to have a more

effective grasp of the significance of these rights and how their daily lives can be affected by the philosophy underlying the United Nations' statements.

Australia has a legal obligation to meet the UN standards, but, just blandly stating them gives the ordinary citizen very little opportunity to know how to be involved in monitoring them let alone being able to participate in developing new rights and responsibilities as society changes.

It is therefore suggested that attention be given to popularising some aspects of the various charters which have been developed by the United Nations through world conferences (on children, older people, women, shelter, health and sustainability and so on) These charters provide the philosophical background for the UN Human Rights Declarations and thus are more likely to promote an exchange of ideas than a listing of already agreed to rights and obligations

2 a. Popularising Value Judgements of Community Organisations
The Discussion Paper recognises that the Australian people have created a great variety of voluntary organisations. The report states that "we do have a high level of voluntary (civic) activities ... (Many Australians) engage in a rich variety of voluntary activities and social movements which affirm civic values" (Page 53). Let us develop opportunities to give more recognition to moral and cultural transformations which are constantly taking place as people meet together to defend and extend their local, voluntary organisations.

One way of doing this is to popularise the value of community organisation clearly stating their aims and objects. An appeal to community organisation to participate in discussion on national citizenship benchmarks and indicators needs to include a request to community organisations for such information and the popularisation of the information received. A survey such as this has never been attempted and very creative planning will need to be used to carry it out so that it is a two way process, that is, strengthening the community organisations in their reason to exist and providing a factual framework for local benchmarks

3 a. Community Education about Community Organisations. The Discussion Paper states "If citizenship is an important value, it should be taught and encouraged" (page 69).

There is a need to foster the inclusion of information on the contribution being made by community organisations as part of the process of educating people about Australian Citizenship.

A look back at the 200 years of white settlement will show that there has been a number of turning points in our history, times when there has been a flowering of our culture, changes in our democratic structures, the provision of new types of social services and more widespread participation in debates on social issues. Some of these have been identified in the Discussion Paper. The development of a system of national citizenship indicators provides an opportunity of finding new ways of

popularising our nation's history, showing how ordinary people have contributed and still contribute to the moral and cultural transformation of society.

REACHING A COMMON UNDERSTANDING

It is recognised that "value judgements" are expressed in various ways and most community organisations may not have formally adopted value judgement. Thus an appeal needs to request "charters", "statements of aims and objects", or even less formally requesting community organisation to state "what they stand for". Most such information may probably be in point form, only listing some direct action, but some may include what may best regarded as philosophic statements about human relationships. These are gems for the formulation of benchmarks on citizenship.

I am enclosing three examples of value judgements which have been worked out by participants of community organisations. The three I have chosen have never received funding (from Federal, State or Local Government) and are thus true examples of "voluntary" organisations.

The three are :-

1. The Ecoso Exchange Newsletter value judgements which were adopted by the Crow Collection Association in 1991. These values are stated in every newsletter published by the Crow Collection Association. (See enclosure 2).
2. The 1973 value judgements of the North Melbourne Association as expressed in their report "Citizens Action Plan for North and West Melbourne (CAN)". (See enclosure 3.)
3. The 1985 value judgements of the Communist Party of Australia (Victorian Branch) as expressed in their report "Make Melbourne Marvellous". (See enclosure 4.)

1 a. THE ECOSO VALUE JUDGEMENTS - THE CROW COLLECTION ASSOCIATION EXAMPLE.

The Crow Collection Association was formed in 1991 with the aim of enhancing the accessibility and comprehensiveness of the Crow Collection. (Enclosure 4). From 1967 Maurie Crow (and others) had distributed a roneoed newsletter, mainly on urban issues, which from 1975 became known as the Ecoso Exchange Newsletter. The change in name coincided with restating the value judgements for this publication in order to give more emphasis on ecological and sociological issues which were then emerging. The Ecoso value judgements are summarised in the words used on the masthead of the newsletter.... *Ecological, Social and Political Discourse* (See enclosure 5).

2 a. THE CAN (Citizens' Action-plan for North and West Melbourne) VALUE JUDGEMENTS - THE NORTH MELBOURNE ASSOCIATION EXAMPLE.

In 1972 the Melbourne City Council appointed planners to prepare a Strategy Plan for the Melbourne City Council and called for

community and individuals to participate in its preparation. A well attended meeting of the North Melbourne Association decided to accept this opportunity of preparing a plan for North and West Melbourne. Enthusiastic sub-groups were formed. However, parochial issues tended to divide participants. It soon became necessary to find some way of uniting the members. Therefore considerable attention was given to organising a public occasion on which the participants could agree on specific value judgements (Endnote 2)

3 a. THE MAKE MELBOURNE MARVELLOUS VALUE JUDGEMENTS - THE COMMUNIST PARTY EXAMPLE

On page 65 of the Discussion Paper there is a quote from Kymlicka and Norman on the Left and principles of citizenship. They quote Marx's famous slogan :- "From each according to his talents to each according to his need". In Make Melbourne Marvellous Marx's quote is reformulated and expanded. (Endnote 3)

In 1968 at a State Conference the Victorian Branch of the Communist Party adopted a document on town planning called "Plan for Melbourne ...Facts and Principles" (Endnote 4). From then until the mid 80s the Communist Party held numerous meetings and brought out a variety of publications on urban issues.

In 1985 when urban issues were strongly on the agenda in both state and federal political arenas the Communist Party decided that one way of participating in his revived movement was to update the Party's policies. Numerous discussions were held over a period of about one year with the result of the publication of "Make Melbourne Marvellous - A Socialist Alternative Melbourne". (Endnote 5.)

THREE CONSTRAINTS ON DEVELOPING A STRONG PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

The Discussion Paper calls for "a strong participatory process". From my varied experiences in community organisation I have found that there are three main constraints on involving the community in participatory planning. These arise from the following three contradictions :-

- i. Initiators and newcomers,
- ii Paid staff and unpaid volunteers
- iii Parochialism and the wider community.

The best way to counteract these three inter-related contradictions is to involve as many of the constituents as possible in working out the aims and objects of the organisation, to continuously and creatively popularise these and, from time to time provide opportunities for updating them to the changing needs of society and the changing abilities of abilities of the people involved.

PARTICIPATION DEPENDS ON PEOPLE WHO CAN MAKE IT POSSIBLE AND PLACES WHERE IT CAN TAKE PLACE.

In preparing this document and reflecting on the various ways I

have been involved in promoting participation it becomes clear that some periods are more fruitful for widespread participatory action than are others.....that in some periods the community seems to be seething with ideas and seeking new ways of gathering together for example in the late 1960s, the mid 1970s, the early 1980s.

A feature of these three turning points was that participatory action was encouraged by local government, state government and federal government. This encouragement took various forms including the provision of information, (community newspapers, popularisation of official reports etc) the provision of paid people to make participation possible ("enablers", "catalysts", "community development officers") and the provision of urban spaces (neighbourhood centre, health centres, library information services, cultural activities including funding for street festivals etc) making participation not only possible but also enjoyable.

WE CAN DO IT !

It may be that Australians do many "citizenship things" but don't recognise the concept of citizenship in what they are doing". (Page 54 Discussion Paper)

As is stated on page 78 of the Discussion Paper developing national citizenship benchmarks "is difficult and complex, but it seems that it can be done". From life's experience I have found that the challenge of helping organisations to work out value judgements is a difficult and complex task until steps are taken to begin it, but that once the purpose is understood by the participants the task becomes easy as so many people have ideas..

The Discussion Paper calls for "input of ideas and common sense from ordinary Australian citizens". There is a fund of this sort of "experise" ready to be tapped in community organisations.

Thank you for this opportunity of participating in this debate on our national identity, the quality of community life and the kind of society we want in Australia.


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**NATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BENCHMARKS
A Contribution from Ruth Crow AM**

Enclosures

1. A leaflet about the Crow Collection.
2. Ecoso Exchange Newsletter's Value Judgements
3. North Melbourne Association's Value Judgements
4. Communist Party's Value Judgements on urban planning
5. Masthead of Ecoso Exchange Newsletter.

Endnotes

1. Documents about some of the organisations to which I have belonged are in the Crow Collection at the Victoria University of Technology, Footscray Campus. (See leaflet, enclosure 1.). Included in the Collection are some of the working papers used to find agreement on value judgements.
2. The Association organised "a month of meetings" to discuss the draft value judgements. Speakers addressed local organisations including a Rotary dinner, a discussion group at a convent; street parties were held and a very well attended meeting later endorsed the value judgements. The value judgements were popularised through delivering a leaflet to every workplace and dwelling and by articles in the local paper. (documents on this are available in the Crow Collection).
3. It is hoped that this contribution about *Make Melbourne Marvellous* shows that some section of the Left have recognised that Marxism is not a dogma. As one of those who formulated the value judgements for *Make Melbourne Marvellous* I completely reject the idea that it is only appropriate to demand fulfilment of responsibilities after the rights to participate are secured, as stated by Kymlicka and Norman on page 65 of the *Discussion Paper*.
4. At the time it was thought that the unanimous endorsement of such a document at a political party conference was unique in that other parties had policies on planning but these were piecemeal, contradictory, and with no clear values stated..
5. There was considerable "red baiting" press publicity when the Lord Mayor of Melbourne launched the book.