

**Australian Meals on Wheels Association National Conference
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Keynote Address. Volunteering: The Moving Frontier

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I have been researching and writing on aspects of volunteering for over 20 years now. Being a historian, I had the opportunity yesterday & couldn't resist strolling over the bridge to the wonderful Arts precinct across the river to visit the John Oxley State Library – I was interested to see what they held on Meals on Wheels [not a great deal I have to say] but 20 years ago, almost to the day, Queensland hosted the Third National Meals on Wheels conference from 12-14 September 1989 in Brisbane. You might be interested in the themes and issues that were troubling the organization then – they included substantial increase in clients; significant changes in food preparation technology, especially frozen foods; increased awareness of quality & nutritional standards; and significant difficulty in maintaining volunteers.¹ I'll come back to this later.

What I want to do in this keynote address today is to talk a little bit about the voluntary sector, specifically organizations like Meals on Wheels [MoW] and the relationship with governments [or the State] over time – a relationship that has been termed a 'moving frontier'.² I'd then like to position your organization – MoW – within some of these key historical changes – and then finally talk about where the organization may or can go into the future – into the second decade of the 21st century.

Some of you may have heard of Sir William Beveridge – a British Liberal politician, bureaucrat and economist, perhaps best known as the father of the

¹ National Meals on Wheels Conference record, 12-14 September, Brisbane, 1989.

² Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994.

British welfare state and the author of two key reports written during WWII that formed the basis of the revolutionary welfare reforms post-1945.³ But Beveridge also wrote a third report, his little-known *Voluntary Action. A Report on Methods of Social Advance*, published in 1948.⁴ It was a prophetic plea for ‘voluntary action’ as he termed it not to be forgotten in the wake of the emerging welfare state & increasing power of government [that he, ironically, helped to create!].

Beveridge saw voluntary action as comprising ‘*mutual aid*’/‘*self help*’ and ‘*philanthropy*’ – activities that happened outside of the home [in the public sphere], either individually or in association with others – mutual aid or self-help was when people came together with a common view and action to remedy something, often to assist oneself. For example, landcare; climate change groups; Co-operatives; sporting groups; etc. Philanthropy he described as when someone has a social conscience, not for oneself but for others, eg. charitable work and Meals on Wheels.

These sorts of activities that made up Beveridge’s ‘voluntary action’ were, he believed, an integral part of a democratic society. A thriving democracy didn’t depend alone on an open and free market, a hallmark of capitalism, but also on citizens acting collectively for the common good – so in a healthy democracy, a requirement was a healthy voluntary sector and visible voluntary action. Voluntary action, therefore was the intermediary between the state and private sector.

And Beveridge had a wonderful phrase – that ‘the business motive was a good servant but a bad master, and a society which gives itself up to the dominance of the business motive is a bad society’.⁵ Now, of course, these ideas have to be kept in their context – Beveridge was writing in the aftermath of a horrendous war – a battle between good and evil – between freedom & totalitarianism – a war when

³ William Beveridge, *Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services*, 1942 and *Full Employment in a Free Society*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1944. See also Jose Harris, *William Beveridge. A Biography*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997 reprinted 2003.

⁴ George Allen & Unwin, London.

⁵ Ibid, p. 322.

the British people came together like never before – a period that also bore the WVS and their Meals on Wheels program.

Many of these Beveridge's ideas have been picked up by others in recent times [just a change of language but the sentiments are the same]. For example Anthony Giddens [a pin up boy of Tony Blair's in the early 1990s & author of the 'third way']⁶ used the analogy of a three-legged stool to compare a well functioning democracy – you needed the government; the economy and civil society – all in balance – if one dominated over the other, then chaos could result.

Meals on Wheels, along with other voluntary organizations, form part of Beveridge's 'voluntary action' & Giddens's 'civil society'. But for much of the 20th century, it has been ignored as historians, policy makers, politicians, journalists etc have focused almost exclusively on the role and function of the 'welfare state' & the role of government - endlessly pondering its success or otherwise, to the exclusion of everything else.

I would argue that our preoccupation and 'obsession' with the 'state'/government; & capitalism/free markets in the 20th century has been at the expense of the smaller but integral component – **voluntary action**.

For the voluntary sector did not disappear after 1945 with the formation of the welfare state – either in Britain or here in Australia. Indeed many new voluntary organizations were created like Meals on Wheels. So in my book *Volunteering*, I've looked at Australia from 1945 [after WWII] and examined the relationship between governments and the voluntary sector, especially focusing on the voluntary sector & volunteering.⁷ Now the relationship certainly shifted but when one thinks about the 'moving frontier' – where governments and the voluntary sector are integral to each other – and where the relationship moves backwards and forwards through time across the 20th century – through this

⁶ *The Third Way. Renewal of Social Democracy*, Polity Press, London, 1998.

⁷ Melanie Oppenheimer, *Volunteering. Why we can't survive without it*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2008.

‘moving frontier’ – then we can more clearly see and understand what happened in the past; why things may be the way they are today; and most importantly how events may pan out into the future. And integral to all of this is volunteering and volunteers – because they play such an important role within the voluntary sector and especially organizations like Meals on Wheels.

One can also see the ‘moving frontier’ at work in a quick snapshot of the history of Meals on Wheels in Australia and one can see the slow and subtle shift in the relationship between the voluntary sector and the state [especially the Commonwealth government & its increasing power since 1945]. Doris Taylor, the founder of MoW in SA in 1953 published a pamphlet in 1955 in which she wrote, ‘Its not a charity – it’s a social experiment’.⁸ The concept of MoW was radical & new in post-war Australia – it was something that only the voluntary sector could, and did, trial – it’s a perfect example of the adage and rationale of many voluntary sector organizations – that they can innovate & experiment – where governments cannot or will not.

But if you’ve ever wondered why MoW today is adhoc and different in each jurisdiction, it’s because of how it was originally formed in each State. MoW developed State by State, either being founded by an individual such as Doris Taylor in SA with generous assistance from that particular State government; or by an individual such as Rhoda Cameron in Ipswich, Queensland in 1956 without any assistance from any level of government; or by the local government, ie the Sydney City Council in NSW in 1957 with no State government help or something in between. Sometimes hospital kitchens were used from the earliest days as in Tasmania or programs were left to local government, service organizations and community groups to fund and manage. By the late 1960s in Australia some State/local governments assisted with funding the organization but others did not. Quite frankly, it was a mess.

⁸ Doris Taylor, *Meals on Wheels, What it is – How it Began – What it is Now – What it Can Become!* Pamphlet, SA, 1955, p. 5

From a policy perspective, how could it be ensured that all Australians, whether they lived in NSW or WA, have access to the same quality of service provision – that is to be provided with a regular hot meal in their own home each day if needs be.

Enter the Commonwealth government – Using the moving frontier thesis - the Commonwealth began to discuss the possibility of a subsidy to Meals on Wheels to address this lack of uniformity across the nation as part of the Australian Health Ministers' Conferences in 1967 and 1968. This was part of a new State/Federal funding agreement for home and nursing care for the aged – these initiatives included home nursing, a housekeeping service, home help and other specialist services. The package was largely aimed at relieving the demand for aged care facilities in public hospitals and nursing homes, as well as encouraging the elderly to remain in their own homes. WC Wentworth, from NSW, was the minister who championed the cause.

During the Second Reading of the Bill in March 1970, William Wentworth said:-

I should, however, make it clear that we do not propose to interfere unnecessarily with the affairs of any organization by laying down rigid conditions in regard to the application of this subsidy. We are prepared to trust organizations which, by their very existence and operation, have shown themselves worthy of trust ... provided that our subsidy is applied for these purposes or any one of them or any combination of them, I think we ought to be satisfied. We should leave it to the decision of each organization as to how best the money should be used for these purposes...'.⁹

There was little resistance to the idea – indeed the opposition Australian Labor Party [Bill Hayden was opposition Minister for Health] strongly supported it. The result was the *Delivered Meals Subsidy Act* of 1970 where voluntary organizations providing Meals on Wheels services were allocated a \$1 subsidy for every ten meals served. That is 10 cents for every meal. This was about 25%

⁹ *Delivered Meals Subsidy Bill*, 4 March 1970, Vol. House of Reps, 66, p. 63

of the average cost of a meal excluding transport costs. In 1972 a submission was put to raise the subsidy to 15 cents per meal & give an additional subsidy of 5 cents per meal for organizations to deliver fresh fruit and juice and deliver free ascorbic acid tablets [assented to in February 1973 after Liberals had lost office].

So we have a perfect example of the frontier moving in the early 1970s – the relationship between the voluntary sector [MoW] and government [Federal] shifted with the Federal government, for the first time and in accordance with other policy changes in the field of aged care, coming in and taking responsibility through funding local community organizations for the first time [as this had hitherto been either the domain of the State governments, or local governments or the charitable sector itself].

This policy was further refined in 1985-86 when HACC (Home and Community Care Program) – an integrated State/Federal government funding program was introduced. The aim was more of a client focus; expanding services & attempting to make it more evenly distributed along with increased funding. The frontier was moving once more.

Let us now fast forward to today and let's see where the 'moving frontier' is – and how Meals on Wheels can best move forward into the future – into the second decade of the 21st century – with all its associated contemporary problems, challenges and issues.

In the 1970's, Meals on Wheels was described as

The Meals on Wheels organizations ... deliver meals to the aged, the sick and the lonely who live in their own homes and have the need of care and contact with outside life. Their staffs are predominantly volunteer; the headquarters from which they operate are varying in type – sometimes they have their own kitchens; sometimes they work from a hospital kitchen; and there are various other arrangements. They generally distribute meals from special insulated containers. The vehicles which they use are almost always the property of the

*volunteers who give their services. They sometimes receive assistance from State and local governments, and they raise and get charitable donations to expand their work.*¹⁰

Does it sound fairly similar to today? Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Is this continuity and tradition a good thing for the organization or not – how can the organization innovate, move with the times without losing its soul and *raison d'être* in the process?

Another point I make in my book, *Volunteering*, is that of generational change. Every organization has to re-invent itself each generation in order to remain relevant, vibrant, current to the society. The Australia of the 1950s when Meals on Wheels was born no longer exists; the Australia of the 1970s when the Federal government first came on board with national subsidies to Meals on Wheels also no longer exists. How much has Meals on Wheels adapted and changed accordingly? There is no doubt that MoW has a good grounding – you must have one of the most recognizable brand names around – that's a good start!

But conversely, many of the issues that were bothering the organization in 1989 as I mentioned at the beginning - are the same ones or similar as today - substantial increase in clients; significant changes in food preparation technology, especially frozen foods; increased awareness of quality & nutritional standards; and significant difficulty in maintaining volunteers.

It is interesting that the question of volunteers and how to retain them seems to be as intractable a problem in 1989 as today – how does an organization predicated on a volunteer model of the 1950s survive in the 21st century? Especially when governments seem to take this use of volunteers for granted –

¹⁰ William Wentworth introducing the Bill in 1970, *ibid*, p. 62.

and fundamentally ignore them [eg National Productivity Commission's NFP Sector study which did not mention volunteers in its terms of reference].¹¹

The question of having sufficient volunteers is not only a problem for Australia – but is affecting many other countries. The first comprehensive national study of MoW in Ireland, for example, was completed last year. Commissioned by the National Council on Ageing and Older People, *The Role and Future Development of the Meals-on-Wheels Service for Older People in Ireland*, by Ciara O'Dwyer and Virpi Timonen from Trinity College Dublin, makes for interesting reading as many of the issues appear universal. The service was in crisis in Ireland because of a lack of volunteers, a lack of support from government authorities, the *ad hoc* nature of MoW services, not established or structured in a coherent way – an absence of an overall framework that led to gaps. Overall, the report concluded that MoW needed reform and restructuring. Now I think we are better off here in Australia because we have a national body and some areas are working well [eg in my home town of Walcha in northern NSW – small town of 1,700 but with a rural population of around 3,000 – plenty of volunteers because of the use of voluntary organizations who organize specific days eg P&C gets younger volunteers involved]. A national study of our own here in Australia would certainly be advantageous.¹²

However, perhaps Meals on Wheels could look to the past for inspiration – and take Doris Taylor's 'it's not a charity – it's a social experiment' to new levels. Therefore what might be best is simply re-evaluating the functions of the organization – to innovate and experiment – remember with the 'moving frontier' idea – it is always the voluntary sector that comes up with the bright, new ideas – which are often then purloined by governments as their own at a

¹¹ See my submission to the Commission at <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/study/not-for-profit> and follow the prompts to submissions.

¹² Professor Jeni Warburton and myself along with the National Association of MoW are submitting a research project to the ARC Linkage program in November 2009.

later date. That is how the moving frontier waxes and wanes. The change over the last 60 odd years has been a slow but continuous one.

In 1989, there was talk about expanding the role of volunteers so that more socialization could occur with the clients who value, need and want that contact; bringing more people together to eat communally through shared meals was also discussed and already done in some areas. Overwhelmingly, however, the importance of the human element that the volunteer brings – food, sustenance, companionship, altruism, generosity, care – these values transcend technology and ideology – it is the humanity of the service of Meals on Wheels – largely predicated on its volunteers – that is at the heart of the service and organization. Nothing can replace that. These universal traits and values transcend time and place.

Perhaps that's what makes Meals on Wheels so endearing and enduring.