



ourcommunity.com.au



Launch of the Community Capacity Building Workshops

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 7th June 2004

Larry Anthony
Federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the
2004 Communities in Control conference
convened by **Our Community and Catholic Social Services.**

Larry Anthony, **Communities in Control** conference, June 2004.
Visit www.ourcommunity.com.au

Introduction

I am absolutely delighted to be here today, and I want to start by thanking Rhonda Galbally and her team. 'Communities in Control' is a wonderful initiative.

I know how hard people in the community sector work at the grass roots. So often your energies are fully absorbed just meeting the demand for your services. But like any industry, we need to keep one eye on the future and where we are going.

Perhaps more than any other, the community sector needs to constantly move forward and meet the challenges of a changing world. Conferences like this provide an opportunity for us to come together, take stock of where we are at, and ask where we need to go.

Obviously the Government has a vital role in this process. The Government is a key stakeholder in community development. I would like to take the opportunity to examine this relationship - especially the principles that guide us in the policy development process. This also requires some discussion on how these policies are being implemented.

I want to talk about what drives the Coalition Government, including:

- What we believe
- Where we want to go
- And how we plan to get there.

Social Coalition

If you flick through the Prime Minister's keynote social policy speeches since 1996, one phrase is consistently repeated – 'the social coalition'. The concept of social coalition is a fundamental tenet of the Coalition Government's approach to social policy. The social coalition is the concept that government, business and the community sector need to share responsibility for Australia's social issues.

There is an African proverb, which says it takes a village to raise a child. The notion of social coalition advocates that government and business comprise a central part of that village. Not on the fringes, or on the outskirts of town - but at its core.

Implicit in this statement is the acknowledgment from Government that we do not have all the answers. People can knock on my door and inform me about

the challenges that face their communities, and I can go away and speak with my Department and try to develop policy to respond to this. I can argue with my colleagues at the Cabinet table for increased funds. But the truth is, unless Government forms a genuine partnership with the community and business sectors then these efforts are wasted. These partnerships are the foundations of real and lasting solutions.

It is also important that I debunk the idea that the social coalition is the nice way of saying outsourcing. There is definitely a role for Government in resourcing certain social services -- but a partnership is more than a financial relationship. It is about power sharing. The Government wants to engage the community and business sector in the decision-making process.

Perhaps the most reticent partner in the social coalition is the business sector. Business is driven by profit. And it is often hard for businesses to see the role of community development in their business model.

I have some experience in the business sector, from the cut and thrust of Wall Street to running my own business on the North Coast, but I firmly believe forward thinking companies must think outside the square.

They are beginning to understand that many employees want to contribute to society and want them to provide this opportunity. Initiatives such as volunteering and mentoring in the workplace can build a better work environment -- and they are certainly much cheaper than Christmas parties.

More importantly for the private sector, a healthier community breeds a healthier future workforce. So for the hard heads of the business world there is an economic argument for investing in the community sector.

I also believe there is a genuine desire from the business sector to be more active in community building. They do not want to be seen simply as the cash cow of the social coalition. There is a trend in corporate philanthropy away from 'chequebook' giving to supporting programs that work with the firm -- where, for example, employees can volunteer or lend their expertise.

There is also a trend to supporting programs that are aligned to a company's core business. For example, the ANZ is working with the Brother of St Laurence to implement their *Savers Plus* program, which helps low-income families save for their children's education. By working with a program that is aligned to its core business ANZ is maximising its social responsibility.

Local Solutions

The other phrase which is regularly used in Coalition speeches is 'local solutions for local problems'. This captures the idea that funding for community programs needs to be flexible and localised.

For too long Government's have tried to apply template solutions to social problems. The problem with this approach is that each Australian community

is unique. For example, the causes of substance abuse in Toorak are very different from, say, an indigenous community outside Shepparton. The causes of youth unemployment are not the same in Tamworth as in Sydney. A one-size fits all policy approach fails to recognise this.

Another problem with broad policy prescriptions is they prevent the Government from picking up those projects that have been proven to work. In the last three years I have travelled throughout Australia visiting community organisations. I have seen so many successful projects -- in my own electorate, for example (yes, we politicians are very parochial) there are some wonderful playgroups that work through caravan parks. These programs are successful in engaging at-risk families and their children.

Another impressive local solution is Uniting Care's Working Together program that operates in outer east and inner south of Melbourne. It provides early intervention and support services to parents, teachers and carers of pre-school age children. This program recently received \$800,000 from the Australian Government. These are both projects that have been proven to work -- in other words, local solutions to local problems.

Government Does Not Know Best

If you merge these two concepts of local solutions and the social coalition then you get to the root of the Coalition Government's social policy. This is a Government that is big enough to know when they do not know best. It is a Government that is not too proud to look beyond our Departments for answers. This is why we are engaging partners in decision-making, and looking to fund programs that already work.

Many of you might think that this is the approach of all Governments regardless of political persuasion, but this is not true. In the past six months we have seen the Australian Labor Party increasingly advocate for a high level of government intervention in the social policy arena. As the Federal Election draws nearer this will be a point of distinction between the two parties.

Stronger Families and Communities

Any discussion of policy development needs to be accompanied by a discussion on policy implementation, and I want to discuss how we translate these concepts of social coalition and local funding into policy on the ground. Specifically, I want to talk about the new \$365 Stronger Families and Communities Strategy which the Prime Minister launched in April. The Strategy is for me a pet project. I have looked after its operation for several years and witnessed its evolution.

I was absolutely delighted with the recent announcement, not just because I had been able to convince my Cabinet colleagues about the importance of community but because at its core it is very good policy.

Larry Anthony, **Communities in Control** conference, June 2004.

Visit www.ourcommunity.com.au

Communities for Children

The centrepiece of the new Strategy is the Communities for Children initiative. Very basically, this provides \$110 million to 35 disadvantaged communities across Australia. Each community will receive up to \$4 million dollars for early childhood programs. The funding model is not dissimilar to the Sure Start program that operates in the United Kingdom; there is, however, one big difference. The Sure Start program is typically administered by the Local Government Authorities, while Communities for Children will be administered by non-government authorities. If you just took a big gasp - you should have. I think people have tended to under-estimate just how big a shift in social policy this is.

Since I have been a Minister the consistent message I have received is that community organisations want to have more control over the allocation of government funding. And rightfully so. Too often Government Departments assess the needs of the communities on the basis of limited knowledge. Wrong decisions are made because Departments lack local knowledge. Communities for Children will put communities in the driving seat. Decisions will be made by the people working at the coalface -- people who often have generations of local knowledge at their fingertips.

Previously I spoke about the social coalition - this is the Coalition in action, the devolution of the decision-making process to the grass roots level. But just before you crack the champers - the caveat. With rights come responsibilities.

I have great expectations of non-government organisations charged with the responsibility of allocating funds to other organisations.

- They are going to have to achieve community consensus.
- They will need to make sure that no one is left out in the cold.
- They will need to galvanise communities and drive collaboration.

I sincerely believe that we are at the cross roads in social policy.

If this initiative is going to succeed local organisations need to pull together. They need to demonstrate that they have the capacity to make decisions on behalf of communities instead of Government. If we can do this then this funding model can be replicated across all areas of social policy.

Local Answers

Another arm of the new Strategy is the \$60 million Local Answers initiative. Some people have picked up on the fact this is the 'L.A' initiative -- my legacy to the community sector. But let me assure you despite recent opinion polls I have not started trying to create legacies. This initiative will provide small-scale grants for local projects. We have purposively made it flexible. Projects

can be literally anything that strengthens families or communities, projects such as parenting courses, youth development, mentoring or volunteering.

For example I recently announced a project called Café Enfield in South Australia. Enfield is one of the most disadvantaged areas in South Australia. It has high numbers of single parent, low-income families, Indigenous and culturally diverse communities. Local experience had shown that people benefited from an integrated support mechanism. The Café Enfield project provided a central point for parents of young children to meet. It also provided a central point for service delivery. The project received 200,000 dollars.

Another example is the Collingwood Community Information Centre. Evidence suggests access to information is a major issue for low-income families in many inner urban communities in Melbourne. The Collingwood Community Information Centre has been granted funding of \$75,000 to continue operating their highly successful community information centre and drop-in facility for low-income families.

There are many critics of this local approach to funding. People have said that we would get better bang for our buck through a few national programs - in other words, programs conceived and administered in Canberra.

I think it all turns on what you consider to be bang for your buck. Small scale funding for local projects will not attract the visible attention that a national program might, but it does achieve our goal of building a better society. I hope that in the end our achievements, communities working together will speak for themselves.

Strong Economy

I have spoken mostly about the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy because it has been useful to highlight our policy principles in action. It is, however, only one of many successful Government programs (in fact the general commentary at the moment is that this is a big spending government, especially in the area of families and communities.

I want to finish on this note. The 2004/05 Budget was the seventh budget surplus delivered by the Government. A big-spending budget is a result of good government. It is no accident that we have been able to deliver the biggest assistance package ever for Australian families and still keep the Budget in surplus.

As community workers it is important to remember that the biggest threat to community wellbeing is economic mismanagement. There are no bars that can imprison families like the poverty.

I think we all acknowledge that economic growth needs to be sustainable and controlled, but equally it should not and cannot come at the expense of social stability. If we jeopardise economic growth then we seriously risk our social stability.

Conclusion

Over the next day you will hear a variety of opinions and ideas. This type of robust debate and exchange of ideas is essential to driving the community sector forward.

A special thank you to Rhonda for organising such a wonderful initiative. I would now like to officially launch the Community Capacity Building workshops.