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Speech note/ opening remarks

Communities in Control Conference/ Melbourne

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

Ladies & Gentlemen

I'm here to say a few word form a sponsor, in this case The Pratt Foundation. And at one level that's easy.

I can certainly say that on behalf of our Chairperson Heloise Waislitz, and on behalf of the Pratt family, we're delighted to support this conference, and in particular the participation of its two distinguished visitors, the pioneering scholars Professor Len Syme and Professor Lisa Berkman, the inaugural Pratt Community Fellows.

We're pleased to do so because:

Firstly, it dovetails with our Foundation's mission statement, our motto: "To enrich the lives of the community". This is what we're about.

Secondly, the conference is the brainchild of Rhonda Gallbally and her team at Our Community.

Rhonda Galbally has left a trail of innovation and creative thinking behind her over many years of leadership in the development of social policy, in and out of the government. And Our Community is providing to be yet another example of that innovation and creativity, as demonstrated by this conference.

And thirdly, the conference will explore ideas that reflect our own experience at The Pratt Foundation and at Visy Cares in some of our priority areas in philanthropy, such as youth and family welfare and Aboriginal health.

Community rules. Community works.

As I said, it's easy to explain why we're comfortable helping to sponsor this conference.

But we hope that's not too comfortable. Certainly not as comfortable as sitting in a warm bath.

Now I don't know how you feel about warm baths. They are certainly conducive to feelings of well-being.

And, if we can accept the tradition, they have contributed, on the least one occasion to intellectual discovery.

The Greek mathematician and philosopher Archimedes is said to have shouted Eureka, "I have found it", while sitting in his bath.

But since what he discovered was a method of detecting the amount of alloy in the crown of the King of Syracuse, I think we can say that the case for warm baths as a means to advance knowledge and the welfare of society has not been conclusively demonstrated.

Which brings me to cold showers.

In my experience, conferences can be divided into warm baths and cold showers.

The warm baths will certainly make you feel good. They'll confirm the prejudices and mindsets you've brought with you; your fellow delegates will agree with you and everybody else; the speakers will be benign and reassuring, extolling all the right "hurrah" words and denouncing the "boo" words; we go home with that warm inner glow.

The cold shower conferences, by contrast, upset our conventional wisdom; challenge our most cherished beliefs; and make us want to strangle a speaker or two who has committed truth.

I hope that in the range of speakers and workshop over the next two days cold showers outnumber warm baths.

As a small contribution to that bracing prospect, may I turn on the cold water tap and share some ideas about community and communities?

Some three years ago, Sian Watkins, a staff writer for the Age wrote a column on the op-ed page, in which he attacked the "inaccurate, idealised and self-serving" use of word "community".

In the newspaper on the talkback radio, every politician, campaigner and disgruntled member of the public is lamenting on behalf of the "community", or "lost community values".

Goodies (the people) and baddies (those who control them) use the word. The “community” is nearly always the victim of heartless governments and bureaucrats, big business, economic rationalism and associated agreed – as if the community existed independently of politicians, business people, bureaucrats, bank staff, property developers and greedy people driving Saab convertibles.

“Community” conjures images of small country towns, barn dances, chewing the fat leaning on car bonnets, and fund-raisers to build new toilets for the local sports ground. Use the word “community” and any action—whether a cut to funding for a public art program or a plan to build a block of flats in a nice suburb – that threatens his utopian existence is bound to be seen as reprehensible.

The word is used in another, equally manipulative way, by the baddies. MP’s governments and big companies are seeking “feedback from the community”, or “community consultation”. They use “community”, rather than “public”, “electorate” or “residents”, because it makes them sound kinder and more sensitive.

“Community” is now applied willy-nilly by people with suburban, citywide, regional, state and national grievances, as if Australians share common values, aspirations and grievances. But we don’t.

But we don’t.

In other words, what Watkins was highlighting, and what this conference I hope will confront at some point, is that the idea of community, much like the idea of democracy, is not given, agreed upon fixed principle.

It is rather, a dynamic evolving notion.

In 1953 the American sociologist Robert Nisbet published his classic study: “The Quest for Community”. If you haven’t read it, I recommended that you do and be prepared for some very cold showers indeed.

With considerable prescience about our own time, Nisbet wrote: “The Quest for Community will not be denied, for it springs from some of the powerful needs of human nature—needs for a clear sense of cultural purpose, membership, status and continuity”

Throughout most of its history, Nisbet argued, mankind had satisfied his longing for belonging through the small communities of human experience – the family, church, temple or mosque, the neighborhood, and local fraternal, ethnic and voluntary association.

What the 18th century political philosopher Edmund Burke called the “small platoons” of civil society.

Writing 50 years ago, immediately after World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War, Nisbet was concerned that the rise of the nation state represented a threat of the idea of community.

At its worst it descended into totalitarianism and abolished communities altogether. But in its more benign guise, that of the democratic welfare state, the idea of community writ large, the big battalion – as opposed to the small platoon – in represented a different but still worrying threat.

Today, 50 years later, Nisbet's view about the existential importance of community has been confirmed, even if there's still debate about the desirable relationship between communities and the nation state.

But those debates are taking place in a different global and societal context.

Today, post the Cold War, in the midst of ongoing globalisation, post September 11, post Bali, and let us hope soon to be post Iraq war, the yearning for community, for connection, for being in control has reasserted itself.

But as in Nisbet's time, the idea of community, like the idea of beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder.

What's more, profoundly embedded though it IS in Western civilisation, the idea of community often exists in some tension, if not sometimes in outright conflict, with another important idea of social democracy, namely that of pluralism.

Finding a balance between them is an ongoing requirement of a free and just society.

For as anybody who has had anything to do with local government can attest, and this is the arena where the uses and abuses of community are perhaps most manifest, those claiming to speak on behalf of "the community", often directly contradict each other.

Clearly, then just as there is a potential conflict between then notion of community and that of pluralism, there is a potential conflict between differing notions of community.

Moreover, that tension is often inherent in our own multiple community memberships. We can be simultaneously members of our neighborhood, our municipal community, our faith and ethnic communities, our cultural association, our sporting clubs, our charitable groups, and find that there is not necessarily a seamless connection between all of them.

And also, to echo the theme of this conference, who's in control of our community, whichever one we happen to mean at any time, and in control of the various communities of communities to which we all belong, and who should be?

As my mentor in political journalism, the late and great Alan Reid taught me 40 years ago: Who's on top, and who pays?

And in communities, often self-selecting associations, how do we decide?

No wonder, then that Professor Christopher Campbell, at the University of Washington in Seattle, recently wrote: “There is perhaps no concept more central to social life, and at the same time more muddled and misunderstood than the idea of community. We live within it, define ourselves by it, seek it out, rebel against it, and crave it when it cannot be found.

“And yet do we really understand it?”

It is a profoundly important question. And a difficult one. As indeed are so many other questions associated with the themes of this conference.

All the more reason for revisiting them, breathing new life into old ideas, and learning to understand them afresh.

So it’s a great privilege for the Pratt Foundation to be part of such an enterprise, and, speaking personally, for me to have this opportunity to say something.

May all your showers be cold ones.

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