

The Role Of Business & Community in Reinventing Australia

by

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Blind Freddy

For the record may I remind you at this point that Blind Freddy who will appear more than once in my few words was one Sir Frederick William Pottinger, the bureaucrat in charge of the Lachlan district of NSW 150 years ago. The success of bushranger Ben Hall in evading capture there in 1862 earned Sir Frederick the nickname "Blind Freddy".

The Lucky Country

You know the lucky thing about living in Australia is not that it's a lucky country but that we live in relative peace with a multi-cultural mix to die for in a place that is the best in the world for being a kid and where despite a relatively high cost of living so much is available for free – the sun, the beaches and the bush – and where paid resources are plentiful and on tap and not trapped by bureaucracies and by elites. Having lived for the first 40 years of my life in London I know this so well.

Global Nation/Local Problems

We are nevertheless a global nation and share many problems with democracies worldwide.

Parliamentary democracies pride themselves on the role of their elected governments to debate the most important issues of the day, to provide a chamber for the scrutinisation of legislation and to bring the fruits of their labours to the statute book.

Over the last 50 years this admiration has been dissipated as witnessed by the dwindling membership of political parties (350,000 in Oz and falling) and the growing lack of trust in politicians.

Add to this the short-term attention span of most politicians and we have a recipe for a growing divide between Canberra and the rest of the nation.

Blind Freddy knows that powerlessness is a recurring theme: the belief that "they" are not listening, preferring to be engaged in adversarial slanging matches and the strange idea that the future of the country should be based on numbers in the two houses of parliament.

When the debate about same-sex marriage was being run during both the Gillard and Abbott governments the focus was on the party numbers in Canberra and not on the needs and wishes of the Australian people.

Unrepresentation

The unrepresentative nature of parliamentary democracy in almost all western democracies is being demonstrated by falling levels of participation in civic life, the erosion of the public sector and the shrinking idea of public good (think Barangaroo and Australian energy policy for example) not forgetting the inexorable decline of the traditional “infrastructures”, such as the church and trade unions which were once the connecting tissue for communities.

If you add to this manifestation of misalignment, the ubiquity of digital technology then Blind Freddy will tell you using his sign language app. that we are at a turning point of such importance that now is the time to act for change.

The Shock of the New ...

We need new relationships. New political models. The days of the Aorta Syndrome with governments as manager and coach and telling me what aorta do are over. The days of the public funding using the welfare state model are over too as the privatization of health, energy, transport and education bites deeper and deeper.

...Through An Old Lens

In 1835, 27 years before Blind Freddy hit the social scene, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic *Democracy in America* warned us, following his visit to the newly fledged US, of the tyranny of the majority – the capacity for a citizenry to make really bad decisions on the basis of pure majority politics.

In 2004, US journalist Jim Surowiecki, in his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, argued that nobody is smarter than all of us, provided – of course – that collective wisdom is garnered in a reflective environment and not from lemmings rushing towards the cliff.

The Wisdom of Crowds

In the last ten years of Australian political life we have witnessed the powers that be wrestling with topics like climate change and same sex marriage, refugees (in and out of their boats), ISIS and Moslems, as if the warning made by M. de Tocqueville is the only caution worth acting on.

But you know, Australia’s citizenry may know better. Bob Hawke once attested to the intelligence of the Australia electorate though that attribute might have been linked to his success at the polls!

Nevertheless, we have usually been in favour of taking action on climate change, even the introduction of same sex marriage and – as Richard Flanagan wisely said – of treating refugees as human beings and not a statistical aberration.

So just where do we go from here?

Where from Here?

In 2016 Reinvent Australia seeks to start to reveal our capacity as a nation to prove Jim Surowiecki right. To access the best thinking from the broadest possible base in response to the challenges facing us now and into the future.

As a group, Reinvent Australia has been created by people from a business rather than social or academic background. And by people who want to see action and not just a think-tank approach.

Business Matters

As such we are champions of what business has to offer and how business and communities can work together to create a better future.

Despite the rigours of the bottom line and the mandate to deliver shareholder value, people in business know the power that can be generated by the social engagement of business with the future of Australia.

As Theodore Zeldin argues in his miraculous book *An Intimate History of Humanity*, businesses may be a better source of a better future than governments. We shall see whether Australian business can break free from its traditional crony mindset and set fire to the creation of an innovative and creative future.

Art for the Future

In this endeavour we seek not only to tap into the obvious channels but also to bring artists of all kinds into the story. Creativity in all its emanations is one of the key drivers of innovation. The current cuts to arts funding will reduce this capacity but we must soldier on.

Platforms for Change

We also understand from recent events like the Turnbull initiative on innovation and the conclusions reached in Paris on climate change that it is up to us to build on these platforms and create the better future that we all want to see.

Whatever the context we are facing and the uncertainties of the future, let's be surprised by the shared vision for the future that reinventing Australia might deliver.

I leave the last word with Gary Hamel, management guru of the future and author among other books of *Leading the Revolution*.

From Gandhi to Mandela, from the American patriot to the Polish shipbuilders, the makers of revolutions have not come from the top.

Ask Blind Freddy. Even he knows that this is true.

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