

Kerferd Oration Sunday July 26, 2020
Cathy McGowan AO,

“It was Mahatma Ghandi who said the future depends on what we do in the present.

Welcome to this Kerferd Oration: The Australia We Want where I will share a vision for our future; and outline how, by working now, in the present, we can build the foundations for that future.

In summary my message is – the COVID 19 pandemic is being destructive of our economy and in many cases our way of life, and it has been distressing and devastating in so many ways, yet the disruption it is creating can also be an opportunity; I ask if there was one thing, if we did really well now, which would make a significant difference to our future –I believe that one thing would be to pay attention to the views and voices of the young adults in our community.

Today I will lay out my reasoning, refer to 2006 and the lessons learnt during and following 3rd Kerferd Oration, including being in politics, and the present -the Kerferd consultation and conversations which took place earlier this year and conclude with some ideas for action and practical ways to encourage a diversity of viewpoints as we make decisions about the future.

It was 14 years ago that I stood at this lectern, nervous and also honoured. I was the first local to deliver the Oration and it was a privilege – and I wanted to prove I was up to it and in particular to impress Joan Sims OAM who was the initiator of the Oration. That Oration “Our Commonwealth” reflected the results from a series of facilitated community conversations based around 4 questions: what is Beechworth’s gift to you? What do you value about living here? What are the issues for Beechworth and what do you hope for the future? When I re-read my notes, I see that a quote from Don Chambers, an Indigo Shire councillor from Rutherglen, helped set the scene and famously, that quote later found its way to the toilet door at Mittagundi outdoor education centre and eventually into Parliament’s hansard:

“The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating, the paths to it are not found but made, and the making of those pathways changes both the maker and the destination”

At a personal level that quote, the speech, research and the dinners had a pivotal impact on the course of my life – certainly I grew in confidence, but I also grew in humility as I met many other locals and needed to reassess my attitude to this town and our community. Let me explain briefly:

I had gone to school in Beechworth, growing up 20 ks in the Indigo Valley, where my parents were dairy farmers, and for me during the 50’s and 60’s Beechworth was a scary place: first there were the bad vibes of catholic v protestant which took some management, then there was The Prison where the occasional convict escaped and the news went out

“be careful –escaped convict on the run”

a police block on the Wooragee road stopping the school bus, mum and dad, taking the keys out of the car and locking the house doors at night, very unusual behaviour; and in the background, there was The Mayday Hills asylum – on the hill - and the stories told to us by the children of the workers – often terrifying.

However that view changed during the 2006 Kerferd conversations. I saw Beechworth with new eyes and liked what I was seeing. Clearly Beechworth had changed, and while all was not well, the economic and social base of the community had diversified, Mayday Hills had closed, there was a new prison, there was an active arts council, entrepreneurs such as Lucas family manufacturing portable timber sawmills and the O’Toole’s with the bakery were attracting new people to the community.

And it wasn’t only in Beechworth, across the Shire things were also changing. In 2012 the Indigo Shire population 16,111 released its optimistic and creative 2030 plan for “a united thriving and admired community, a great place to live work and visit” based around 6 principles and clear vision for the people, our places, our spirit, getting about, value for money, and a new idea - the Indigo style. And this overall plan in later years was complimented by plans for Rutherglen, Yackandandah and Chiltern.

As I continued on my journey of community engagement inspired by the idea of facilitated conversations with purpose, around meals, in kitchens, in work places, I also recognised the important role of our regional and rural communities within the fabric of our nation; our Commonwealth was more than what cities produced or had to offer – while in the past it may have been the economic contribution of our agricultural industries – more and more I could see our regions held answers to major national issues; climate change – produce renewable electricity in the regions; overpopulated cities – grow our regional cities; and it was the potential as well as the lack of action on these issues that was one of the factors that eventually drew me into politics.

During those political years 2012 – 2019, I truly and deeply came to understand the skills, experience and capacity of our young adults and what we were missing when they are not active participants in our democracy.

It first became obvious during 2012 – it was Indigo’s young people who had tapped me on the shoulder and said “*someone needs to do something and we think its you*” which led to the formation of Voice for Indi and my eventual decision to stand as an independent; but it was during the campaign that I first had an inkling that I may have been the problem – it came to a head over the use of social media and in particular twitter.

One of the young team rang me “Hi Cathy, we haven’t had a twitter post for a few days. How are you going?”
Me “Don’t worry I am on to it.” “by when?”
me “tomorrow, it takes me a long time to draft a tweet”
and I could sense the eyes rolling backwards in their head as they responded
“But its only 280 characters”

I almost cried with frustration – for me doing a twitter post was a major challenge.

And it was then I decided to let go. Said lightly but in fact it was big – I handed over control of the twitter account, delegated the drafting of social media posts and moved to a place of trust.

And my rational, clearly, I wasn’t coping, but a shaft of light had penetrated my stressed brain -these were digital natives, they knew this territory, I was a foreigner and could hardly speak the language. They wanted to win the campaign, they wanted action on climate change, on the trains, on mobile phone towers, maybe more than I did -why wouldn’t I trust them with the twitter feed? It was a turning point in the campaign – and when the final vote was counted – with 439 votes– I believe it was the use of social media that made the critical difference and the vote of young adults.

This lesson stayed with me all the time I was an MP – and I continually asked – where are the young people/ what are they saying? What are they doing? What are they thinking? And how can I support them in their issues, in their careers, in their lives? And when I asked them they responded - for example in my final year as a MP over 200 young adults provided valuable input to the Indi survey into the federal budget.

I hope that background sets the scene for the next section – the present: In discussion with the Kerferd Committee about the 2020 Oration, there was strong support for the topic and opportunity to focus on young adults’s perspective on the future. Similar in a way to 2006, we had planned to revisit the kitchen table conversations, but with Covid, it wasn’t possible and we switched to Zoom. I probably should confess that in April this year I had never used zoom, (revisit 2012 and twitter) and am grateful to Jill Briggs from Rutherglen/ Noorong exactly, for mentoring me, the advisory group and project lead Susan Reid. Over 100 people participated in the survey and on line meetings. There is a copy of the project report on the web site and I encourage you to download it after the oration, for now a few highlights.

- The key outcome from the discussions indicates there are young adults in our community who are ready to lead, and to have their knowledge and insights taken seriously.
- There are young adults in Indigo Shire who want to connect with others and take action on issues big and small that are important to them,
- Major issues nominated: health and well being, climate change, the environment, and education
- They love the towns of Indigo Shire and think this is a great place to live and COVID 19 restrictions have been easier to endure in the country – where remote work and study is possible.

- There is a strong pull back to the region for young people who have had to leave for study and or work. Resolving problems such as lack of public transport and unreliable internet would clear some of the barriers to 'returning home'
- Re COVID; they reminded us that it is the young people in our communities who will be living with the consequences of decisions being made now by leaders at every government and community level

Our young adults expressed a strong sense of belonging especially when their families lived in Indigo and they had grown up or gone to school here. However if they went away it was the coming home which was often – not always – but often difficult. Their friends had moved on, and often they had moved on in their jobs, their lives and sense of purpose. It was hard to reconnect. Also for new comers to the Shire they described how it was challenging to find a way into new networks, to meet others with similar interests and to make a meaningful contribution to their community.

To build The Australia We Want – we don't have to start from scratch and its not rocket science; with appreciation to all those who participated in the project, the report outlines many suggestions – some of which I will come to in the final section – but first some stories about what works;

The young adults told us: mentoring, creating meaningful work, making connections, belonging works. Jobs work. Art works. Locally available and relevant education works. Music works. Sports work. Agriculture works. Opportunities for leadership works. They were clear: connections, inclusion and belonging.

There are many examples where leadership & engagement is happening; The deputy mayor of Indigo Shire, Sophie Price, Daisy Ryan on the Kerferd committee, Jacqui Hawkins running as an independent in the last state election and examples of organisations and groups that have systems that support and encourage;

- Murray Arts – meaningful relevant work – and a spot light on Bethany Thornber who lives in Wahgunyah, is an emerging artist and the inaugural curator at Burrja Gallery the only dedicated aboriginal art gallery in the border region - in her voice *"as a young Wiradjuri woman and emerging curator I have valued the opportunity to help grow the gallery and build a platform which gives voice to our local Aboriginal community"*
- The Australian centre for rural entrepreneurship – ACRE – targets programs specifically designed for schools and encourages young people to create a job rather than take a job.
- Kerferd & Quercus committees – as well as appointing young adults to their boards, supported this The Kerferd Oration project and specifically asked young adults for their views and followed up with deeper conversations
- Yackandandah folk festival provides a designated performance space and platform for many young and emerging musicians to build a reputation and an audience
- Northeast local learning network – NELLEN networks and links projects, schools and jobs
- Ovens and Murray Advertiser t- our local voice, tells the stories, and regularly profiles young adults
- Sports -Emma George Sports Scholarship providing financial support to talented athletes
- The rainbow ball was organised and run by LGBTIQ young people and supplied free transport
- Indigo shire council has a dedicated youth worker and strategic plan, they support among many activities the young citizen of the year awards and the youth politics camp.
- It's a matter of great pride to me that many of the local Governments in NE Victoria are attracting young adults onto council

And our Indigo young adults say they want more – more inclusion, more opportunities to connected, and more opportunities to be leaders.

Before I outline my ideas for what to do. Let me answer the obvious question - Why bother ? why bother to do the work, to make the effort, to change the way we do things?

- Because we can,
- Because we should,
- Because our young adults are asking us
- Because they want it
- Because they know things, those of us over 40 don't know

- Because they can use computers, mobile phones, apps, can create code and know about tic tok,
- Because they know about working by distance and zooming is their second language
- Because its in our own best interests,
- Because the consequences of not acting to include young adults as leaders will have significant negative economic and social consequences
- Because its their future

I don't agree with the Prime Minister Mr Morrison when he talks about snapping back – I don't want to go back to how we were before COVID. I want to go forward to a new destination.

As Ghandi said the future depends on what we do, now, today – today we have an opportunity to move forward with care, with clarity, with purpose, with intention.

Imagine if we could make decisions now that would create a community where our young adults truly knew they were wanted, they belonged, their contributions were welcome and encouraged, their creativity and innovation were celebrated and their leadership was supported by mentoring, encouragement and opportunities.

Imagine if the Indigo Shire was known as a place where there are lots of creative, talented, interesting, fun young adults all connected and supporting each other and us – the oldies – in our interests, hobbies and community groups. What a vibe that would create.

Imagine if many more of our young adults chose to live in the Indigo Shire instead of the overcrowded cities because we offered more of what they wanted and needed, particularly in terms of jobs, education, services and opportunities to be involved in taking action on the issues which are important to them such as climate change.

Imagine if the many young adults who came home during COVID 19 lockdown, decided to stay –

Imagine if we had more capable, resourceful, skilled, regional young adults on all our councils, in state government and in federal parliament.

The Australia I want – is one where young people choose to live in regional areas because it is beautiful – they told us this; where there are jobs, educational and recreational opportunities; they told us this; where they belong – they told us this;

During this time of COVID, I believe there are opportunities for all of us as individuals, as a member of a community organisation, as a region, state and nation to reach out and take action to renew our communities and rebuild our economy

What can we do? For me the destination is clear – a prosperous caring Australia alive with opportunities for everyone; where the regions and Indigo Shire's 15 communities are buzzing with jobs, relevant education, and all the necessary services, there's great food locally grown and locally available, entertainment including top notch sports facilities, lots of music and art festivals, opportunities to make a job through innovation and entrepreneurship abound everywhere; vibrant communities who truly care for each other

What would it take to ask our young adults to come home, to say we want them to come with their friends and young families to live in Indigo Shire

What would it take to incorporate this as a principle into our strategic planning ?

What would it take? Intention, resources, commitment, dedication, champions

It will also take physical infrastructure – certainly - Effective public transport, strong internet and mobile phone connectivity, jobs, and social infrastructure – groups and activities that are inclusive, encouraging and open – with clear intention, commitment and resources

What else would it take ?

Us – to ask
Us - to care
Us - to facilitate
Us - to put up our hands
Us - to make the time
Us - to release resources

What to do?

On this journey to the desirable future, and on the assumption that you agree with my proposition that young adults are the key – they can't do it alone. To get to our destination it is going to need all of us to 'buck in' to lend a hand, to turn up, speak up and step up, and for some of us to move over to the passenger seat for a while and encourage a young adult to get behind the wheel.

What to do...

All of us over 40 have lived experience of being a young adult – first piece of advice – pay attention to your own experience – what would you have liked? And look around, notice young adults, your nieces and nephews, your neighbours, acknowledge - say hi, how is COVID impacting on you, your friends -listen for understanding, offer to help - put a hand out, tap on the shoulder;

Become a Mentor – also known as intergenerational weaving...there's much wisdom to be shared

Beechworth's U3A – university of the 3rd age as reported in the O&M Advertiser on 10 July their advice *'encourage and empower, make space for young people to voice their opinions, treat them as equals, value their concerns, and facilitate their involvement in the community – and their message to young adults ' the world is run by those who turn up, we encourage you to turn up and speak up''*

The Kerferd project recommended an Indigo Mentoring Program be established – who might be interested in taking the lead role?

Leadership programs such as the Alpine Valleys Community Leadership Program, encourage and support young adults to apply, thing about a providing a scholarships similar to the Youthrive program that supported Corey-James Jackson, from Beechworth Secondary College last year was awarded the Helen McPherson Smith rural scholarship encourage young adults to apply for the ABC's Trailblazer program (closes 31 July).

What about an Indigo specific leadership program where young adults are able to connect, learn skills, network and be mentored into positions on community committees, hospital boards, and encouraged to stand for local government – call out – elections in October?

What we know works is when organisations become aware: Someone begins to pay attention and asks how many young adults are involved and doing what? and if not why not?

They meet with and talk to young adults about what would work -a strategy –set an ideal target, goal or outcome. Then be ready – there will be grant programs – and philanthropy willing to invest. And finally the reporting – story in local papers and on TV and celebrating.

The Kerferd project recommended the establishment of a kit "Young People in the Lead" for the use of organisations who are looking for ideas on how to increase their engagement with young adults.

Support and encourage young adults to form specific groups and create spaces for groups with special interests to gather - to connect, to network, to be found: Indigo Shire has recently declared a climate emergency – given the strong interest in our young adults in this topic – surely there's an opportunity to work with this cohort on ideas and strategies' There are also opportunities in the arts, in agriculture, in education, in health

And clearly, it's not all one way:

My experience of 2012 – it was the young adults who were #bold #brave and #built a bridge – they tapped me on the shoulder and then they continued to turn up, speak up and step up to leadership roles.

To our young adults we ask for your tolerance and patience, please know that our intentions are honourable but sadly we won't always get it right...and the words of U3A 'the world is run by those who turn up, we encourage you to turn up and speak up'

In conclusion:

COVID has created great disruption and also a great opportunity. COVID can give us that once in a lifetime chance to do leadership differently; We are not powerless, nor are we victims. There will be an end to this particular journey – as you leave today can I ask you to do one thing, begin with a conversation and let's all make a commitment to be open to new ideas, new ways of working, new friendships, a new economy, and a renewed community empowered by the energy of our young adults.

Thankyou!