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Once again thank you Aunty Pat for your welcome to country and Maroochy Barambah for your inspirational song of welcome.

I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past and present and the elders of other communities who may be here today.

Minister Nelson-Carr, special guests, ladies and gentlemen.

We have the opportunity to create the perfect wave for volunteering.

It takes an alignment of wind and tide to create the perfect wave that you see here, and it will take an alignment of political, social and economic forces to create the perfect wave for volunteering.

The question we must ask over the next three days is “are we ready and equipped to take advantage of this unique opportunity”?

Never before have so many Australians been willing to volunteer their time and money to help other Australians. Never before have there been more opportunities for volunteer participation. Never before have we had the alignment of political forces in this country with the potential to support volunteer effort nationally. Never before has the contribution of volunteer effort been so vital to the productivity of this nation and so central to civil society.

We have the people, we have the opportunities, and we have the political environment.

However, unlike a surfer we cannot afford to sit out the back waiting for the alignment of these forces to create the perfect wave for volunteering. We must harness the potential of the social, political and economic circumstances to shape the perfect wave. We must take the lead to ensure this wave not only appears but has the shape and power to carry us for years to come.

With so many potentially positive forces in play why is it that 1 in 5 organisations we surveyed recently reported a decline in volunteer participation? Why is it that the areas of greatest need such as aged care, health, and welfare service cannot attract and retain volunteers to meet their demand? Why are rural communities finding it hard to maintain volunteer support for local sport and recreation and where is the next wave of volunteer workers to support our emergency services?

Australia has a proud culture of volunteering and although we have seen periods of growth in volunteer participation, we have sufficient early warning signs to suggest that urgent action is required to address what we believe is a change in the climate of volunteering.

As with global warming, we are at risk of deluding ourselves that the changes we see are purely cyclical. Irresistible forces influence the change in the climate of volunteering. Forces such as a shift in the way people want to volunteer, the enormous impact of the retirement of the baby boomer generation, the rising

cost of volunteering, and competing demand for time in dual income families.

To address this change in the climate of volunteering we can learn from our friends and colleagues in the environmental movement. For decades they extolled the virtue of environmental values as a fundamental truth yet little heed was paid to their calls. It was only when the consequences of climate change could be predicted in terms of social and economic disruption that decision makers took notice.

So it is with volunteering. For decades we have extolled the virtue of volunteering as a fundamental truth, as part of Australia's cultural DNA.

Unfortunately virtue holds low value in the trading scheme that determines allocation of scarce public resources.

Therefore, like the environmental movement, we must move from a virtue proposition to a value proposition.

We must frame our case in terms of social and economic impacts and develop an urgent and compelling argument that to neglect the signs of change in the climate of volunteering will be at our peril.

This value proposition recognises that volunteering is vital to the economic development of this country. We must have the research and evidence base to demonstrate the cost to government, business and community if the work of volunteers had to be replaced with paid staff.

Similarly we must point to evidence that demonstrates the vital role of volunteering in developing safer and stronger communities and promoting social inclusion.

This proposition should also recognise volunteers as a vital part of our productive workforce. We must be able to present a compelling case that the skilling of volunteers and volunteer managers needs high priority in the Skilling Australia Agenda.

This is a proposition we need to direct not just to government for governments cannot act alone. The future of volunteering in this country lies in a partnership between the community, government and business sectors.

It is essential therefore that, as a profession, volunteer infrastructure is comfortable with the language of politics and business so that we can translate the elusiveness and power of volunteering into a coherent business case that others can relate to and identify with.

I use the word profession deliberately for I believe that professionalising of volunteer infrastructure is imperative if we are to lead and shape the future of volunteering. One of the great challenges for us however is to recognise that volunteering does not work along lines that can be easily understood and controlled in traditional management frameworks and this is what makes it so frustrating for government and business.

So the key challenges we face are to:

- Recognise there is a change in the climate of volunteering

- Develop a strong business case demonstrating the social and economic impact of volunteering; and
- Professionalise volunteer infrastructure to compete in the national market.

I urge you over the next few days to take up these challenges and ensure that the tides of human endeavour and winds of social and political change will produce the perfect wave for volunteering in Australia.
