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ADDRESS TO THE 12TH NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON VOLUNTEERING

RADISSON RESORT ON THE GOLD COAST, QUEENSLAND

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****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY****

Introduction

Thank you to Cary for your kind introduction and for the invitation to close, what has been by all accounts, a vibrant conference.

May I begin by acknowledging the Kombumerri people, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet. I pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and their wisdom, laws and customs.

Welcome to the international guests including today's speakers from New Zealand and Brazil, and those who've travelled from other distant parts.

One of my most favourite things is a set of bookends that my children gave me. One end is a little house bathed in the pale light of dawn. The other is the same little house, captured in the mellow rays of the setting sun.

I was reminded of these bookends when I looked at the structure of your conference. It was opened by Minister Nelson-Carr who outlined the challenges facing volunteering in the 21st Century and provided fascinating detail of the research commissioned by the Queensland government. *The Economic Value of Volunteering*, produced through analysis of the 2006 census data by Professor Ironmonger, makes compelling reading and adds to the breath of knowledge we are building about the importance of volunteering.

In the middle is all of the shared learning that you have engaged in: the presentations, workshops, networking and discussions. It is a very rich agenda.

And here I am, closing the conference, drawing together the threads of the conference, the ideas and the vision that is the new wave of volunteering.

The political landscape has certainly shifted for your sector. The Government wants to encourage, promote and enable new waves of social innovation and, at last, acknowledge the enormous contribution of the non-profit sector and the volunteers that play such an important part in the social and economic dynamism of the nation.

It's very timely that this Conference is occurring during Adult Learners' Week. I understand the invaluable contribution that volunteers make in helping new migrants to build new lives in Australia and I recognize the support provided to second-chance learners boosting skills and engaging people, who have

experienced barriers to other educational opportunities. I know too, the learning that you are all involved in, dealing with the compliance, quality improvement and reporting requirements that are part and parcel of working or managing a community organisation.

Over the past 18 months I have visited many wonderful voluntary organisations that are changing lives and building inclusion; organisations such as Home Start, that wonderful home-visiting program that supports families with young children, building their confidence and ability to cope in often very difficult circumstances.

And organisations like Conservation Volunteers Australia, who develops young people's skills, confidence and opportunities through its many environmental projects.

According to the ABS, 5.2 million people over the age of 18 volunteered in Australia 2006, representing 35% of Australia's population. Volunteers dedicated 713 million hours of volunteering in that year alone. This contribution is a reflection of the Australian spirit, defined by mateship, fairness and being ready to lend a hand.

We know that its part of the national psyche, that where disadvantage, poverty and exclusion divide communities, volunteers unite communities.

Their role in the Social Inclusion agenda is paramount. I've been asked today to describe for you how and why this is so.

Well, of course volunteers provide a rich resource for organisations and governments. We often think of volunteers only in the community or non-profit sector – that’s simply not so. When I took on this portfolio responsibility, I asked a seemingly straight forward question of the public service: what departments use volunteers, and what departments have programs that fund volunteers. Let me tell you, I’m still finding more.

We use volunteer interpreters and advocates to support work in the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, family courts and relationship centres. We use volunteer counsellors in the emergency services and to support drought relief workers. We use volunteers as tourist guides, facilitators in land care and natural resource management projects. The list goes on. Government could not do its own business without the pool of volunteers it carefully cultivates and sustains.

And of course volunteers have always been integral to the community sector. Before lots of projects and services ever get to be funded, there is a long history of voluntary effort.

Interestingly, yesterday I had a long conversation about this with Noel Pearson, who is doing such good work to build economic sustainability for the indigenous communities in the Cape. He told me that reciprocity is an important cultural feature that needs to continually be fostered in his communities because as a principle, it is almost lost. Everyone expects to find a way to get paid for the effort they put into community building – that way – the social glue

is no one's responsibility. Yet, it is a critical ingredient for building the skills and knowledge of communities – to learn the nimble art of planning, negotiating, compromising, improvising – the things we all need to do in our local community organisations – are not skills that necessarily come naturally after a long period of welfare dependence or social isolation. And if we don't have those skills and use them, we lose the capacity to innovate, to be responsive, to recognise when circumstances mean we have to change the way we do things.

So, these are the kinds of skills that we talk about fostering, when we talk about social inclusion. These are the skills that allow people to participate, to make choices, to connect with other people in a way that is not a 'servant-master' relationship. Volunteering means that you can work as an equal on a project, alongside the local bank manager, planting trees, and no one treats you any differently.

These are the experiences that allow people to grow in confidence, to build social networks, to become involved, to be seen and valued in their communities. These are the skills that mean you are able to find help when you need it, have the confidence to call a hotline, and to believe that your opinion is worth expressing, and worth being listened to.

And we all know that volunteering is beneficial not only to the people volunteers reach out to, but to those who choose to volunteer – the research tells us there are significant public health benefits for them as well.

Of course we not only recognise the social impact of volunteering, but the enormous economic contribution, estimated to be \$42 billion per annum to our national economy. Volunteers are so crucial to the non-profit sector. For every paid staff member there are six volunteers. And these figures don't include the contribution of informal volunteering that so many in the community rely on.

A National Strategy for Volunteering

I have been very interested to hear from the conference and from my discussions with the sector about the extent to which volunteering activity is changing. Just last week I had an email from someone who wanted to be a virtual volunteer – this is a new dimension of the traditional concept of volunteering isn't it. Today, volunteering goes far beyond the typical stereotypes and now includes corporate volunteering, participation in social ventures and enterprises, the sharing of professional skills with non-profit organisations and boards, advocacy and self-help groups.

There are also many challenges in attracting and retaining volunteers in this hectic modern world. While the numbers of people volunteering has increased, the average medium hours of voluntary work is decreasing. While the numbers of volunteers continue to grow, the rate of growth has declined since 2000. And some communities are finding it harder to retain and attract volunteers than others.

It's time to harness our generosity of spirit, make it easier for people to give time and talent and foster new forms of volunteering to meet rising challenges that are facing our community.

Well we certainly think so. For the first time, we have created this fantastic portfolio with special responsibility for Social Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector. In this role I support both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister in developing and implementing our social inclusion agenda – I think I have the best job in the Government.

In this role I am currently working on developing a national strategy to find ways the Government can help volunteering to flourish. I want this to be a central tenet in our Social Inclusion agenda and in our commitment to develop a fruitful and respectful relationship with the non-profit sector.

I'm convinced that we need a strong non-profit sector to partner with us to help us meet both current and emerging policy priorities. Our social inclusion agenda is focused on solving some very complex, intractable and difficult problems (the academics would call them wicked problems – and they certainly are wicked) as well as building a culture of active participation which, as you and I know, underpins community wellbeing.

To me, it is essential that those who want to volunteer can do so readily.

2011 will be an important year for volunteering. It will mark the 10th anniversary of the United Nations International Year of Volunteers held in 2001, which highlighted the achievements of volunteers worldwide.

The UN recognises volunteers are and must continue to be a crucial renewable resource throughout the world, building sustainable and connected communities. The UN has asked governments of the world to come up with fresh ideas and proposals to celebrate this occasion. So, I'm throwing that challenge to you too.

I congratulate all of you in way you reach out to Australians every day, but also ask all of you to continue to innovate and use the opportunity of the 10th anniversary to bring forward fresh ideas about how we can better celebrate and support volunteering.

In the coming months I will be continuing this conversation with you about what I see are the opportunities to develop a national vision and commitment to volunteering, in advance of 2011.

What might be some of the key opportunities as part of this strategy?

To start, I think they include:

- A better understanding of the voluntary contribution to Australia, to inform our strategy and match supply and demand for volunteers;

- A commitment to supporting volunteers as part of action to tackle poverty and disadvantage;
- A desire to use innovative ways to promote volunteering and help the business sector to make a contribution;
- A commitment to building the skills and capacity of volunteers, which might include achieving national consistency in training, accreditation and standards;
- An abiding commitment to reducing the red tape that is strangling voluntary organisations;
- Making it easier for people to volunteer;
- A mechanism within government to better coordinate Government spending in volunteering; and
- A renewed effort to motivate and enthuse young people, and those who would normally see themselves as the recipients of volunteer effort, to volunteer themselves, to build a culture of community engagement in Australia, transforming lives and communities.

Current agenda

As part of our Social Inclusion agenda, work is already underway to build the capacity of volunteers.

Better understanding the sector

The Government recognises the role of the non-profit sector in the 'social economy' and wants to understand its contribution to the national economy, as well as our communities.

But the most comprehensive data about the non-profit sector dates from 2001. Better information about the sector will help all of us to understand the contribution of volunteers and will inform our thinking about broader policy for the sector.

That is why we have commissioned the Productivity Commission to construct a new tool to measure the contribution of the non-profit sector to communities and the economy, including the value of volunteers. The Commission has started developing the terms of reference for this new tool.

This is also why I am keen to hear more about the outcomes of Tuesday's Research Symposium, the second held in Australia, and sponsored by the Australian Government.

Australia has also made a commitment to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the John Hopkins Centre for Civil Society Studies on ILO to provide support for a manual on the measurement of volunteer work through official labour force. This project continues to be very important as we consider the opportunities that volunteering provides for creating pathways to sustainable employment.

Making it easier to volunteer

We are also very mindful of the significant costs that deter volunteers; the costs of involving yourself in the community, the costs involved in participating, such as uniforms, petrol and equipment.

That's why the Government has refined the Volunteer Grants Program. We have committed \$64 million over the next 3 years to this program to allow community organisations to apply for funding to reimburse their volunteers for fuel and other incidental costs.

We've made it easier for organisations to access this support, and made it easier to account for the funds received.

Community organisations will also be able to apply for funds to buy small equipment such as sporting items that support their existing community organisations and encourage greater participation in volunteering.

Applications for this program are now open. The advertisements will be in the national press this weekend and I encourage you all to apply.

But we all know that it's not just the costs of volunteering that can be a barrier to voluntary organisations getting on with their core business of building communities.

So, we're getting very serious as a government about addressing the burden of regulation and red tape you are experiencing.

Sometimes it's seems that we're cracking a nut with a sledgehammer – surely it's time for the compliance regime to match the level of risk such voluntary activity represents?

The last decade or so has meant that government has increasingly used competitive tendering, contractual arrangements and purchaser-provider relationships as the way in which it has funded services. For many this has meant that voluntary management committees and boards have had to develop new skills to manage increasingly complex relationships with Government.

And for organisations that apply for government funding, they often find themselves deep in complicated application forms, contracts and conditions. Many organisations that rely on volunteer management committees just give up when the process is too draining on their minimal resources - resources which could be going into providing services into communities where they are needed most.

We think that the time is right to think about how the sector can have a better regulatory regime. We think that regulation of the sector needs to take into account the nature, scope and operations of such organisations. We think the regulation of these organisations should be transparent, clear and consistent across jurisdictions.

This does not mean less accountability and transparency. What it does mean is a simpler process that allows services being delivered with government funds to put clients at the centre of their service delivery and focus on outcomes, rather than outputs.

A good example of this is the frustration I know that many organisations experience trying to get child protection checks

done. Police checks are increasingly being used to help screen volunteers to ensure their suitability for volunteer roles. We all acknowledge that these checks have an important role to play in protecting the community, but we are also aware that volunteers and community organisations have concerns about the costs of these checks, the differences in the checks between states, the lack of portability and the amount of work involved in administering these checks. Surely there's a simpler way of dealing with this important issue?

Well, this is something we're working on - we've canvassed some of these pressure points with our State and Territory colleagues.

We believe that a national volunteering policy framework provides opportunities for consistency, accreditation and skills transfer across the States for volunteers, which could boost the numbers of our 'grey nomads' volunteering in regional communities.

In coming months we will be talking more with the sector and the State and Territory Governments about some of these challenges and how we can resolve these issues as part of our commitment to constructive Commonwealth/State relations.

Promoting and recruiting volunteers

The Queensland government response emphasises the need to be innovative and proactive in promoting and recruiting volunteers. This is very true - we have to be techno-savvy, we have to be aware that volunteering isn't just a one way street; we need to

acknowledge that, like my constituent who wants to ‘virtually volunteer’, there are many others who can use this path to volunteering – using their IT skills to connect in the virtual social networks that are part of the new wave of technological interaction.

To continue the work of promotion of volunteering, I am pleased to announce today an additional \$64,000 for Volunteering Australia to continue providing the customer support service for *GoVolunteer*, Australia’s premier website for the placement of volunteers.

This is a fantastic website for volunteering opportunities across Australia. It has a very high hit rate, and those who are using it are spread across the non-profit sector, individuals and business.

Matching volunteers with non-profit organisations this way, through the *GoVolunteer* website, is fast and efficient. It reduces the time and cost of recruiting volunteers and makes it easier for more Australians to volunteer to make a difference in their local communities.

Once a bit of a techno-sceptic, I am now converted. I’ve watched as 1,500 organisations are now advertising on the website – an increase of more than 20 per cent in the last 12 months. The visitor numbers have also been increasing, with almost 300,000 visitors accessing the website in the last 12 months. The Government is pleased to help Volunteering Australia to continue to provide this service.

The challenge for us all is to keep finding new and ways to promote volunteering, and to share the learning opportunities. This is of special interest to corporate partners who are keen to find meaningful opportunities for employees to contribute to their community, through corporate volunteering programs.

Let's not waste the opportunity this presents to us all and ensure those efforts are not only well-intentioned, but well-targeted to meet genuine community need.

We recognise the several hundred thousand regular emergency volunteers that staff our emergency services – emergency services, fire fighters, maritime rescue and many more. We recognise their enormous contribution, but also the need to continue to attract and retain emergency volunteers.

The Emergency Management Australia in the Attorney-General's Department is working on developing new ways to attract, support and retain emergency service volunteers. We know that so much effort goes into training these specialist volunteers – the last thing we want to do is lose those skills because people aren't feeling supported to use them!

One way we want to focus on training and re-training volunteers is through the Volunteer Management Program. I was glad to be able to announce the continued funding of this program when I launched National Volunteer week in Adelaide. The Federal Government has committed \$16.7 million over the next four years

to continue to support volunteers and the non-profit sector under the Volunteer Management Program.

This program currently supports 50 Volunteer Resource Centres across Australia and provides funding for the National Volunteer Skills Centre. I know this is important funding for your organisations – it is what makes you able to recruit, train and support your volunteers, and each year the program assists 20,000 people to find volunteering placements.

A National Compact

Underpinning all of this work is our commitment to develop a new and stronger relationship with the non-profit sector, based on partnership and respect.

I'm pleased to advise that working with Volunteering Australia, we are providing funding for a national forum to be held in December for centres that receive funding under the Volunteer Management Program.

I look forward to meeting with the forum representatives to continue our discussion about volunteering and to discuss our interest in developing a National Compact with the non-profit sector.

The Commonwealth Government sees an Australian Compact as an important vehicle for advancing its Social Inclusion Agenda,

because a strengthened non-profit sector plays a vital role in providing opportunities for social cohesion, not only through its services, but also through advice to Government on policy and programs.

We think that a Compact is a very respectful way of providing a platform for discussion and agreement between the Government and the sector on a range of issues. These issues could extend to the way in which volunteers are trained and resourced, as well as more complex strategies around how to give impetus to some critical social inclusion priorities, for example, early childhood learning and parenting support.

I am very determined to make the Compact process work. At present, ACOSS is running initial consultations with the non-profit sector to discuss how a National Compact would be useful in the Australian context.

Last week I appointed an External Reference Group co-chaired by David Crosbie, CEO, Mental Health Council of Australia and Evan Lewis, Group Manager, Mental health and Autism Group in FaHCSIA. There are ten other members of this group who represent the best in academic, for profit and the non-profit knowledge. I have asked the group to advise me on the outcomes of the early consultation process for the Compact and what should be our key priorities for action.

I am delighted that the Chief Executive Officer of Volunteering Queensland, Di Morgan, has accepted my invitation to join the

reference group. Di's extensive knowledge and experience in volunteering will be invaluable on the reference group and will ensure the Compact captures the needs of the volunteering sector.

Conclusion

I believe there are huge opportunities and merits in giving volunteering the national focus it deserves.

Increasing participation, not only through work, but through civic, cultural and voluntary effort is of great significance to build inclusive communities.

An important first step is the Rudd Government's willingness to build a new relationship with the voluntary sector and remove the barriers preventing non-profit sector organisations from evolving to make an even more significant contribution to our community.

While it requires political will to make it happen, it depends on your organisations not giving up on your efforts to contribute to an inclusive and sustainable Australia.

It also requires you to think about your own practices and what you are doing in your own space to be inclusive. Going back to my earlier thoughts about how powerful it is to volunteer and be included on your own terms - this is the challenge I present you all today – to be inclusive in your practices. To take the risks – to use the human capital and resources that are within your service

provision – often the best volunteers and mentors are those who have made the longest journeys and can walk many miles in your clients' shoes.

Volunteers and their organisations are already responding to disadvantage, exclusion and providing the social glue to our communities in profound ways. I congratulate and thank you for your efforts, your innovation and your inspiration.

I congratulate you on your conference and I look forward to generating a 'new wave' of volunteering with you as we build a more inclusive, united and fairer Australia.

Thank you.