

Sandy Hollway Launches International Year of Volunteers 2001 in NSW

Speech by Sandy Hollway at the launch of the International Year of Volunteers dinner. Convention Centre, Darling Harbour, 4th December 2000.

I would like to welcome you all to the launch of the International Year of Volunteers 2001 in NSW.

As recently appointed Chair of the NSW Advisory Committee for the International Year of Volunteers which was recently established by the Premier of NSW, Mr Bob Carr, and as Volunteering NSW Board Member, I thank you all for showing your support for IYV by being here tonight.



As someone who is also very conscious of being a newcomer to volunteering, I also want to thank you for your much longer and distinguished service to this great cause and to the Australian community. In talking to you, I know I am talking to the leaders of the cause of volunteering over many years in this State.

And, of course, I thank Marie Fox and her team at Volunteering NSW for their tireless efforts in organising this event.

It seems to me that this is a very interesting time for the cause of volunteering. Three things are, I believe, coming together.

Firstly, as you know, there is a growing body of thought to the effect that the quality of life in our society will increasingly depend on the contribution made by individuals, giving of their time and relating productively to one another.

The notions of civil society, social capital and so on are finding their way out of the theoretical literature and into the behaviour of governments, community organisations and even private companies. Volunteering has been given higher and more explicit prominence as a policy imperative by the New South Wales government, for example, than before. We see similar trends in comparable countries overseas.

Second, we have the International Year of Volunteers, declared by the United Nations for 2001. This will provide an opportunity for sharper focus, and for action, on volunteering domestically in New South Wales and Australia. A number of initiatives are being developed by both the government and community groups.

And third, It is fortuitous that IYV occurs within a matter of months after the Olympic and Paralympic Games because a rare opportunity exists to use the momentum from the Games to focus the spotlight on volunteering and volunteers - on active citizenship - even more.

Make no mistake, the volunteers were absolutely vital to the delivery of the Best Games Ever, both the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

They were vital operationally. The sheer size and complexity of the project, the biggest peacetime project on earth required that everybody pull together to get the job done. The statistics give some indication. Some 50,000 volunteers. A workforce of around 130,000. 200 participating countries. 200,000 people accredited. 60,000 meals a day at the Athletes' Village alone. 15,000 athletes and officials. Half a million people a day for many days in a row at Sydney Olympic Park. 28 sports to run simultaneously. Supply and resupply of venues every day between midnight and 6a.m., a huge logistical achievement. An extraordinary 12 billion hits on the internet site. An International Broadcast Centre which was the biggest television production facility in the world. Three billion people watching the Opening Ceremony.

Australia achieved a magnificent success, and we have been acclaimed for it throughout the world. I have examined the press reporting from around the world during the Games period and it is virtually universally complimentary. Certainly the Greek press criticised the Opening Ceremony for not being Greek enough - we will just have to learn to live with that.

None of this could have been achieved without the volunteers. And financially, of course, they were vital too. For the sake of argument, assume payment of \$1,000 per head had we needed to hire paid staff for all these positions. The arithmetic is pretty simple. We would have been looking at a cost of \$50 million. And this is on the low side.

But the volunteer contribution was not only operational and financial. The volunteers became, for the spectators and the visitors from overseas, the ambassadors for the Games, the face of the Games. And they did it with a wonderful Australian friendliness and humour. I well remember Francois Carrard, effectively the IOC's Chief of Staff, commenting at an IOC meeting with us during the Games that he had visited Central Railway Station and seen the volunteers operating there, and that it was the greatest thing he had ever seen. So much so that he burst into song at the meeting to demonstrate how volunteers were directing the pedestrian traffic. My favourites were the volunteer at Sydney Olympic Park informing the crowds through a loud hailer that people with small children should look out for them because any lost children would be confiscated; and the volunteer directing people to trains from the City to Homebush but informing them that if they wanted to walk they only needed to follow the blue line.

The achievement was all the more because we started from no legacy of management information passed to us from previous Games. For most people it was a first time, one shot effort to put on the Games. In this sense, it has been said that Games organisers are amateurs. Mind you, I take heart from the fact that Noah's Ark was built by amateurs - it was the Titanic that was built by professionals.

We organisers provided the basis for the Games to occur efficiently and well. But it was the public, the community, the athletes and the volunteers who poured the heart and soul and exuberance in to the exercise.

I am convinced that the legacy will be important and enduring - the infrastructure, the economic impact, the business attraction, the showcasing of Australia, the mirror which the Games provided to Australians themselves about our identity and our capabilities, the infusion of pride and national confidence.

One important part of that legacy will be the development of human capital, and especially the impetus for volunteering. In saying this, I repeat that I am acutely conscious of the fact that the Olympics is only the latest demonstration of a remarkable history of volunteering in Australia, that it was this culture which made our task possible, and that we must always acknowledge the people working day in and day out in other causes less prominent than the Games.

The success of the Olympics and Paralympics Volunteering Programs and the fact that 2001 is International Year of Volunteers prompts me to ask the question:

What is the state of health of volunteering in New South Wales and Australia?

The numbers seem somewhat ambiguous. Some data suggests that the people involved in organised volunteering are declining - that is, those working as volunteers through community organisations. On the other hand, informal volunteering appears to be on the increase. In any case, at over 2.5 million according to the 1995 ABS Survey into Voluntary Work, the base is high, and is impressive relative to a population of our size.

It also seems to me to be notable that a number of organisations which have virtually icon status in Australia exist and run to a significant degree on volunteers - the Rural Fire Service, Surf Lifesaving and so on. Australians have a healthy admiration for such national institutions and those who staff them.

Perhaps we take volunteering too often for granted because volunteers themselves are not in search of praise and because volunteering is simply woven into the fabric of Australian life. But it doesn't take much to bring it to attention: as a community we quickly recognise and admire, for example, the role of volunteers in relation to the recent floods in New South Wales.

Volunteering was, of course, brought massively and positively into public prominence by the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Certainly it was a special case. But then again, virtually everything about the Games was unique, including the way they attracted volunteers in such huge numbers, some 47,000 at least depending upon one's definition. Nonetheless the Games experience surely suggests that the underlying potential and disposition to volunteer is very strong in our community.

The Games brought this out more dramatically than perhaps ever before in our peacetime history, but the essential motivating factors were there before - willingness to serve the community, the wish to stand up and be counted when important Australian interests are at stake and when failure is unthinkable, the satisfaction of working with others for a common purpose, the sense of having a place in the bigger scheme of things, the opportunity for work experience and skills acquisition.

That the Olympic experience was not just a "one-off", but points to a healthy general situation for volunteering in Australia, is suggested by the fact that when we described the job we in no way gilded the lily. We did not hide the reality, the boredom, even drudgery that could be involved. Certainly we suggested that the Games were a wonderful event and a great cause, but we worked proactively to dispel any misconception that the work would involve handing Ian Thorpe his towel or giving Cathy Freeman tips on how to run the 400 metres.

We made very clear that volunteers would probably see no sport, indeed would have less of a chance than the average person with tickets and some time off; would often be behind the scenes in crucial but unglamorous jobs; must work a minimum of ten shifts of approximately eight hours each; must organise their own travel to and accommodation in Sydney at their expense; and would receive no recompense beyond food, transport to work on the public system and a uniform. Benefits like tickets to the Opening Ceremony dress rehearsal were not incentives to sign on, but came right near the end as expressions of thanks.

And still over 60,000 people put up their hands and said "Yes - I will do that." So again I make the point that I have to believe we were blessed with a strong pre-existing culture conducive to volunteering.

The Games experience highlights a number of other points important to volunteering in general. These will be discussed at a forum tomorrow - the first of a series of forums organised by the New South Wales Government and Volunteering New South Wales as part of the IYV activities - where the question will be asked what lessons can be learnt about volunteering from the Games. I think I can safely anticipate at least three key lessons.

The first is the importance of aligning people's expectations with the realities. As organisers, we were sensible to be frank and honest up front. Anything else can only lead to volunteer frustration, attrition and operational inefficiency. Having been frank and honest about the job, the 60,000 who applied were serious rather than star struck. We could take almost all of them. Attrition was relatively low.

Second, what an extraordinarily powerful motivating force is recognition. The media and community applause for the volunteers provided a massive positive feedback to them. This in turn fed their confidence and morale, enhanced their performance, reinforced the public adulation and the whole thing snowballed as the Games progressed.

Again, yes of course the situation was unique and the Games were special for the community. But the uniqueness was in the context only. It was not in the fundamental regard of Australians for people who give freely of their time of in how human beings react when they receive recognition and appreciation. The Olympics and Paralympics are only a dramatic demonstration of that.

And third, the Games decisively prove the principle that, in the words of the Head of UN Volunteers, Sharon Capeling-Alakija, who was in Australia recently, volunteering, while cost effective is not free. There is no way that the modern Olympic Games, on the massive scale they have now assumed, could affordably be put on without volunteers. They were operationally vital, and financially vital. But the program worked so well not through luck or exuberance or good intentions. It worked so well because of the huge and painstaking effort we put into recruitment, recognition, training, motivation and team building. The volunteers shone and made us all proud, but to put them in a position to shine took resources, some \$700 per person to feed, uniform and train, not including management time.

And of course nobody more than the volunteers themselves - whether those in the Olympics or any other community project - deserve to be given, and are entitled to expect, good management, clarity about what they are being asked to do, training and support. They are the ones we owe.

I wish to note, too, that the management of our particular project - the Olympic and Paralympic Games - could not have done so well with its volunteers unless we had drawn on the expertise of those who had far greater practical experience. Thus it was very important that we had the sense to establish a Volunteers Advisory Committee and partnerships with Volunteering NSW and many of the volunteer organisations here tonight. Thank you for your invaluable counsel and guidance.

From the outset, all of us on the Committee and in the volunteering community recognised the legacy that could come from the Games - the lessons for successful volunteering generally was part of it, but so too was the chance of bringing more people into the fold. We aim, through Volunteering NSW, to establish a Skills Bank, a data base of people who may want to take their positive Games experience as volunteers into their volunteer roles in society. The Premier is writing to all our Games volunteers about this opportunity.

IYV 2001 will give us the opportunity to celebrate and recognise the contribution of these up to now relatively "unsung heroes", the volunteers who work in our sports clubs, in Landcare groups, in our schools and youth clubs, in our national parks, our museums and art galleries and in many other organisations and groups.

It will give us the opportunity to explore the extent to which the infrastructure that ensures the effective recruitment, training and management of volunteers in NSW is in place and to develop a platform for future action.

Many of you participated in workshops and forums to prepare for IYV2001 and contributed excellent ideas for celebrating, promoting and resourcing volunteering and provided many suggestions towards that platform for future action. These ideas together with a number of initiatives from both the NSW Government and Volunteering NSW, such as the Premiers Awards for Active Citizenship were tabled this afternoon at a meeting of the NSW Advisory Committee for IYV 2001.

Working together with the government secretariat based in the Premiers Department and the community secretariat in Volunteering NSW we will attempt to bring these plans to fruition.

As Chair of the IYV Advisory Committee, I must say I am impressed by the Committee's membership. It draws on the expertise of people from around the State, from a variety of backgrounds and with a wealth of experience. The Committee will advise the Government and the non-government sector on strategic directions - goals, actions and results - not only for 2001 but beyond. It will also work to promote IYV and volunteering all over NSW.

We will endeavour to ensure for volunteering in NSW a lasting legacy. We do not just want 2001 to be a year of PR exercises which are here one minute and gone the next. We want to use the IYV for some realistic enduring improvements for volunteering. These should build not only on the Olympic experience but more importantly on those traditions of volunteering which helped build our nation and our State.

Traditions that included the exploration of our land and building of our communities, traditions that saw the establishment of organisations such as Rural Fire Service, 100 years old in 2001, Meals on Wheels (established in 1957 here in NSW), The Smith Family (78 years old), the SES (45 years), P & C (79 years old next year) and many many more - including Volunteering NSW itself which in 2001 will be 27 years old.

Volunteering is social capital to the economists. It is part of civil society to the political theorists. It is, to the volunteers themselves, personal fulfilment and a philosophy. To quote the title of a forthcoming book being put together by the Games volunteers themselves "Living is Giving". That so many of our fellow Australians take this view and give freely of their time in so many courses to make our society so much better a place, is something for which we should all be very grateful, as indeed we should be very grateful to all of you for your support.

ENDS.