



29th April 2012

Letter to Saturday Extra with Geraldine Doogue
Broadcast on ABC Radio National, Saturday 5th May 2012

Dear Geraldine

Your interview with Bob Forrester, the President and CEO of the Newman's Own Foundation, was insightful listening into both the strong culture of philanthropy that is deeply embedded into life in America and the evolution of not-for-profit organisations there.

While Australians are generous donors - especially for emergency appeals as a result of floods, bushfires and cyclones - and quite a number of our most high profile families are known as significant benefactors, the truth is we don't give enough on an ongoing basis through planned giving.

But more than that there is a sizeable gap within the philanthropic sector in terms of sourcing seed funding for new ventures.

Ten years ago I founded Australia's annual celebration of community, Neighbour Day, in response to the lonely death of an elderly Melbourne woman who was finally discovered two years after she had passed away in her home. What began as my Letter to the Editor of The Age encouraging Australians to check up on elderly and vulnerable neighbours, has evolved organically into something bigger.

On the last Sunday in March every year communities across the country now hold street parties, barbecues and other social events; councils/shires, residents associations, tenancy groups and community organisations organise festivals, major events and open days.

All are designed to bring neighbours of all ages together to connect. It's about strengthening communities, building social capital and creating social cohesion while promoting tolerance, respect and understanding. And having a good time while they do it!

Yet what I have personally struggled with is the elusive benefactor or philanthropist to help Neighbour Day evolve. So for ten years I have been the benefactor and philanthropist, investing my savings and private income to keep it alive while building critical links with communities, councils, the media, advertising and design agencies, politicians and other community leaders.

All the time working on Neighbour Day after hours and on weekends, because during the week my time is my employer's. Governments, it seems, are extremely reluctant to help start another not-for-profit for fear of being tied into recurrent funding requests.

I know the not-for-profit sector and how it works from the inside as a former senior executive with Australian Red Cross, British Red Cross and also as a Board Member and volunteer for other charitable organisations. That's given me entree to companies like Qantas, News Community Media and law firm Norton Rose to seek and gain pro-bono support, but it doesn't provide the cash to strategically grow the idea.

The issue that the Stokes, Myer, Grollo, Forrest, Fairfax, Holmes a Court, Lowy and Rinehart families, and others, face are the constant and relentless letters pleading for help. Such is the volume that some now have to employ a person simply to gently decline requests for financial assistance. As do philanthropic funds who are prevented by their own governance structures from transacting with bodies other than registered charities and associations with deductible gift recipient status.

So from my perspective what Australia really needs is the equivalent of a national not-for-profit clearing house to give advice to people with ideas, to help them discover whether what they are proposing could be sustainable, to direct them through the process of putting governance structures to the concept, pointing them towards potential funding sources and them mentoring them through the early phase.

Some of this will be made more easy once the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission comes into existence later in the year, and when there are clear national standards rather than complicated, difficult, onerous (and sometimes conflicting) state and territory regulations to navigate.

However at the end of the day what's needed is money, and sourcing that money is a job in itself.

Thanks again for yet another thoughtful Saturday morning discussion.

Andrew Heslop
Founder & CEO, Neighbour Day

Australia Day Ambassador
Champion for the National Broadband Network
Champion for the National Compact
Outreach Partner - Office for the Not-for-Profit Sector, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
Ambassador for Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution Day