

In *It's the community, stupid!*, Colin Ball has provided us with a passionate, committed conversation about the common good. Building on his own wealth of experience, Ball takes us for a practical and contextual trip through language, history, the roles of various actors in society, education, and prescriptions for change.

Book Review by Phil Saunders

15

The Voluntary/Community Sector Is..?

At a time of emphasis on economic business self interest and the bottom line, Ball reminds us that the voluntary/community sector is not in the business of business but in the business of community. It is different: no apologies. In reminding us of the importance of voluntary/community organisations, of their place historically, of their importance, he urges them to stand up for themselves, to shout their strengths, to build on and protect their strengths.

Ball points to two distinct groups of organisations: the large institutionalised voluntary organisation (IVO) with large staff, and the much smaller community organisations (CO) very much reliant on the efforts of a few dedicated unpaid people.

Whilst Ball challenges IVOs as 'new colonialists', the challenge for all organisations, large and small, is to ask how they measure up against a template of being voluntary, independent, not for profit and not self serving: are they becoming too inward looking, as innovative as they are capable of being; too institutionalised; too preoccupied with going along with funding conditionalities; losing sight of true values?

A Balancing Act

There is, says Ball, a balancing act between the common good and individualism, with people and communities as purposeful actors in achieving greater human security. Society's three main actors, government, private enterprise and civil society, need balance to maintain competitiveness, to be cohesive, to be caring. For people, the balance is in preparing for action, be it individual, collective or institutional, determined by internal and external factors and by choice about what to do and how to go about it.

Making the Changes

Ball's concern is that the understanding of the proper role voluntary/community organisations in society should fulfil has been conspicuous by its absence. Community mindedness is not a nice comfortable luxury but an essential, locally and globally; a foundation. He calls for globalisation Mark 2, a global marketplace for commerce and a meeting place; and for a 'Mark 2' social contract between state, citizen and community. Ball calls for the government to foster cooperation, interdependence and related community values and 'common good' purposes, not as an alternative to competitive, self interested and individualistic values and behaviours but as a counter-balance to them. He wants education to be about knowledge, skills and essential personal qualities in an appropriate learning culture where people's personal qualities, attributes and attitudes they need in a changing world are developed.

The word 'charity' should be removed from the lexicon because of what it represents. The emphasis should be on 'third sector functions' rather than 'charitable purposes'. The voluntary/community organisations are challenged to see their functions in a spectrum from care and welfare through to change and development, including service delivery; mobilising, building, creating and using resources; research, innovation and enterprise; human resource development; public information, education and advocacy.

Government and business need to support community originality and innovation; to give power and trust to community and their organisations. A new body, the Australian Commission for the Third Sector, should be set up to go beyond the restrictive legal and regulatory role of the Office for the Non-Profit Sector to one that also includes assistance, promotion and support.

Much of this common sense approach will be familiar. It is, however, a thoughtful, jam-packed, exceptionally readable package. At a time when many of us are, frankly, tired and worn down by years of increasing demands at the coalface and the ever changing games of the funding bodies, Ball's book provides us with a little something extra to help us face another day, as he says, to fix the character of the times.

Ball is clear—this is but a beginning. He has opened his website for further comment. Since the SACOSS 2010 Conference, this is the book we have been waiting for. Thank you, Colin.

It's the community, stupid! available through www.colinball.com.au

\$30 includes P&P

