

Building an environment for an ageing society: Physical and social planning

**Address given by Janet Wood, President, Council on the Ageing Victoria
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Re-doing Ageing: Yes we can!

A well-known radio host used the recently announced ABS data on life expectancy to ask his listeners to ring in with their response to the phrase 'I feel old when...' It was all very light hearted and predictable. It would have seemed curmudgeonly to ring in and protest that this was ageism... but it was.

We are not yet used to the idea of ageing as a really positive thing. Probably we are over the worst of talk of a crisis of titanic proportions, tsunamis of elderly, but we struggle to erase the negative colouring from words such as 'old' and 'ageing'.

The 'old' have always been among us, but never in such numbers and never living, in numbers, for such a long time. Demographers have never had it so good. So many reports and research papers and economic forecasts begin with statistics about ageing. This is not surprising. This is a new world for demographic explorers.

For all except this tip end of human history, the majority of people who survived infancy died before the age of 60. The Greek ideal was the beautiful youth. The Romans did not organize senior citizens clubs.

The English experienced even long-lived monarchs as a bit of a nuisance. Edward III, a perfect king until about the age of 45, outlived his wife, most of his children, his beloved Order of the Garter friends and his reputation by about 20 years. The first great Elizabeth ditto, and one could hazard a guess that the downfall of the British monarchy might well be the longevity of the present Elizabeth.

The aforementioned report from the ABS, as per the Age newspaper, tells us that 'a boy born in Australia today can expect to celebrate his 79th birthday and a girl her 83rd.' Then comes this cheerful news, 'however, this longer than ever lifespan is also more likely to end in Alzheimer's disease.' Perhaps that's what ailed King Lear. "I fear I am not in perfect mind."

The point of this is that, from a jokey radio talk show to the high point of English literature and many bits in between, ageing and old age are seen as negative.

Today we are the inheritors of and contributors to this same culture. It makes having positive conversations around ageing and positive policies and practices damned difficult. It is part of our social and cultural topography. Old age is a treacherous hillock – climb it and then it's downhill all the way.

I specifically want to talk today about the place of seniors' organizations in the building, shaping, of a healthy and positive environment in a time when people live long lives. But let's not forget the burden of culture and history which still weigh on our views on 'getting old'. We have a miserly vocabulary to describe ageing and we have a multitude of images of the horrors of that process.

Why an interest in seniors' organizations? If older people are to have their opinions taken seriously, then it is unlikely that a process of consultation on an individual basis can happen or would result in much more than a series of anecdotes. Some forms and degrees of organization are essential if older people are to be more than curious subjects of study.

Seniors' organizations are, of course, varied. They are largely the product of the rush to organize into groups which characterized the middle of last century. I am not sure that any Australian organizations whose membership or focus is of older people pre-date World War II.

The three great catastrophes of the first half of that century changed the social politics of our society. War, depression, war – there had to be better ways to live. The investment by thousands of ordinary people of their time, skills and money into forming organizations which would improve the well-being of the community is a highlight of the latter half of the 20th century.

In this new century, there are some questions as to whether they can maintain their shape and their importance. Much has been achieved. Governments, state and federal, pre-empt some of the need for protest and action by having social welfare, social reform and continuing improvement on their agendas.

There are new industries, like that of residential aged care, new professions, such as gerontologists. There are Seniors Cards and concessions. The newly old might well wonder whether specialist seniors organizations need to deliver more than reduced travel insurance and lists of age-friendly merchants.

The current batch of seniors orgs include the Senior Citizens clubs, few of them now robust enough to last for more than a few more years in their present form. Then there is the U3A type, emphasizing the capacity of people to learn at any age, to be curious at any age. The third age is not Erik Erikson's stage of relinquishing but of continuity. There is Probus, with its promise of no minute taking, no fund raising and no plates, men's sheds, sporting associations for veterans. There are those which are not specifically seniors' organizations but

whose activities are relevant to seniors. I think of the Carers' Association and Alzheimers and others associated with matters medical.

My organization of choice is Council on the Ageing, COTA. Its stated vision is to the formation of a just, equitable and humane society in which older people are able to age with dignity and purpose. Its stated mission is to mobilize older people and those who work with them to age well in a just society. This suggests that while we are on the way to this just society, we have not yet arrived. If you will forgive me the use of a theological term, there is a certain eschatological flavour about COTA's vision.

Its emphasis, honed over 55 years, is on active participation of older people in decisions which effect their lives. So words such as participation and consultation are significant in COTA's vocabulary. A lesson only slowly and painfully learned over the past thirty years is that those who are the subjects of policy have a right to participate in its authorship.

Having a place at the policy and planning table is not just a matter of wanting an invitation to the party. We do believe that the outcomes will be different and better if older people are consulted. People who use a service are likely to know something of the effectiveness of that service. Patricia Reeve, senior policy officer with COTA, has a great illustration for this. She reminds us that in bread making, the first ingredient is the yeast. It is the essential ingredient if the loaf is to rise. The subjects of policy and programmes need to be engaged from the beginning.

However, it is very hard work to ensure that government policy and programmes which flow from such begin with consultation of and participation by older people. I am not addressing government shortfalls here so much as examining the issues for seniors organizations in pressing for all things bright and beautiful for seniors.

- Voluntary organizations are just that. They ebb and flow depending on funding, on leadership, on perceived relevance of their constituency. A feature of the current situation is that people in their 60s, the new old, are often too engaged elsewhere to make membership a priority. And even when some really splendid new recruits come on board, they will need three months off here and another there because they travel.
- Some people who have already become recognized as leaders are most reluctant to identify themselves with seniors causes and organizations. They are not unsympathetic but they will tell you that it would make them less effective across a wider range of causes to take up that of older people.

- The range of policies emanating from three layers of government makes exhausting demands on voluntary organizations. An annual sorting out of COTA's priorities might place, for example, affordable and accessible housing at the top of the list but along comes a surge of interest in pensions. Shifting gear to respond to a new issue takes some snappy maneuvering and resources.
- We cannot work with, and be known by, only one Minister, or one department. Issues of relevance to seniors cover health, community development, infrastructure, transport, the law, employment. How do we adequately resource ourselves to give advice on all these topics?
- Then there is the matter of whether we or any organization can claim to be speaking for seniors. COTA claims that it is the voice of seniors but knows that, in fact, it is channeling a great cacophony of individual voices into one so that we can enter into conversations with policy thinkers, planners and makers. It seems almost trite to make the observation that the needs and hopes of a 60 year old are not those of the 90 year old. It is too trite to observe that people are increasingly diverse and individual as they age. As Tennyson has his Ulysses say, 'I am a part of all that I have met.' Older people have experienced more; each experience marks us in ways different from others.
- While I did say I did not intend to harp on any shortcomings of those in the political scene, there is the fact that governments can forget that older people are around. Take one of the Labor Party's major planks in its platform for the 2007 election, social inclusion. In many ways this is a fine statement. I have no quarrel for anything that is in the policy. It is what it omits which is sadly interesting. There is no reference to the social exclusion/inclusion of older people.
- Again with the Victorian government's Growing Victoria Together, 2000-2010. This is a worthy document to be applauded for what is in it, its identification of important issues and priorities for action for this decade. Unfortunately age is absent from the most recent progress report.
- Most seniors organizations are not single issue bodies. There can, of course, be groups and coalitions formed for an immediate cause, such as the Fair Go for Pensioners. Come next February, when the Harmer Review reports, it will assess its need to remain as a protest group. Another that comes to mind is the Housing for the Aged Action Group, a feisty band of activists and advocates. For the rest, it is a mixture of advocacy, policy development, membership promotion and projects and programmes.

So what re-doing needs to be done? What are some of the strategies and tactics which will shift the balance towards never doing it only for us but always with us?

One is to keep in mind that there are models already developed for participation and consultation, particularly in the area of women's issues. There also are those developed for indigenous matters, less successful in their implementation. Eventually, it needs to become second nature to consult the primary subjects of policy and planning right from the beginning.

A second element is that of partnerships. What ought not to be surprising is that an issue can arise from a number of points almost at the same time. Take the matter of affordable and accessible housing. This is a very large matter. COTA is not an expert on housing in general; it *is* experienced in issues around housing for older people. It knows of the stresses for older people in rented accommodation and seniors with disabilities in unsuitable housing. It makes its contribution by joining with other relevant advocacy bodies to make sure that issues around housing for seniors make it into the discussion and decisions on housing in a wider context. It holds forums to bring together people concerned about housing. Through its information telephone service, Seniors Information Victoria, it can add real stories of real people to the discussion.

A third element is that of evidence-based research. COTA, or any other seniors organization for that matter, is unlikely in the foreseeable future to have the range of research capacity which would give it the base from which to mount its own campaigns without reference to others. Sensibly it uses the strengths of research from such as MonRAS to strengthen its own position. However, it does have the right to claim that it consults. It does its research with older people. Listening to older people, collecting anecdotes, compiling case studies, these contribute to a seniors organization's credibility.

Insisting on the inclusion of older people in the decision-making which is relevant to them is surely part of the necessary support for mantras around 'successful ageing', 'maintaining the dignity of older people', 'respecting choices' and promoting independence.

Using the resources of seniors organizations to inform policy development is a crucial element in enabling healthy ageing.

Can I here insert a note of warning, to researchers, policy makers and to seniors organizations. There's a bit of Lord Kitchener around and about. Your country needs you, the over 65s, to be healthy and positive, to age well. Let's pull back from setting an examination in Healthy Ageing 101 with a fail; mark for those who fail to lift weights or walk the required 10,000 steps per day

Healthy ageing policies and programmes are not the social equivalent of cosmetic surgery. There are aspects of accumulating birthdays which are faced daily by older people themselves and push us back from an unreal expectation that soon the wrinkles will all be smoothed over.

Last week my hairdresser informed the salon that she hated getting older. 'I just hate it', she said with some vehemence. She has chronic osteoporosis. Her job means that she bends over clients' hair, but she can no longer straighten herself up.

There is some evidence that while we are and will live longer, we will also live with disabilities for longer. Chronic ailments won't kill us, but they will still be chronic.

While we can develop a disability at any age, and lose friends and family at any age, there can be an accumulation of ailments and griefs in the later decades of life.

People can be resilient in the face of the adversities of life. People can adapt to the changing circumstances around them. People can also be crippled by both. We know that a low income, inadequate housing, an insecure environment, inadequate access to health care and discrimination against older people make for negative ageing.

That is why there is a continuing need for organizations which draw the stories of individuals together. This is why there is a continuing need for dedicated seniors organizations to be in the public space, exhorting those who can, to do.

Seniors organizations are an essential part of the business of re-doing ageing. We are agreed that it needs re-doing. The grannies are no longer on the verandah. They have walked out the gate to re-join a community of all ages. Or they will, if we, researchers, policy makers, service deliverers, concerned citizens, older people themselves, determine that we are looking for change.

Yes we can re-do ageing. Yes we can!

Janet Wood
President
Council on the Ageing Victoria