

The Seven Waves of Volunteering in Australia: a brief history

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Towards a
National Strategy
for Volunteering



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The Seven Waves of Volunteering in Australia: a brief history

Melanie Oppenheimer¹ and Sue Regan²

Key Insights

- Volunteering and ‘community giving’ by First Nations people has been a core feature of their everyday life for tens of thousands of years. These long-standing Indigenous forms of volunteering constitute a unique form of social capital in Australian society and deserve full recognition.
- The relationship between governments, civil society organisations and volunteering has been fundamentally shaped by Australia’s past as a penal colony established by the British in 1788. This has shifted over time in response to macro-events (such as wars and climate change) and the ideological orientation of governments. The role of governments in encouraging and supporting volunteering has been consistently ambiguous over time. Greater clarity around the role of all levels of government should be an aspiration of the new National Strategy for Volunteering.
- The ‘Australian way of volunteering’³ continues to evolve but has been shaped over time by a) the ‘moving frontier’⁴ between government and civil society; b) Australia’s distinctive model of federalism; c) our unique geography and climate (think of volunteer surf lifesavers and firefighters); and d) the nature of Australia’s diversity as a country (with First Nations people and many layers of migration.) The new National Strategy needs to be mindful of these longstanding influences on volunteering.
- Significant shifts in volunteering have occurred in response to major crises - natural disasters (for example, bushfires and floods), the two world wars, and in more recent times the COVID-19 pandemic. The innovation and immediacy of the volunteer response in times of crisis has been a remarkable feature of volunteering in Australia and should be nurtured going forward.

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3 This was argued by Melanie Oppenheimer in chapter 2 of *Volunteering: Why we can’t survive without it* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008). The ‘Australian way’ of volunteering draws upon Paul Smyth and Bettina Cass’s 1990s discussion of an ‘Australian way’ that built on Jill Roe’s use of the term to describe the development of Australian public policy in her article ‘The Australian Way’ published in 1998. Smyth and Cass were using it to find a way to describe the ‘subtlety of the middle way which Australians have negotiated between the state and the market’.

4 Beveridge, 1948

- Since colonisation, much volunteering in Australia has been undertaken in 'change-orientated' organisations, from heritage and environmental groups to those addressing specific social welfare needs such as women's refuges and community legal centres. These typically start from voluntary action in response to an identified local need and operate outside of any government oversight. Typically, governments become involved once these organisations are successfully addressing local problems. The new National Strategy needs to pay attention to how change-oriented volunteering is supported in the future.
- Many of the issues and tensions in volunteering in the past are as relevant today, for example: concerns around volunteering being 'misused' in some public policy initiatives (such as mutual obligation requirements for government benefits); the over-regulation of volunteering and how this can stifle innovation and the inclination to volunteer; and fears over volunteering substituting for paid work or volunteers being engaged to replace paid workers. These issues will need to be addressed in the new National Strategy.

Introduction

A new National Strategy for Volunteering provides an opportunity to reimagine the role of volunteering in Australia. We have much to learn from history in embarking on this endeavour. The aim of this paper is to provide a vital yet brief historical overview of volunteering in Australia that will inform and contextualise the new National Strategy. By examining our volunteer history, we can better explain the phenomenon of volunteering generally and provide tools to understand this important aspect of Australian life, both now and into the future.

This paper is framed around seven historical themes or ‘waves’ in chronological succession that make up ‘the Australian way of volunteering’. They are:

1. First Nations
2. Colonial experiments
3. Volunteering for victory – the World Wars
4. The 1970s – challenges & expanding boundaries
5. We are one, but we are many - multicultural influences
6. The 2000s - Becoming visible
7. Challenges of our Age - climate, geography, work.

The paper includes the innovative concept of ‘an Australian way of volunteering’, which encapsulates the following ideas:

- A distinct but evolving relationship (a ‘moving frontier’) between government, civil society organisations and volunteering in Australia.
- Australia’s unique geography and climate.
- Australia’s particular model of federalism.
- The ever-changing diversity and multi-cultural nature of Australia as a country with First Nations and many layers of migration.

Wave one: First Nations

Australia is home to one of the world's oldest surviving cultures in the world, encompassing a remarkable cultural diversity of First Nations people who have lived on this continent upwards of 60,000 years. Volunteering is not an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concept. However, when understood as cultural obligation and reciprocity, different forms of 'community giving' among First Nations people actively embody the principles of volunteering as time freely given for the common good⁵.

Research has found that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, voluntary effort is a key aspect of cultural survival, self-determination and mutual responsibility.⁶ Many extend this kinship support to thousands of self-determined and community-managed agencies and programs across Australia. Policies of self-determination from the late 1960s onwards have required the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on boards, committees, government inquiries and consultative bodies at local, state and national levels.⁷ This extends across a diverse range of issue areas including health, education, arts, sports, youth, tourism, economic development and the criminal justice sector.⁸ Research indicates that, at the start of the 21st century, there were at least 5,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporations across Australia with 30,000 directors who are volunteers.⁹

The first National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1994 found that First Nations people engaged in voluntary work at a higher rate than non-Indigenous Australians (at 26.9 per cent and 19 per cent respectively). The voluntary contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is hugely diverse and extends to cultural tourism, contribution to land management and in a wide range of advisory capacities, and often unrecognised and unacknowledged.¹⁰ The current volunteering ecosystem is largely a Western system that does not recognise that First Nations have engaged in community giving for over 60,000 years. These long-standing Indigenous forms of volunteering constitute a unique form of social capital in Australia and deserve full recognition¹¹. The new National Strategy for Volunteering is an opportunity to begin a proper conversation to recognise the Indigenous history of volunteering in Australia.

5 Volunteering Victoria, 2022

6 Kerr, Savelsberg, Sparrow & Tedmanson, 2001

7 See Rademaker and Anderson, 2022

8 National Volunteer Skills Centre, 2007

9 Jope, 2008

10 Kerr, Savelsberg, Sparrow, & Tedmanson, 2001

11 Al Adawy, 2021

Wave two: Colonial experiments

Many of Australia's volunteer traditions can be traced back to its British origins and, in particular, the colonial settlement of Australia as a penal colony. Volunteering was part and parcel of British political, cultural and philanthropic customs and institutions. The Australian colonies inherited not only British forms of government, law, religion and political structures, but also modes of philanthropy and charity. However, because the first white settlement was originally a state-imposed and state-run gaol, governments provided much of the financial and economic direction, and were relied on to do so. Colonial, state and later national governments played a leading role in the development of the fledgling economy and social infrastructure, alongside religious and other charities such as the Benevolent Society, and this had an impact on voluntary action and volunteering.¹²

Despite the strong role of the state, concepts of self-help and mutual aid also played a central role in the development of fraternal societies, trade unionism, friendly societies, adult education and cooperatives, all of which became key facets of working and middle class culture and volunteerism. British migrants brought the concept of friendly societies to Australia, with the first society established in 1830. Within ten years of British settlement, various types of self-help or trade societies appeared in the Australian colonies, and by the beginning of the twentieth century nearly half Australia's population was connected to a friendly society.¹³

Again, following British models, a wide range of associational voluntary organisations were established during the second half of the nineteenth century and played an integral role in many aspects of Australian life. In sport and leisure, education and politics, Australians came together in the cities and in the bush to form a range of voluntary organisations to enhance their lives and provide mutual support. From the 1880s onwards, volunteers in the emerging social reform and the nascent labour movements worked towards promoting social equality and reform in the areas of workplace reform, women's rights, health and education.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Australia (and New Zealand) developed an international reputation as the social laboratory of the world. The concept of a living wage (embodied in the 1907 Harvester Judgement)¹⁴, compulsory industrial arbitration, a system of government pensions and allowances, female suffrage and other social

12 For a detailed discussion of the early colonial settlement and its problems, see for example: Dickey, 1987; O'Brien, 1988; and Swain, 2017

13 Green & Lawrence, 1984

14 <https://www.fwc.gov.au/about-us/history/waltzing-matilda-and-sunshine-harvester-factory/harvester-case>

reforms, created the framework for an Australian society that upheld notions of fairness and equality (often termed 'colonial socialism').¹⁵ The introduction of pensions and endowments and the development of the philosophy of government responsibility for the social welfare of its people, pushed philanthropy, self-help and the voluntary principle to one side. But if voluntary action was often overshadowed by state bureaucracies and government expansion into social welfare it never disappeared.

Wave three: Volunteering for victory – the World Wars

World War One (1914-1918) witnessed a large increase in civilian volunteering. The conflict saw the establishment of a range of war-related voluntary organisations or patriotic funds, including the establishment of the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society.¹⁶ This organisation became closely involved in all areas of medical and hospital work for the sick and wounded soldier and his dependents, providing medical supplies and volunteer staff, as well as assisting in the convalescence of returned soldiers.

During the Great Depression, Australian volunteers became adept at rallying round sick neighbours, organising money and food collections, visiting and helping those in need in the community. Crisis management and methods of dealing with tragedy and sudden emergencies were commonplace: in mining communities where tragedies often struck; in rural communities where floods, drought and bushfires were constant threats; and in urban communities, where struggle was a constant part of everyday life. During the inter-war period, many diverse voluntary organisations were established by volunteers in response to the needs of specific groups in the Australian community, such as the Country Women's Association, formed in 1922.

World War Two was a high point in Australian volunteering. During the war the diversity of civilian volunteering on the home front was limited only by people's imaginations. Sorting donations and goods, packing parcels for the troops, learning first aid, cooking, and secretarial duties were all undertaken in a voluntary capacity. Wartime voluntary organisations provided recreational activities, accommodation and food for servicemen and women, as well as helping soldiers' dependents and victims of war overseas. Children collected salvage, sold raffle tickets, and performed in concerns. Active citizenship involved patriotism and a sense of duty to one's family, the local community and the nation. Corporate volunteering was also widely practiced during the war, where

15 Examples include the Old Age Pension Schemes introduced in NSW and Victoria in 1900 and 1901 respectively, and in 1908 at the federal level, as well as the Commonwealth government's Maternity Allowance of £5 in 1912.

16 For a general history of wartime patriotic funds in Australia, see Oppenheimer, 2001. For a history of the Australian Red Cross, see Oppenheimer, 2014.

businesses encouraged their employees to undertake wartime volunteering. It was very common for employers to donate the services of their staff towards specific wartime activities, especially for government or large voluntary organisations.

The 'all in' spirit that characterised the war years provided volunteering with a springboard into the post-war period. The community action – the 'we can do it' – mentality provided an impetus for increased civic engagement in a wide range of areas and resulted in a country buzzing with voluntary action. From 1945 onwards, Australia was not a suburban malaise and cultural wasteland as is often suggested but rather a society readjusting to peace and prosperity, a society of renewal, with the next wave of immigrants contributing towards a renaissance of civic engagement.¹⁷

Wave four. The 1970s – challenges & expanding boundaries

The 1970s saw a social revolution in gender equality, Indigenous rights, migration policies, and the development of a counterculture and sexual revolution. It was also a time of high inflation, high unemployment, huge fluctuations in oil prices and political instability. This had significant implications for volunteering in Australia. While some areas of volunteering expanded and thrived, others saw a decline. For the first time, federal governments became involved in funding local voluntary organisations, and the first forays into volunteering research were undertaken to better understand and measure volunteering. Over 30 per cent of voluntary organisations today have their origins in the 1970s.

The relationship between governments and the voluntary sector shifted, propelled by the election of the Whitlam government in December 1972. The Australian way of volunteering was transformed, assisted by government policies and funding subsidies that both increased awareness of and encouraged the broad expansion of volunteering. The Australian Assistance Plan (AAP) played a key role and was the first attempt by a Commonwealth government to not only include voluntary organisations as part of its social policy but to acknowledge their importance in the delivery of a wide range of social welfare services within communities.¹⁸

The profile of the volunteer began to shift, too, as the traditional volunteers, women from child-bearing age to middle years, entered the paid workforce in greater numbers. Changing demographics, early retirement schemes and better health care meant that older Australians participated in greater numbers. In many ways, the 1970s was a watershed. For while the direction of volunteering shifted in interesting and exciting ways

17 For an exploration of these ideas, see Oppenheimer, 2008, especially chapters 4 & 5

18 See Eklund, Oppenheimer & Scott, 2016

(especially in the area of the environment and activism), the increasing drive towards the professionalisation of volunteering, through measurements, surveys and research, and for volunteers and their organisations to be treated more like paid workers in terms of recruitment and training, was evolving.

The second wave feminist movement also had an impact on volunteering. Many believed that volunteering was an extension of women's domestic labour, because most volunteering was undertaken by women, was unpaid and often involved the maternal qualities of nurturing and caring. Some feminists believed that women carrying out volunteer work provided another example of the subservience of women within a patriarchal society. On the other hand, many women were involved in 'change-orientated' volunteering, such as the establishment of women's refuges, women's health centres and child-care centres, and this kind of volunteering was deemed acceptable by feminist organisations.

The 1970s saw an increase in volunteers working in environment and heritage areas. People worked in their own communities, trying to protect and raise awareness of the fragility of our environment and preserving old buildings at risk of demolition. In the major capital cities during the 1970s, small groups of Australians formed themselves into groups to fight and save their communities from what they saw as crude over-development and rampant destruction of heritage buildings and precious open spaces. Others in rural Australia fought to create sustainable State Forests. This continued into the 1980s and 1990s with Australian volunteers at the forefront of unique ideas and organisations that were later transported to other parts of the world. Two examples of this are Clean Up Australia and Landcare. Landcare is a quintessentially Australian volunteer initiative, supported and assisted by all governments, local, state and Federal, coming together to address a particularly urgent need – that of protecting, saving and redeeming our fragile Australian environment.

The 1970s also witnessed the beginning of organised volunteer centres, and what we now know as volunteering peak bodies – evolving across the country through the 1980s. In 1993, the state-based volunteer centres established the Australian Council for Volunteering (ACV), with Margaret Bell (who later became President of the International Association of Volunteer Effort) elected inaugural President. The ACV brought together two peak volunteering organisations, the Australian Association of Volunteering and the National Association of Volunteer Referral Agencies, under the one umbrella. In 1997, the national peak body changed its name to Volunteering Australia.¹⁹

19 Maher, 2014

Wave five: We are one, but we are many – multicultural influences

With changing demographics, more women in the paid workforce and shifts to smaller families, volunteering provides many Australians with a sort of extended family. Volunteering offers social interaction and connections that are integral to our physical and mental wellbeing. For migrants, volunteering helps to provide a sense of belonging. Each wave of immigrants to Australia from the 1950s onwards, brought with them new perspectives on volunteering. They established a range of ethnocultural organisations to preserve their homeland culture, languages and customs. In time, these organisations have become part and parcel of our way of life.

Migrants volunteer in diverse ways including through religious-based organisations, sporting and arts groups, and ethnic community radio and television stations. Research has demonstrated that volunteering can be an important aspect of settling into a new country and volunteers are a vital resource in supporting the settlement experience of migrants and refugees.²⁰ For example, when AMES Australia was established in 1951, the organisation engaged volunteer teachers to help the thousands of new arrivals from post war Europe to successfully settle in Australia through the acquisition of English language skills. Since then, thousands of volunteers have been engaged in multiple ways, providing practical assistance to those newly arrived in Australia.²¹ Volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds bring valuable social and cultural capital and lived experience brings additional value in supporting others from diverse backgrounds.²²

Wave six: The 2000s – Becoming visible

From the 1980s, and under the aegis of ‘new conservatism’, an ideology that has dominated the thinking of both sides of politics is economic rationalism and neo-liberalism.²³ This shifted the relationship between governments and the voluntary sector, and how people volunteered changed significantly. Subsequent decades witnessed a fundamental shift in the way the relationship worked, particularly in the area of social welfare with the huge increase in the contracting out of key areas by governments to both the voluntary and the private sectors, the privatisation of services, and development of a ‘user pays’ philosophy.

20 <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/research/volunteering-and-settlement-in-australia-a-snapshot/>

21 Jedwab, 2023 (forthcoming)

22 Ellis, Muller & Szeker, 2020

23 See Pusey, 1991

Two international events – the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games and the United Nations International Year of Volunteers in 2001 – had a significant impact on the shape and form of Australian volunteering. It was widely acknowledged that without the unpaid labour of approximately 60 000 volunteers (45 000 for the Olympics and 15 000 for the Paralympics), the Games could not have been staged.²⁴ Not only did volunteers receive unprecedented media coverage and public acclaim but governments began a series of new initiatives. Led by South Australia, state governments began demonstrating a commitment to volunteering by establishing offices within government departments, designating specific Ministers for Volunteering, and designing policies and practices that recognised and assisted volunteering.

The United Nations International Year of Volunteers (IYV) was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the UN in November 1997, with the objectives ‘of increased recognition, facilitation, networking and promotion of volunteering’ across the world. Building on the globalisation of volunteering and the early efforts of two peak bodies: the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE), formed in 1970, and CIVICUS: the World Alliance for Citizen Participation, founded in 1994, the event was enthusiastically taken up, with over 120 countries establishing IYV committees. The first event of IYV was the IAVE world conference, held in Amsterdam in February 2001, where the new Universal Declaration on Volunteering²⁵ and the Global Agenda for Action to Strengthen Volunteering were launched. The declaration reflected the recognition that volunteering was ‘the fundamental building block of civil society.’

A National Community Council of Advice was formed in June 2000 by Volunteering Australia and Australian Volunteers International, the body representing the United Nations Volunteer Program in Australia. Speaking for ninety-four organisations across the breadth of the voluntary sector, including sport, community services, health, heritage, international aid, service clubs and youth, the council organised consultations around the country to draft an Australian national agenda to ensure a legacy for volunteers and volunteering beyond 2001.²⁶

The first years of the twenty-first century were significant for Australian volunteering with the changing attitudes towards volunteers and the consideration of the rights and protection of volunteer workers.²⁷ Changes to legal liability, occupational health and safety, risk management, the protection of children and the aged, brought about new institutional environments for both volunteers and the organisations within which they work. Other issues such as the use of new technologies and the internet, the ageing of

24 <https://www.olympics.com.au/games/sydney-2000/facts-and-figures/>

25 <https://www.iave.org/advocacy/the-universal-declaration-on-volunteering/>

26 <https://volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/National-Agenda.pdf>

27 Oppenheimer with Edwards, 2011

the Australia population, involving more people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and whether or not volunteering was indeed in decline, all contributed towards discussions on the value of volunteering and its role in contemporary Australian society.

There was a corresponding interest from Australian academics and advocates from a wide variety of disciplines, including social sciences, business, psychology, tourism and sport studies to undertake research. Corporate engagement with volunteers and the voluntary sector increased through social enterprises and ideas of corporate social responsibility and sustainability. The number of philanthropic trusts also increased and with a boost in financial donations and ‘giving’, with philanthropy re-emerging into the twenty-first century.

Although volunteering was now becoming ‘visible’, the field was largely devoid of public policy, and with limited exceptions, State and Commonwealth governments reacted in a fragmented way. In 2011, the Gillard Government launched a ten-year roadmap for volunteering. Called the National Volunteering Strategy it set out how volunteering would be encouraged, supported, and recognised with a focus on increasing participation rates for young people and retirees.²⁸ A change of government in 2013 saw the implementation of the National Volunteering Strategy stall.

In the ten years that have passed since the publication of the 2011 National Volunteering Strategy, there has been little strategic development of volunteering policy in Australia. As a government-led national strategy, it always risked neglect in the face of political change. We hope that the new National Strategy for Volunteering, with its ambition of being co-owned by stakeholders across the volunteering ecosystem (including government), stands a better chance of longevity.

Wave seven: Challenges of our Age – climate, geography, work

There are multiple challenges for volunteering today. As we learn to live with COVID-19 and attempt to regain control over our lives, we must acknowledge that things will not necessarily return to pre-2020 norms. As we struggle with climate change and Australia’s unique geographical challenges we will rely on volunteers and volunteering more than ever. There is a relationship with environmental volunteering, climate change activism as well as emergency volunteering (in both formal and informal settings).²⁹ There are

28 https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/National_Volunteering_Strategy_2011.pdf

29 <https://generations.asaging.org/promoting-climate-change-activism-older-people> and Measham & Barnett, 2008 discusses climate activism as form of environmental volunteering.

multiple examples in recent years of how volunteers have responded in emergency situations, and this area of spontaneous volunteering will only grow.³⁰

Volunteering is part of the digital and communications revolution. The relationship between social media and volunteering the use of social media and digital platforms in recruitment and management has significantly changed how many volunteers now engage.³¹ Online volunteering is made possible through the digital revolution, and this is another growth area of volunteering.³²

When the definition of volunteering was reviewed in 2015, one of the drivers was to include ‘informal volunteering’ (volunteering outside of an institutional setting) that was known to be more prevalent in communities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Official data consistently shows that migrants (both recently arrived and more long-standing) are less likely to volunteer through an organisation (formal volunteering) than people born in Australia. So too are younger aged volunteers, who often do not want to participate in ways that their parents have – they want to make their own way, and volunteer in ways that are meaningful to them.

In looking to the future, volunteering will need to adapt in response to the challenges of our age. Much volunteering in Australia has been ‘change-orientated’, from heritage and environmental groups to those addressing specific social welfare need such as women’s refuges and community legal centres. During the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteers and volunteer involving organisations adapted in response to restrictions and were able to continue providing vital services.³³

Finally, however, we must be mindful that there is a ‘dark side’ to volunteering.³⁴ Volunteers must never be used to replace paid workers and volunteering is not ‘free’ as there is always a cost associated with volunteering. How we work, whether as paid workers or as volunteers, has changed as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are unlikely to return to pre-COVID workplace norms and greater flexibility and hybrid models of working, where possible, will have to be accepted by employers. How this will influence volunteering and where volunteering sits within this new work paradigm is unknown, but it cannot be ignored.

30 See, for example, Barraket, Keast and Newton, 2014

31 Lee, 2020

32 Haski-Leventhal, Alony, Flemons, & Woods, 2022

33 McDermott, 2021

34 Cox, 2000

Conclusion: implications for the new National Strategy for Volunteering

The ‘Australian way of volunteering’ continues to evolve and has been shaped over time by a number of influences such as the ‘moving frontier’ between government and civil society; by Australia’s distinctive model of federalism; our unique geography and climate; and the dynamic nature of Australia’s diversity as a country with First Nations people and many layers of migration. The new National Strategy for Volunteering needs to be cognisant of these enduring impacts on volunteering.

Throughout our history, government policy has been developed around the innovations of the voluntary sector and volunteer activity, without governments ever having to develop clear, coherent policies towards volunteers. Greater clarity around the role of government at all levels should be an aspiration of the new National Strategy for Volunteering. There is an opportunity for a new revitalised and reinvigorated whole-of-government approach to all aspects of volunteering policy, from Federal right down to local government.

It is clear that volunteering in Australia has responded in times of crises. Significant shifts in volunteering have occurred in response to major natural disasters (for example, bushfires and floods), the two world wars, and in more recent times the COVID-19 pandemic. The innovation and immediacy of the volunteer response in times of crisis has been a remarkable feature of volunteering in Australia and should be nurtured going forward and be an important consideration in the new National Strategy.

Many of the issues and tensions in volunteering that have been grappled with in the past are as relevant today, for example: concerns around volunteering being ‘misused’ in some public policy initiatives (such as mutual obligation requirements of government benefits); the over-regulation of volunteering and how this can stifle innovation and the inclination to volunteer; and fears over volunteering substituting for paid work or volunteers being engaged to replace paid workers. These issues will need to be confronted in the new National Strategy for Volunteering.

The history of volunteering in Australia has largely been ignored in contemporary policy debate and analysis. This needs to change. As we hope this paper demonstrates, there is much to learn from history in developing policy and practice going forward and in informing the new National Strategy for Volunteering. A future research agenda on volunteering needs to include work that examines the rich history of volunteering - from Indigenous wisdom through to contemporary digital innovations. Without this historical perspective, we risk repeating the mistakes of the past and will fail to build upon the many remarkable contributions that volunteers have made over time in Australia.

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