

COTA National Policy Forum Summary

By Forum Facilitator Caroline Baum

This year's National Policy Forum was nothing short of a call to arms to fight ageism in every sector of Australian life from the workforce to aged care. Furious agreement united speakers with a sense of urgency. A common refrain permeated discussions across all sectors: 'It's about changing the narrative', 'a different lens', 'reframing the argument.'

Throughout the day, language was identified as a frontline component of the issue, both as key culprit and as an essential tool in the campaign. Abhorrent terms such as 'bed blocker' and the so-called 'they had a fair innings' attitude were called out, as was the supposed perception of older Australians as an 'economic burden' and the cause of 'inter-generational conflict'.

Comparing the increased numbers of older people to a natural disaster, as in the phrase 'silver tsunami' was just one example of often unconscious but common negative imagery.

There was an almost unanimous acknowledgement that, except in the case of heavy physical labour, the word 'retired' is inadequate to express the next phase of life that older Australians experience when they stop full-time paid employment. In a modern Australia the former 'retirement' phase in life is a potentially exciting transition to new roles and a different sense of purpose, whether as a volunteer, mentor or as a so-called seniorpreneur (a ghastly term but one that illustrates the significant number of start-ups by the over 55s). An upbeat phrase borrowed from US social researchers to express this next phase is 'encore career.'

Kirsty Nowlan's heartfelt keynote '**Ageism faced by older people and what drives it**' introduced the Benevolent Society's spearheading of a coalition of forces for change through the *EveryAGE Counts* campaign (including COTA Australia as a coalition partner). Her overview of *EveryAGE Counts*' evidence-based manifesto was warmly received and set the agenda for discussion throughout the day.

An understanding that behavioural change is slow underpins the *EveryAGE Counts* coalition's realistic 10-15-year timeframe to finish all the steps of raise awareness, influence attitudes, mobilise people to act, in order bring change to policy and practice across all aspects of our economy and society.

While ageism is a two-way street, impacting on younger people through ill-informed assumptions and preconceptions, the *EveryAGE Counts* Campaign will focus on ageism impacting on older Australians as being the most deeply embedded, pernicious, and the one with the greatest corrosive impact on status, individual wellbeing and economic productivity. It has the potential to target everyone.

For a movement to gain traction in the public imagination the timing must be right. Nowlan's speech confirmed that the moment for an ageism campaign is ripe, with far greater awareness of how many people are living longer, concerns about the shocking stories being made public about poor aged care by the Royal Commission and heightened concerns about an increase in elder abuse. With a cohort entering longer mid-life and older age blessed with more formal education, cultural assertiveness and higher expectations, the time has come. A copy of [Kirsty's speech](#) is available on COTA's website: www.cota.org.au/publication/2019-national-policy-forum-presentations

In a conversation about **ageism and employment**, Australian Public Service Commissioner Peter Woolcott identified of all the people the Australian Public Service engaged in 2018, 12% were over the age of 50 years. This represented the highest annual percent of mature age workers in recent years. The Commissioner also discussed the intended work of the APS to implement more flexible conditions and gradual, transitioned retirement as a way of attracting and retaining staff.

Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman Kate Carnell suggested that small business is already a significant employer of older workers, especially in family run enterprises, and is well aware of the benefits. Carnell also mentioned some employers were unclear about age discrimination requirements of what can and can't be included in advertising new positions where employers would like to encourage mature age employees to apply. Like Carnell, Dr Mike Rungie from the Global Centre for Modern Ageing underlined the need for older employees to promote and continuously upgrade their skill-set, shifting the onus from employers. The conversation also referenced the importance of soft skills and a greater acknowledgement of mature qualities (loyalty, experience, calm under pressure, extensive networks, problem solving, discretion, consistency). Mike's [Top 15 practices for becoming a work-ready elder](#) and summary of [Chip Conley's Top 10 Practices for becoming an Age Friendly Employer](#) are available on COTA's website: www.cota.org.au/publication/2019-national-policy-forum-presentations

Building on the messaging in Nowlan's keynote, Per Capita's Emma Dawson brought a compassionate clarity to her analysis on '**The economic impact of ageism**'. Starting by summarising the last Intergenerational Report as containing a stark warning: that the increase in older people living longer will send Australia broke unless we change policy settings to adapt to an ageing population, Dawson proceeded to suggest a number of fiscal policy reforms that could be considered.

She welcomed the government's commitment to return to the Time Use Survey as of next year, to provide a more accurate picture of the economic contribution made by older so-called retirees.

Dawson highlighted the need for reforming economic policy. She suggested such reforms could consider discounted payroll tax to encourage employers to retain experienced older workers; an overhaul of the tax and transfer system, particularly overly generous concessions on superannuation that disproportionately favour the wealthy, including franking credits; a review of Newstart; and of the settings of the Commonwealth Rent Assistance which should be pegged to the cost of housing.

Perhaps the most radical of Dawson's suggestions was to set aside some of our collective superannuation wealth into a levy to provide funding for aged care and investing the billions spent on giving people cash refunds as home care packages. A full copy of [Emma's speech](#) is available for download on COTA's website: www.cota.org.au/publication/2019-national-policy-forum-presentations , or to read on the Per Capita website: <https://percapita.org.au/2019/06/17/speech-the-economic-impacts-of-ageism/>

The mantra that 'You cannot be what you cannot see' was confirmed by Director, Market Research Unit, Dept of Health Jenny Taylor and CEO Ad Standards Australia Fiona Jolly. Their conversation about '**Imagery and Imagination— older people in the media and public discourse**' addressed the role of advertising and the media, both equally culpable for misrepresenting older Australians with limited and stale stereotypes. The unambiguous takeaway: we need to see a wider variety of experiences of ageing in ad campaigns and culture than well-off retirees wearing cable knit sweaters on yachts. And when we see representations that we find offensive, we need to complain about them, as anti-sexism and anti-racism campaigners have done. Part of the problem? The advertising industry is mostly staffed by young people who may have little or no experience of older Australians. Agencies and broadcasters would do well to hire more mature talent on screen and off. Other tools: humour as a way of challenging stereotypes and assumptions and as a tool to reframe the narrative; awards which expose bad practice, modelled on *The Ernie Awards for Sexist Behaviour* (the Ernie's) or the *Gay and Lesbian Outrageous Ridiculous and Ignorant comment Awards* (The GLORIAS). Copies of [Jenny Taylor's](#) and [Fiona Jolly's](#) presentations are available on COTA's website www.cota.org.au/publication/2019-national-policy-forum-presentations

In the session '**Responding to ageism – what's public policy got to do with it?**' Sue McGrath from EveryAGE Counts Campaign touched on the higher profile that the increased reporting of elder abuse has given to awareness of the issue.

Kathryn Greiner, in her role as Chair of the NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing, addressed the issue of ageism not being a single experience but a process which requires experts not to lump all the 65 pluses together as a mass. There needs to be more specialisation of expertise with distinctive cohorts, much as we have in the specialisation at the other end of life from infancy, early childhood through pre-adolescence and the teenage years.

Practical policy shifts discussed including adopting the US practice of moving people in and out of the public service from the private sector, and an ageing strategy in relation to housing. A key message: the need to rescue ageing from the health portfolio and spread it across all areas of government.

In the session exploring ***'What lessons on anti-ageism can be learnt from diverse communities and other campaigns for social change?'*** Professor Tom Calma provided valuable insights into the issues that impact on Indigenous, particularly remote communities when addressing ageism, ranging from political churn and frustration with silos in bureaucracy to more practical obstacles such as poor road infrastructure and access to vehicles. He drew delegates' attention to the success of the anti-smoking in communities' campaign through the Ninti One foundation. A full copy of [Tom's presentation](#) is available on COTA's website: www.cota.org.au/publication/2019-national-policy-forum-presentations

Like several other speakers, Daniel Coase from the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council reiterated that one size does not fit all in tackling ageism: there is diversity within diversity. Globalisation and urbanisation are threats to traditional family support networks. Visas allowing for the migration of parents/grandparents have become more difficult to obtain, creating additional stress and expense for families. He signalled the need for more research to be done regarding dementia and ageism in CALD communities.

Kirsten Deane, Campaign Director of the Every Australian Counts Campaign, reminded her audience that the NDIS feels inevitable now but originally the campaign had to combat lack of political will and public awareness and deliver change without being able to afford lobbyists and advertising. She provided inspiring examples of how the Every Australian Counts campaign was a grassroots campaign that relied on positive storytelling to reinforce community sentiment and make up in powerful narrative what it lacked in funds. Critically Kirsten argued that the NDIS solution was developed because it offered both a sound *social* and *economic* policy solution. More than 1000 submissions were made to the productivity commission - s 'we gave people a reason to care and told positive stories.' She also raised the importance of universal design in services, programs and buildings as an important component of the campaign that could also apply to ageism.

In a session on ***'Ageism in aged care and health care'***, COTA Australia CEO Ian Yates put forward a hypothetical scenario in which there was no such thing as Aged Care, envisaging instead a fully integrated health care system in which everyone had universal advance care directives, access to palliative care, powerful age discrimination laws applied, affordable housing existed, and carers had strong social security support. A copy of [Ian's speech](#) is available on COTA's website: www.cota.org.au/publication/2019-national-policy-forum-presentations

Responding to this scenario, Patricia Sparrow, CEO Aged and Community Services Australia focussed on dignity and choice as key concerns for anyone contemplating aged care. She gave the example of food safety making it difficult for an aged care resident to enjoy a soft-boiled egg, because of regulations about the risk of salmonella.

Sparrow also cited the benefits of specially created emergency wards overseas specifically for older people, which show that those attending these wards had better health outcomes than those in generalist emergency wards.

Leanne Wells, CEO Consumers Health Forum, reiterated the CHF view that health care access is a human rights issue and that language is, in the health space as in so many others, value -laden. She also expressed

concern about ageism expressed in access to health services determined by age- i.e. in the case of breast cancer screening, women over 74 do not receive reminders; women over 70 have difficulty getting breast reconstruction after mastectomy. There is a bias against older people in health technology assessments and allocation meetings regarding benefits in terms of years of life gained from treatment. This is predicated on a 'rate of return' on the investment - an inappropriate barometer. However, ageism can be beneficial where it helps deliver different services for different age cohorts and their needs (as is the case with youth mental health services like Headspace which have an upper age limit). There is a worryingly common assumption from clinicians and others that depression is a normal part of ageing and does not require intervention. This needs to be challenged.

Treatment decisions must be made on evidence rather on clinicians' bias of what is appropriate for older people. We need to promote tools such as advance care directives more effectively. The long wait times for home care packages is an unacceptable result of poor planning. A summary of [Leanne's speech](#) is available at: <https://chf.org.au/blog/ageism-health-and-caring-make-difference>

In the final session '**Moving towards an Australia without ageism**', Anne Burgess from COTA South Australia, Marlene, Marlene Krasovitsky, from the EveryAGE Counts Campaign and Professor John McCallum CEO National Seniors Australia spoke of their vision for an Australia without ageism.

Professor McCallum delivered one of the more fascinating stats of the day: from a survey of 50,000 when asked how old they felt, most respondents felt 20 per cent younger than their actual age. Women felt this more than men. McCallum stated his conviction that ageism is the new frontier of feminism. He stressed the value of co-design, with particular reference to digital literacy and envisioned a future of age friendly communities and cities.

As part of the session the panel invited tables of participants to identify 2 things they could do to challenge ageism in their lives. Many participants noted how they would seek to challenge ageist language in their everyday lives (including language they may use themselves). Others noted the importance of showcasing positive stories about older people and that work needs to be done to shift the cultural disrespect shown towards elders in the community, noting the importance of intergenerational activities to change mindsets. Participants called for practical tools to be developed such as a glossary of ageist terms not to be used and called on Government to fund an anti-ageism campaign building on the successful anti-sexism and anti-racism campaigns of the past. A [summary of the actions](#) participants identified they could take to tackle ageism is available on COTA's website: www.cota.org.au/publication/2019-national-policy-forum-presentations

Conclusion:

The mantra of 'nothing about us without us' applies to ensure that older people are involved in every aspect of the complex range of decisions required to make getting older a far more positive experience than it currently is for many, especially those who are vulnerable. To shift attitudes requires the will - and education - of the entire community and a whole-of- government strategy across portfolios.

Baby boomers are going to tackle ageism with a set of expectations that distinguishes them from their parents, demanding a level of choice, independence and agency in every aspect of later life. This will energise many sectors, as well as putting pressure on them.

The political will to reverse deeply embedded attitudes and make the necessary policy reforms will require a concerted effort across all sectors.

One possible source of inspiration for how to retire the concept of retirement and adopt a different model, would be to look at the way artists, who are often trend leaders in our society, adapt to the mature years of

their lives. They never stop their practice, which means they retain their sense of identity - one of the most precious and fundamental aspects of human life.

The campaign against ageism has the advantage that it does not require anyone to give up a pleasure or pay extra for something. It is about enhancing life, and removing a cause of potential shame and distress. This means that a campaign and policy can be framed in positive terms from the outset.

In recent years, there has been a gradual but significant rejection of the built-in obsolescence of products, expressed through a global movement to fix and repair goods to minimise waste and landfill and promote recycling. There may be valuable lessons, messages and narratives to be shaped around the similar recognition of the value of our mature citizens, beginning with a vocabulary and a set of stories that emphasize renewal.

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