

Action and Impact

Discussion paper from the visit of Melody Barnes
to Australia in February 2016



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About this Report

This paper brings together content from the series of events that Per Capital held with Melody Barnes in February 2016, in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne.

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Acknowledgments

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Background

This discussion paper emerges from a series of events held by Per Capita with Melody Barnes in February 2016. Melody Barnes served as Assistant to US President Obama and Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council from 2009 to January 2012. Melody is now the Chair of the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions.

Per Capita brought Ms Barnes to Australia for a series of events on building economic growth through social policy, cities and innovation, and insights into her community-based work at the White House.

A full list of events and media appearances from which this content is drawn is listed at the end of this report.

The intention of this report is to capture the content and arguments of the events, and serve as a discussion paper for future Per Capita research. The issues raised at these events are some of the most important questions we are facing in our polities: what role can education play in addressing inequality; how can we build communities that are economically successful but inclusive? How can we build the innovative cities of the future? What role can education and skills training play in ensuring continued mass employment in an age of change? How can we address people's disengagement from traditional politics, and what does the rise of populist candidates mean for the future of our democracies? These are the long-term issues facing not just the United States, but also Australia.



Lucy Turnbull AO, Annabel Crabb and Melody Barnes at the Per Capita public forum, On Leadership: Cities, Community and Social Innovation.

Education, Social Mobility and Economic Growth

Throughout her career, Melody Barnes, has argued that education is key to social mobility and economic growth, and she brought this vision to her work at the White House. As Director of the Obama Administration's social policy agenda, Barnes oversaw the largest Federal education spend since the GI Bill. She sees education as a crucial element in opening up economic opportunity and addressing inequality.

"My view of education has become that it is the great civil rights issue. It provides opportunity in a way that very few things do."

Barnes' own experience bears this out and is a shining example of the role education can play in realizing "The American Dream". Her grandparents were a tobacco worker and a domestic cook, who worked hard to ensure her parents could go to college. The value of education was passed down to her through them. She describes her childhood as one where education was seen as an opportunity and a gift, and the key to social mobility.

"I look at that arc, from my grandmothers to my parents to me: tobacco worker and domestic cook to someone who is able to sit in the Oval Office and advise the President."

Through the education-based programs delivered during her time in the White House, Barnes wanted to ensure that this kind of opportunity would be available to all.

"If we can give children, young people and adults access to education, then we are giving people tools to be able to create greater social mobility for themselves and their families."

In addition, Barnes sees an economic dimension to education. It's in education and domestic policies more broadly where a country's economic advantage is gained, she argues. A focus on these types of programs ensures that the maximum number of talented people can participate in an innovation economy.

"Education is key to creating the knowledge workers of the future, in building economic growth, and in ensuring the wealth generated through innovation is shared."

In the section below we outline the ways Barnes executed this vision through leadership of the Domestic Policy Council at the White House. Her strategy has always been to work at the community level, putting a focus on people and place, and she continues this work at the Aspen Institute.

In the final section, we look specifically at her work advising the President, her role in translating the President's vision into a workable legislative and policy agenda, and her views on the importance for political candidates to show genuine leadership qualities in an age of anti-establishment politics.

Focus on People: Communities and Collective Impact

As the Obama Administration transitioned into government in January 2009, the US economy was facing a severe economic downturn. The collapse of the mortgage market sent the US into recession: nearly 9 million jobs had been lost and many millions had lost their homes.

The administration had to quickly re-calibrate their agenda to stem widespread economic losses and create new jobs. Massive funds were allocated for economic recovery under the stimulus bill, and when the new President's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, said "never let a good crisis go to waste", it became clear that this could be a once in a generation opportunity to address long-standing problems facing the country.

For Melody Barnes, it opened the prospect of advancing education and workforce development programs that would both create jobs in the present and build a pipeline of young people who would become young adult learners and older adult workers when the US returned to a growth economy. Her programs focused on engaging directly with communities.

Working at the local level, says Barnes, brings a real opportunity to do something where you can drive significant positive change in people's lives in a real way.

"Communities serve as fascinating laboratories for implementing social policy. It's the place where you are closest to the citizens and where ideological barriers and friction start to break down because people live in the places they're talking about. They live in the places where the problems occur and where they want to solve them."

It facilitates direct action on problems people themselves have identified, and, she says, engaging directly with people on the ground is crucial to success.

"Often without doing that you will find that even if you've got good data, even if you've got a great idea, what you don't have is something that's sustainable and that the community will rally around. Local communities are critical to the resilience of good ideas. Initiatives need to be well rooted in communities in order to flourish, grow, and be replicated and taken to scale."

The Domestic Policy Council under Barnes' leadership implemented several initiatives to connect vulnerable young people to education and employment. Much of this was implemented through the Serve America Act (2010), which, among other things, established the Council for Community Solutions, a collaborative forum for best-practice community-based solutions to social problems. It brought together experts from government, the private sector, the non-profit and philanthropic sectors to solve the big challenges in collaboration with communities.

"They studied what local communities were implementing, and looked at the hows and whys of what was successful, and found that there was a particular strategy, a way of acting, which has since been given the name "collective impact".

The Council facilitated the sharing of information and data across communities, so that small, locally-based organisations could learn best-practice solutions from other groups' successes. For Barnes, it is essential in developing social solutions programs that you focus on data, real world examples, and identify appropriate metrics to test outcomes.

"Good intentions aren't enough. We have to ensure that we embed our policies and our practices in evidence-based approaches. A focus on evidence means we actually know what is working, why it's working, and it allows us to replicate it. This is also a way to address the problems of corruption or the influence of vested interests that may arise at the local level. Solutions are not bound to particular groups or swayed by moneyed interests; there is a commitment to the truth."

One of the tasks of the Community Solutions Council was to address the challenges of young people (16 to 25 years of age) who had been disconnected from the education pathway and then to employment. Post-secondary education is critical to ongoing employment; those who don't complete are severely disadvantaged in the job market. Under this program, substantial resources were put into higher education, in particular the community college system, which serves as a gateway for many into a good middle-class job, or a chance to retrain.

The administration also established a Social Innovation Fund, so that people who had built really smart organisations that had proved successful, could take them to scale, and implement them across the nation. It combined public and private resources and put an emphasis on funding solutions that had evidence of results. This way, those who were already making an impact could make it work for more people.

The Social Innovation Fund also worked through the district schools system, the most local form of government for schools, to identify education challenges at the local level.

Through initiatives like these, the fiscal stimulus program allowed a number of investments in education and training that would not have been possible under ordinary circumstances. Such mammoth resources were needed for recovery that significant reform was able to be achieved.

Harnessing the untapped resources and leadership of communities was key to Barnes' approach. She quotes the President as saying, "The best solutions aren't found in Washington", and for Barnes, working with communities is how real change can occur.

"People are looking around and seeing children not getting the education they need, young people not getting jobs, environmental challenges not being met, and people are taking action in local communities. People don't just sit at their kitchen table and say "woe is me, we can't do anything about it". In the most vibrant communities, people are coming together and solving problems."

Focus on Place: Cities and Innovation

The second key element in delivering successful social solutions is putting an emphasis on place, and in an innovation economy, this means focusing on cities. Cities bring together individuals with smart ideas, which drives employment growth and prosperity.

Barnes sees a role for government in implementing social policy solutions to create the conditions to get those ideas off the ground, this may include infrastructure, and access to capital and knowledge workers. Governments can invest resources and build the necessary infrastructure - transport, ports, airports, roads, bridges – that move people and products. Government priorities can make a difference as to whether a city is a place where it is easy to do the kind of work that creates prosperity.

“A range of different factors have to come together to produce the conditions where people can live, work, spark off of one another, collaborate and build businesses. We know that certain policy settings can help foster and facilitate those communities and those innovation centres to come together in a vibrant way.”

This means developing a policy plan that brings in issues of livability, transport, green communities, ‘walkable urbanity’, and places that invite entertainment and recreation. These are the things that will attract and retain smart young people, and sustain older people and older workers.

“Cities need to be attractive places to live and work and make it easier to do the kind of work that creates prosperity; to link up smart well-trained workers to good paying jobs.”

For Barnes, building prosperity and creating good paying jobs once again comes back to education, and it is here that its key role in economic policy is clear. She argues that the things that make a country economically competitive are deeply rooted in broad access to education.

In 2011, Barnes launched the Strong Cities, Strong Communities initiative, which targeted cities in need of an economic boost, which included Cleveland, Detroit, Memphis and New Orleans. It was a way of delivering federal resources, technical expertise and assistance by collaborating with local governments, neighbourhood schools, community colleges and local businesses to address the needs those communities themselves identified. The initiative put the viability of cities at the centre of economic recovery, with a central focus on education and job training.

Barnes also sees a role for broader social and cultural programs in building innovative cities. At the Per Capita public forum on cities and innovation, Barnes and fellow featured speakers, Lucy Turnbull AO and Annabel Crabb, highlighted the importance of design in building resilient and attractive cities. Said Crabb, “we have to allow for beauty of design and a feeling of joy when we occupy a space.” This means talking about the built environment as something more than buildings. This might mean a bike track, a walkway, a sculpture. Design is an important and often underestimated aspect of livable cities, said Turnbull.

Cities need to be places of pleasure as well as productivity, as the two are interlinked. Barnes spoke of the role arts and artists can play in economic growth. She talked of Rocco Landesmann, who was head of the National Endowment for the Arts at the height of the economic crisis, who argued strongly for continued funding for arts at a time when government programs were being cut. He argued that it goes far beyond funding of symphonies and museums, and implemented a series of arts-focused projects as pillars of community revitalization in depressed areas. Art, design, and cultural projects play a strong role in cities in developing social cohesion, giving people opportunities for meaningful participation, and in attracting and retaining smart people who will come and work and build businesses.

“One of the things that drives communities is artists and artisans and the maker community. It attracts people to a community and they drive economic development and add value. They are often the first people to turn a community around, and you can see the recovery of the city coming about because of the vibrant artistic culture.”



Melody Barnes talking to Emma Alberici on Lateline, 27 February 2016.

Expectations, Vision and Leadership

Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign was based on a vision of empowering everyday people in their communities, and, says Barnes, it was this vision that led her to join the campaign team.

The election of Obama was an exciting time in American history, and she acknowledges the expectations of the incoming President were stratospheric. The American people had invested a lot of hope in this President; there was a strong desire for change, and people believed a lot could happen.

Speaking at a Per Capita forum at Griffith University, Barnes outlined her experience of transitioning into government, the challenges of translating a campaign platform into a policy and legislative agenda, and the struggle to get it passed and implemented in the face of demands from lobby groups, emerging crises, and a stridently negative opposition.

"Every day you are going to be hit with wave after wave of things that you never expected."

Barnes said her strategy for dealing with this was to put on a bulletin board the things she wanted to accomplish, to not lose sight of the priorities. This way her role could keep on top of the big picture. So many people had their own policies or actions they wanted to move forward, but one thing can affect something else in the way that outsiders don't see. She described her work as a constant balancing act of having to lead and be responsive, of implementing the high-level vision while keeping an ear to the ground.

People underestimate how difficult it can be to get things done she says, and it is disappointing when people mistake this as lacking commitment to making change. She admits it was painful to live through.

"I remember thinking, these people are going to hate us one day."

Anger among the American people has indeed bubbled to the surface in the current primary elections, and given her experiences working with communities and talking to people about education, jobs, social mobility, Barnes has real insight into where this might be coming from.

Eight years ago a pent-up desire for change was palpable, and the American people looked to Obama for change. But, says Barnes, the anger and frustration we're seeing now is the result of trends going much further back. Wages have been stagnant for four decades, inequality is rising, and people were already hurting by the time of the economic crisis in 2007. All of this has brought about a backlash against traditional politics, which goes some way to explaining why we're seeing such an extraordinary presidential Primaries race.

"It is the public articulation of fears people have held privately with regard to security of all kinds: not just national security matters, although that's a factor for many, but also economic security, stagnant wages, and lack of social mobility. Among the middle and older generations, there is a concern that their children's lives will not be at least as good or better than theirs, and among young people, there is a concern that opportunities to realize the "American Dream" are drying up. It is the nature of the American Dream that every generation thinks it will do better than the previous, that if you work hard and take a little risk, you will do well. People no longer feel that that is the case."

In addition to this brewing anxiety, there are significant demographic shifts taking place in the United States.

"People are finding that their way of life, their community, is changing dramatically under their feet, and this is adding to a sense of anxiety and fear. These kinds of demographic changes are exciting and will lead to a renewed vibrancy for the United States, but at the moment, they are causing concern in some communities."

A lot of political operatives, she says, missed the fact that this level of anger and frustration was brewing just beneath the surface. The candidates and their advisors and campaign teams are now having to very quickly try and determine how they're going to respond to it.

"To take an optimistic view, as we move through this, we can see those concerns being put front and centre in a way they haven't been previously. It will hopefully create conditions around which we can discuss and engage around those issues."

From a less optimistic viewpoint, she points out that it's given US politics a level of unpredictability that we haven't seen in a very long time, if ever. In addition, as someone who has trodden the difficult path of translating a campaign message into a governing agenda, Barnes says it's hard to see what an administration under a leader like Donald would look like or how it would address people's concerns, as his policy platform is unclear.

"Much of what he says is vague rhetoric; it is not rooted in data or even based on proposals that could be executed within existing political arrangements. Our system of government has many checks and balances; there is a House of Representatives, a Senate, a Supreme Court. There are very real limitations to what the Federal government can and cannot do.

What that means is that the American people are going to have to look behind the rhetoric and ask some tough questions and think very logically about what real answers might look like, and which candidate might best implement them. It may require that we change the architecture of American politics, so that people feel that they have a role to play and their government listens to their concerns."

It will also mean that the successful candidate will need to show real vision and leadership, and, says Barnes, the American people should look to candidates for excellent leadership qualities, not just someone who will feed them easy answers.

What makes for great leadership is an issue Barnes has been working on with the Leadership Initiative at New York University. She sees leadership primarily as a collective action. A good leader, she says, understands themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, and how they can act with others.

“This allows a person to surround themselves with very talented people, people who will speak truth to power, ask the tough questions and push hard to achieve the goals of an Administration. When you pull back the curtain and look at the toughest challenges facing our society, ultimately you find that it is collective action that has moved us from vision to accomplishment.

Having a vision for a better future and putting together a team to achieve that, takes a lot of courage. You are often dealing with vested interests who are profiting from or comfortable with the status quo. You need someone who is willing to deal with some of the unfamiliarity and ambiguity of change, but also keeps an eye on what the ultimate goal will be. They will also need the ability to work across difference and across conflict, and to understand there’s not always a straight line between your vision and accomplishing that goal. These are personal qualities the American people need to look for in Presidential candidates.”

The person who ultimately becomes President of the United States, says Barnes, will need to be someone who can speak to the level of insecurity being felt by the American people, and bring forward a plan that is rooted in facts. They will also need to have a realistic understanding of how American government works. It is important for an administration to map out what is possible and achievable. No leader can ever implement their entire vision in full.



References

The content for this report was drawn from the following events and interviews:

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