



Take on Board

Transcript – Linda White

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the take on board podcast, I'll be speaking with Linda White about getting on a board being an effective board member and being on a board. So first, let me tell you just a little bit about Linda. She describes herself as having done heaps, she really says no, and she's never too old to learn stuff. She's on the National Executive for the Australian Labour Party, the executive of the Australian Council of trade unions, the National Executive of the Australian services union. And she's also on the board of the Chipley Research Center, the Australian center for the moving image, the MCG trust, and the portable long service leave governing board. She was formerly on the board of legal super the Royal Botanic Gardens, 200 Gertrude street, Footscray community legal service, the Australian social inclusion board and again as she says, I was on heaps of things that you need. We might hear a bit more about that in a moment. So welcome to the take on board podcast, Linda.

Linda White 0:55

Great to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:56

So Linda before we start talking boards I'd like to hear a bit more about you. So can you tell me a bit more about your upbringing or what lessons you learned and what you got up to? Well,

Linda White 1:08

My parents, I think, it's only when you get older that you sort of reflect on the influence that you had on them. And so if I look at their influence in the context of the sort of things that I do, which is being on lots of things, there are lots of things to my sort of earliest memory of their activity was my mother being on the local kindergarten board? I think she was treasurer, so they would freak you know, obviously rotated meetings around and she would be on that and she, she was they would come to our house and meet and then my father was also on things he would be on Amex or rotary or or any kind of club they were always not just participants, but they're always on the kind of the board or being involved in doing something whether it's producing the magazine or distributing things, so they were really quite full on at us and You know, and I did that all their lives,

Helga Svendsen 2:02

As a friend of mine would say that would join us.

Linda White 2:05

Hello, not only join us, so people join, but they also actually took it to the next level to be kind of involved in, you know, the executive overall running Yes, or helping at a higher level always like they, you know, there would be a really that they were on something I didn't get on to the executive order or produce a magazine or have some role and responsibility over and above joining. And it's it. Certainly that was, you know, and that's your role in that model, you probably end up doing that sort of thing. And that's probably what I've done.

Helga Svendsen 2:35

I hear that from a number of people where they say that in their family, so you would have seen that as a child in some of the governance but what was your first experience of governance?

Linda White 2:45

Well, I was on quite a few things at university so I ended up being when I was at Melbourne Uni being president of both the commerce student society and the law student society which were the same time maybe not exactly the same time but very close. I think was common student society president first then law student society president. And so they ran, we ran things we provided things we advocated. And it was certainly in law in the last in society was often contested. And, you know, I had to have keep your wits about you. So we would have meetings, but we would also have to interact with the faculty and so, so you had to be able to wrangle people and convince people. So it was certainly probably not in governance in the strict sense that we talked about it now, but it is, you know, everybody had their roles and responsibilities. And if you're a president, you had to make sure that they did it and you know, satellite shot financially viable and you know, we ran bowls and things like that. So you had to make sure that it worked, that you didn't lose money, and that people would want to come again, that sort of thing. So gave a lot of experience and how to do all of those things. And there were at least two of the things that are on there. There are others because I had a joint have the joint injuring, but also the participation. James. Yeah, the other thing so I gave me hones your skills and also wrangling others is extraordinary important.

Helga Svendsen 4:11

So you're, you know, the Australian center for moving image, the MCG trust, which I'm sure holds some fascination for people. And the ALP National Executive, can you just tell us a little about each of those organizations?

Linda White 4:27

So ACME (Australian Centre for the Moving Image) is a fantastic organization. It runs a gallery that's currently being renovated that's in Federation Square and it also tools and creates exhibitions but it also has a space for emerging entrepreneurs in the art space and does a whole range of different things. The thing that is really interesting to me about it is a public sector board and the depth of talent and creativity. Many of the people who work there, you don't get as much of an exposure to when you're on the board you suddenly realize what a massive asset the people are, but also the assets that have a control under attack me. So it has a great resource of films and moving images, which you just the state owns this is fantastic. And yet it is a massive touring organization and how they do that is amazing and how they attract world class exhibitions to it was just what fascinated me. I'd been a patron for a long time and the opportunity came to get on the board and I jumped at it because I really wanted to understand how Melbourne could attract such massive exhibitions that go nowhere else in Australia. So I learned a lot about I enjoyed the subject matter but the depth of talent and the depth of ownership of assets that organization has that the status answers and rising is a really interesting board. And it is got its challenges. It's currently being redeveloped. And so watching the redevelopment, understanding what how Brill building can be fraught. It brings a whole set of new things and ideas in the public eye. And so watching how things get scrutinized is also interesting from a board perspective. And we've had one or two occasions where that's happened. Where there's been some controversy in the way in which the board operated was really interesting and dynamic.

Helga Svendsen 6:33

Are you able to share any of those controversies?

Linda White 6:36

There was an exhibition last year that was sponsored by a large organization and it was fairly controversial and they were unhappy with it. Some boards models said oh, well, well, they've got to edit what the sponsoring organization doesn't like. And so we had to really wrangle through those issues. And of course, we didn't suggest that at all. We went ahead, and the people who are patrons of it The exhibition were, and artistic community just thought we'd done exactly the right thing. But it took a lot to work through that because you got to balance donors. This is art integrity. And that was really it was a great exercise and controversial and in the public eye, but, you know, for the artists that springboard was massive for them, because it got more publicity than it might necessarily mean they're very well regarded artists, and it probably will done well. Anyway, but it was interesting to see the controversy wouldn't have was probably helpful, pushed it along.

Helga Svendsen 7:39

The exhibition went ahead as initially intended, and the sponsors remained

Linda White 7:43

Forever, multiple year sponsorship, but they just didn't want their name associated with a particular exhibition. So they withdrew their name, although they did sponsor. It was a competition if you like and this was the artist that was selected for it and then I and I put clearly what they were going to do, but I think what it says in writing and how it manifests itself might be slightly different. That was an interesting exercise for the board to go through. Because it all happened very close to the scheduled opening. So we didn't have a lot of meetings about what was the best way forward. And I think we did choose the best way forward. So these boards are not without controversy. And similarly as I think about the MCG trust, you know, that body stands in the shoes of the state which owns the MCG and I know that the MCG is always has scrutiny. I think today, there was I think, on ANZAC Day there was a food poisoning incident somewhere like the MCG which Melbourne people value. A lot is always going to come under scrutiny if bad things happen. And so, that is interesting to be on that too. to, to realize, you know how something as iconic as the MCG. And is valued by the public that it's an address is probably the wrong word. But it is an interesting thing to be on it because you then feel every comment or every manoeuvre and the MCG trusts pretty much contracts out all the work for the MCG to the MCC. And that's a fascinating relationship to because that's a club. So really interesting board, but there are lots of things is a sports ground, but it's also an iconic gathering place for Victorians and Australians. And it has significance for indigenous population and where it's located. It's got a lot of layers to us, and the Parkland to is the responsibility of the trust. And so the Euro pack around it, I learned a whole lot of things, just about how to operate it and there's a lot of bits and pieces to the operation of a successful game when it thousand people or 100,000 people come at different times but all live together. It has its various various levels of challenges. So just on that as well, if I can dig around a little bit, one of the subcommittees of that board because I imagine there is it's quite a complex operation. There's a couple of subcommittees there is subcommittees that deal with the finances, which operate with the MCC, there is also the operates the National Sports museum. So I'm on the advisory board for the National Sports museum representing the trust. There is negotiating committees in relation to some of the you know, dealing with major clients like the AFL and the cricket. There's a paper for do that. And so a series of things and so it's dealing with government as well. So it's a few liars but the MCC so the Melbourne Cricket Club is the employer of most of the staff but for for the trust we're standing in the shoes of the state government and Going to make sure that it's run the way we think it should

Helga Svendsen 11:03

Is the Finance Committee also risk or is risk a separate committee?

Linda White 11:06

So finance committee is more to do with the MCC. And we have a oversight on that because they they have money. So we don't actually have a risk committee of our own. So we're about we deal. We deal at a board level significantly with security and understand about that. You've got to look at risk in every circumstance, but the more you interact with the public, the more the risks are about their safety and their security. Obviously, the asset itself, of course, but you know, if I look at other things that are going on, like the robot 10 of guns, the risk of that was a tree falling down, which you know, does happen, but also it had massive collections and of things that were priceless, you could never do so similarly with the MCG, it has risks of things that can never be replace and risk of pivot on Coming or risks of sport changing a whole lot of things. It's, it's interesting,

Helga Svendsen 12:06

The Australian Labour Party National Executive Linda, tell me about that and tell me how you wake up on the 19th of may 2019, the day after the federal election.

Linda White 12:16

I've been on the ALP National Executive for quite a while. It's an interesting organization, the National Executive. It's like any Federation. So the Labour Party is a federated organization. And so it brings with it its own challenges and it brings with it interesting personalities, but it's might not work necessarily the same as other organizations. So if one keeps that in mind, which sometimes it's a bit hard to, but if you keep that in mind that we want to make life better for Australians, then that grounds you pretty much when things turn to cheat. So in terms of the non into my book, it's extraordinary disappointing. When the majority of people expects you're going to win when the polls tell you it's your party is going to win and you don't win, there is a significant amount of soul searching. But it also tells you, I think, that we're not immune from what the rest of the world is experiencing that is. People are probably disenchanted with politics and what they say to a pollster and what they might do. It can be two different things that's not too great for the polling industry. And it's not too great for for political parties. But it also probably teaches you can never take anything for granted. And that week is a long time in politics. And so that is true now, as it was was first said, things can change dramatically on sometimes politicians and we don't we see what we want to see rather than what's actually happening and that can be on any organization that you on skill in the game is to see what and hear what people are telling you not what you want them to say. And I was uncertain that we were going to win. I thought labor was going to win, as everybody says that now, but I did have a not 100% feeling that we're going to get over. And it's different when you're in Victoria as against the rest of the Australia. The opposition ran a very tight campaign, which might not have had much substance in terms of depth of policy, but it certainly was effective. And you know, it also I guess, raised for us as Australians. The, when somebody like Clark Parma intervenes in, in politics and puts so much money and and doesn't really care whether he wins or not to change minds, then it means politics has changed forever. So there's lots of things to think about

and all that but you know, I haven't thrown away my membership. And I'm still the ALP National Executive. And it'll be onward and upward. And so what we do next,

Helga Svendsen 15:06

You're also on the board of the portable, long service benefit authority. And I'm interested to hear about that because it's a new organization, so effectively on a startup organization in some ways, because it's new. So I'm wondering if you can just give us a quick summary about what that organization is about. And also then maybe some of the governance challenges that have been in place because it's a new organization.

Linda White 15:32

It is new organization. So it basically collects from employers in the community sector, the security industry and the contract cleaning industry money for employees for long service leave, because in each of those industries, they move between employers a lot because of the type of industries they are and so it was something that ASU has campaigned for a lot across Australia. It's his game in the ICT and has been there for quite a while. And there's also those are wrong service low schemes, and particularly the construction industry across Australia. So is new for these industries in Victoria and only the second to this set of industries in in Australia. It is about starting up and looking at the infrastructure where the office would be how it's going to operate, what does the legislation mean? It's going to collect a lot of money. So what the investment structure is going to be all of those things are new. And so from that point of view is fascinating to be involved in there are guidelines because it's obviously a state entity about things, but it is starting afresh and it is starting from the first of July. Employers you know, their liability Start. So they've got to make their first payments. I think by September, you know how much money is going to be collected, what the levy should have been all of those things were preliminary decisions that the board had to make. And that will set the scene for years to come really. So it was fascinating to be involved in it. It's a doing sort of, because there's a kind of, it's got an outcome thing, if you like that you've got to collect the money for each of these employees. And it's a kind of defined thing. So it's a bit different. And it's a service board, I suppose, in some ways, but it's really interesting, just to see it and because it's been a wish of their Australian Services Unit for a long time to have this in the community sector and missed out some years ago because the legislation didn't get through before an election and didn't get up so it was a big hiatus. So it is a lot of has been riding on this working because I wanted it for so long, as far as being honest, like sort of up I was on the legal industry Super scheme way back when which is a predecessor to, to legal super and that was like a cottage industry you can't think of it. You don't really think of superannuation as a cottage industry. But maybe I was around early enough to see it like a cottage industry where it was really small, hardly any investments who are certainly not the sorts of organizations hanging around superannuation back then as there are now and so sort of seeing how things developed from something small to something serious. And and for this portable, long seriously. It has real potential to change people's lives

Helga Svendsen 18:38

With that board when you came together for the first time. I could totally new board coming together. How did you come together? How did you work together? How did your induction go when everybody's new? How did all of that work?

Linda White 18:52

Well, they inducted us within each of our lives, which was interesting. I've never been through such as serious induction, like it was full on and everybody together so often you don't have that opportunity, because people come in, you know, at staggered times. And so that was really good because we really did it. And we went to talk about the legislation, we talked about, you know, how it interacts with the state, and what the insurances lie, what the investments are going to be like, how it will work, what the it and they've been a Department of Industrial Relations, and that's exactly it's nine, but they had a task force working group that set things up. And so to get their perspective on where things were, yeah, it was really full on things thing that was really unusual is that everyone came in at once. And so you had like a mass induction of everyone over long. It was over two days, just because they want you know, they can see it started at the start and they really wanted to make sure everyone was up to speed because there are a series of significant decisions that domain made pretty early. So that was interesting.

Helga Svendsen 20:00

What was your first board and how did you join that organization?

Linda White 20:03

I think the first one was either the Footscray community legal service, or a gallery called 200 Gertrude Street, which was a gallery for emerging artists. So it had studios, which is unusual. And it's had on its board, an interesting mix of people. The state government mostly appointed people. I think the artists also had I could select someone to be on the board. I was appointed by Jeff Kennard twice. So So that was an interesting board because it was something I didn't know too much about contemporary art. I didn't understand how the art spaces work, but it was a great born and somebody asked me who I knew who had been on it, who was getting off it and they asked me if I'd been on it and never been one to say no, I said sure. Yeah, I'll get on that was run on a smell of an oily rag but it had had a very long reputation and had definitely had some fantastic artists like somebody like I think how it actually started his career there, for instance.

Helga Svendsen 21:10

So you've been on a lot of boards, you would have seen a lot of different experiences at board and different chairs. Is there any particular experience that stands out to you,

Linda White 21:20

As lots of experiences is always a man, I can unfortunately go into the ALP National Executive which you have to wait for my memoirs. There's been some interesting times there, but I can certainly say in relation to some of the boards I've been on, which is often with quite conservative people who I would probably say not ideologically in the same place as me and I'm, what I learned from a couple of those boards. Where I've seen people like that is is that you shouldn't dismiss people just because they come from a kind of a different ideological point of view or a different background, there was a guy who's a chair of legal industry This game who was had been on a on a six boards, it was very senior, a senior partner of a very large Melbourne law firm. And he was really smart and but I think he described me as like a gentleman. He was a sort of an old school lawyer type but very clever. And he was very skillful as a chair and that he pretty much let everybody have their say, but somehow everyone always ended up close to what he thought or, but you always thought that you'd had your side now maybe he changed his view based on what people said, but I was felt like you always had a good chance to say what you thought and you're always brought it to a resolution. And he did that in a skillful way. I learned a lot from watching how he chaired sometimes a disparate group or with different opinions to kind of bring it to a head and you know, for the best interest of the members and so I think that is another whitelist and is that you know, you just can't just because people don't don't have the same background or look illogically different, you can't discount that they're not actually in it for the right reasons. And you can't find common ground. And I've certainly found that in other boards where people have had completely different political views, and I might have and have their experience would be on far more like, you know, conservative think tank or the like, and I think what are we going to have in common, but if you think of, you know, that you want to have good governance and you want the best for the organization that you're dealing with, if they are overriding principles, and all that stuff drops away. Indeed, having some of those diverse voices around the table, you know, the evidence around diversity is that having those diverse voices means that you will get stronger decisions. So learning how to manage that is one of the arts but it sounds like your former chair head. I think diversity is not just about political views. It's about gender. It's about ethnicity. It's about a whole lot of things and the boards that I'm currently on. I know the state government is really keen on ensuring that we have indigenous people, which adds absolutely to the way in which we look at things. And it also just people from different cultural backgrounds, because everyone comes to comes to issues in a different way. And I think the skill and the best working boards is where you respect what people say that is different. But in the end, often you come to the same conclusion, even if the route is a different one.

Helga Svendsen 24:31

Thinking about a conversation, which has been around a number of the boards that you've been on and some of the life lessons around there. If you were the chair of this, and this were a board meeting, how would you be summing up? What are some of the main points that you want people to take away from this conversation?

Linda White 24:48

I think that endeavor to learn all to learn things. I don't know if that's come through, but I find with the boards that I'm on that I don't think that I know everything just because I've been on other things before because every experience is different, the challenges can be different. But the more things that you've done, even if it's, you know, you can bring those two boards. And I find that being on boards helps me at my work because it exposed me to a lot of different things. I suppose the other lesson I'd say is, is those are incredibly refreshing to get away from the things that you know. And you can't underestimate what you do know. And that you can apply to a lot of circumstances, then, you know, I would never say no, which is probably why I ended up on a bunch of things, but I also think it can constantly learning the boards that are been on the wire, which governance has been to interpret it over a long period is changed people's responsibilities and how you viewers change. And I think that those are things I guess, I'd take from it. As I said, I'm probably a product of my upbringing. My parents run everything and I've taken that and run with it.

Helga Svendsen 25:58

Someone's got to do it, Linda. It's a fantastic it's a fantastic trait to have. Is there a resource that you'd like to share with the community at TED Talk a book, an idea? If there's not, that's okay.

Linda White 26:12

No, there isn't. But there's maybe one other thing I might say, spot the Fed has been speaking for 30 minutes. I also think that another thing that I didn't talk about that I do think, is that you shouldn't just speak to hear your own voice, which is bit odd talking about a podcast, but I think that what I have learned is that impactful interventions are important. So sometimes it's the quality, not the quantity and that I've certainly set on a number of boards where, like some people don't say much, but you know, that their mind is ticking over. So I don't know if that's in a TED talk anyway, probably not. Again, they talk all the time, but I think that, that it'll be another like if somebody's written about that. It's hard to make something where everybody goes, Okay, that intervention was really that's changed the way in which we operate. I think that's an important thing.

Helga Svendsen 27:00

Thank you, Linda. It's been so fantastic to talk to you and hear some of those stories and hear those experiences, you know, way back to you learning it as a kid from your own family and through university and then onto the boards that you've been on. So thank you for sharing some of that wisdom with us today. And I know the community will get a lot from our conversation. So thank you. Thanks, Helga.