# BCA at 40: Where we are and how we’ve got here

Keynote Address

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## Abstract

This keynote presentation traces the 40-year history of Blind Citizens Australia from its founding in Melbourne by a small group of activists to its current profile as Australia’s national association of people who are blind or vision-impaired. The presentation will identify four phases of BCA’s evolution, concentrating on its formative and development phases through to the year 2000. It will highlight some key developments centring on access to information and the built environment and identify some strategic partnerships that extended BCA’s influence in pursuing its policy objectives. The history of BCA’s international involvements, together with its relationships with governments and blindness agencies, will also be briefly addressed.

## Biographical note

Bill Jolley was BCA's first secretary in 1975, and later he was the organisation's president and executive officer. He is currently a member of BCA's finance and audit committee, a member of the board of Vision Australia and the outgoing treasurer of the International Council on English Braille. In 2000 he received the *Medal for Happiness of the Blind from* the Viet Nam blind Association and in 2004 the *Blind Citizens Australia David Blyth Award*.

## Introduction

Good morning friends and colleagues gathered here in Perth, and good afternoon to those of you listening in Eastern Australia. Thank you President Greg for your introduction, and thank you for your service to the blind community as a BCA director since 2001 including your time as president.

It’s both a privilege and a responsibility for me to have been tasked with overviewing BCA’s first 40 years, so I hope that you’ll find the story gratifying if you have shared the journey and encouraging if you have not. I say ‘encouraging’ because despite any failings, mistakes and unfinished business *Blind Citizens Australia*, as a self-help organisation, has established a reputation and track-record of which we can all be truly proud.

There’s much that’s happened over the past forty years in both mainstream society and the blindness field, and these developments have been linked as many mainstream changes have impacted people who are blind or vision-impaired.

* In 1975 computers were largely confined to scientific research and large commercial data processing, and now they’re in our pockets. Computer chips were confined to research laboratories, whereas now they’re everywhere—in our audio book players, in our white goods and home entertainment systems, in our smartphones and even in our new-age clothes and prosthetic devices. CD’s and email, unheard of in 1975, are on the way out for music listening and social networking; cassettes and typewriters have gone.
* We have also seen tremendous change in Society’s attitude to persons with disabilities—moving away from segregation, institutionalisation and welfare towards inclusion, person-centredness and human rights. Even the language has changed—from ‘retarded’ or ‘handicapped’ to ‘impaired’. But sometimes I struggle with political correctness: I still call myself a blind person rather than someone differently abled through vision loss.
* The United Nations has also moved from a welfare to a human rights approach, highlighted by the declaration of 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons and the adoption in 2006 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
* As blind people we have seen the consolidation of mainstream education and the closure of schools for the blind; the convergence of blindness agencies; the consolidation of rehabilitation services with greater outreach to seniors and to people with low vision; and the ubiquity of audible traffic signals, synthetic speech and electronic information. Synthetic speech has surely been as revolutionary for blind people in the 21st century, as braille was 150 years previously. Although braille is the bedrock of my literacy, synthetic speech is my window on the world.
* Globally there was the historic merger in 1984 to form the World Blind Union; the creation in 1997 of the DAISY Consortium, which developed the technical standard for digital talking books; and in 2013 the Marrakesh Treaty, enabling the international exchange of accessible-format materials produced under exceptions embedded in national copyright laws.
* And in 1975 along came Radio for the Print Handicapped and *Blind Citizens Australia*.

I think of BCA as evolving through four phases:

* 1975–1988 was the establishment phase when the fledgling organisation was started, struggled for survival, relied on commercial fundraising and became incorporated.
* 1988–2000 was the development phase when the organisation first received ongoing agency grants; secured recurrent government funding; carried out information delivery or research projects; achieved peak-body status with defined service streams of individual and systemic advocacy, information dissemination, peer support and consultation; grew substantially; and partnered with other organisations to lead cross-disability policy-related projects.
* 2001–2015 has been the consolidation phase with the organisation focusing on advocacy and blindness-related policy development. The period opened with BCA closely involved as a watchdog partner in the merger that created Vision Australia, and has been characterised by long and difficult policy campaigns for accessible voting and audio description. This period comes to a close as a result of external changes that have shaken the organisation from its somewhat ‘steady as you go’ comfort zone to confront an uncertain future.
* 2015 and beyond is characterised as the challenge of an uncertain future with BCA having lost its Commonwealth secretariat funding and major change happening for blindness services due to the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme for people under 65 and the My Aged Care service gateway for seniors.

I shall concentrate on the first two phases, leaving others more closely involved to assess the third phase and a new generation with energy and guidance to chart the way ahead.

## Four phases of development

### The establishment phase

BCA was conceived, given the go-ahead and born at three meetings in Melbourne, each held at the *Blind Citizens Community Centre* in Kooyong—November 1974, March 1975 and June 1975. The first meeting chose a small group and tasked it with hosting a meeting in March to consider the proposition that a national organisation of individuals should be formed. The March meeting agreed in principle to form an organisation to be known as *National Federation of Blind Citizens* that any blind person could join by right; and decided that the organisation’s first national convention should be held in June to adopt a constitution, elect a governing committee and debate policy resolutions.

BCA’s first president was David Blyth who received 32 votes, with Phyllis Gration and John Machin receiving four votes each. The first committee was made up of David Blyth president, Hugh Jeffrey vice-president, Bill Jolley secretary, Phyllis Gration treasurer, Allan Bates, John Machin and Peter Sumner committee members. Since that time a further 75 people have served on our governing body variously known as the Committee, the Council or the board.

At the June meeting the name was agreed, an annual membership fee of $3 was adopted and branch voting at conventions was approved. In 1999 the name was changed following some years of socialising *Blind Citizens Australia* as our common-use name. The organisation’s first pragmatic decision was that individual voting at conventions would be retained until such time as there were 25 active branches. A few years later a second pragmatic decision was made, but this one had a sting in its tail. We decided to adopt life membership rather than annual membership to save the administrative burden of collecting annual fees—and to increase our membership numbers.

Two icons of the organisation in its formative years were Hugh Jeffrey and David Blyth.

Hugh was a stalwart of self-help by people with disabilities—a music teacher by profession and a gentleman by nature. Hugh was my music teacher at primary school. But much more importantly he was a great role model and encouragement to we young ones to enjoy life, to maintain high expectations and to take our place in society. Every Christmas, as a teenager, we got a phone call from Mr Jeffrey—he’d speak to Christine, Stephen, Bill and Bernadette—just to keep in touch, see how we were doing and share some words of gentle encouragement and inspiration.

Hugh was a mainstream activist—first standing for Parliament on behalf of the Australia Party against Malcolm Fraser—and then contributing as an active member of the Australian Democrats. He was our first internationalist, taking a leading role in drafting *A Charter for the Blind of the World*, adopted by the *International Federation of the Blind* at Colombo in 1969. I shall briefly digress to give a flavour of the Charter through the following paraphrasing of the text because it has the stamp of Hugh’s philosophy and because it has so heavily influenced BCA’s own core beliefs.

* All people who are blind are not blind people who happen to be citizens, but citizens who happen to be blind.
* Blind people, like any group in society, want to think, speak and act for themselves; so representatives of organisations of blind people must be recognised as the authentic voice of blind people.
* No blind person shall be denied training, employment, advancement or equal access to superannuation on the grounds of blindness; always being regarded for one’s abilities possessed and never discarded for disabilities apparent.

Hugh Jeffrey’s lasting contribution to BCA is *The Jeffrey Blyth Foundation* which he founded and fostered through a generous bequest of more than $300,000. He walked the walk of commitment and self-help through which BCA’s effectiveness through longevity and independence will be assured.

David Blyth had an entirely different style. A product of the rural working-class in Northern Australia, he is a big-picture pragmatist. A President of nearly everything he’s touched—the cricket, the golf, the Guild, the Union, the Roundtable, his Lions District, the ANCB and the WBU—But David’s first love remains BCA. The strong partnership and deep friendship between David Blyth and Hugh Jeffrey was a great example for me, with their contrasting cut-around or cut-through approaches which had one thing in common—what’s good for blind people is paramount, and what BCA believes, says and does must always be directed to that end.

David was our first President for seven years from 1975, serving another three-year term from 2007 when a governance crisis called for an experienced hand to steady the ship. He also served as Executive Officer almost 35 years ago, at considerable cost to his family business, maintaining a BCA commitment that never wavered.

BCA’s growth into the 1980s was steady, but our acceptance and sustainability were by no means assured. We tried to expand beyond Melbourne and were successful in Sydney with Joan Ledermann, Wal Bolin and Graeme Innes sharing the burden of leadership, but interstate parochialism was as yet untamed. I still hear the words of Dolly Lee ringing in my ears: “You’ll be welcomed in South Australia, but wait until you’re asked.”

Sustainability was a challenge, for there were no government grants, there was more resentment than partnership from the blindness agencies, and income was insufficient to support a national member-based organisation whose communication costs were magnified by the need for braille, cassette and large print. An early grant of $500 from the Villa Maria Society was encouraging, but the hand-to-mouth existence remained taxing.

We survived during the 1980s by commercial fundraising, walking a fine line between maintaining our dignity and selling our soul. Our regular magazine *BUFF* that later became *Blind Citizens News* was underpinned by mainstream advertising, and much of our energy was expended on telemarketing of dine-out voucher books and pen-sets. We also benefited from waste rag collection and the sale of flowers in restaurants. It was hard going, mind-numbing, critically important in the beginning, but not sustainable.

By 1986 we had recognised the need for a major paradigm shift if the organisation was to move beyond mere survival towards growth. We appointed John Simpson as Executive Officer, incorporated as a company limited by guarantee and set about the massive challenge of securing recurrent funding from the government and the blindness agencies. It’s astonishing to recall that BCA had Gift Deductible Recipient status from the Tax Department for close to ten years as an unincorporated association. In 1987 four members contributed $500 each for us to buy our first computer—Joan Ledermann, Graeme Innes, Barry Chapman and Chris Stewart—and Graeme Innes tithed to BCA for several months in solidarity with John Simpson whose wage had to be reduced for lack of funds.

### The development phase

By 1989, following the passing of the *Disability Services Act (1986)* emphasising consumer-focused funding, client control and a shift away from block grants, BCA began to get traction with the blindness agencies as a legitimate organisation, and with the Commonwealth government as deserving of project funding. We had entered our development phase. For most of this period the Executive Officers were John Simpson and Bill Jolley, and the Presidents were Bill Jolley and Michael Simpson. I guess it was the Jolley-Simpson era.

* In 1989 the Commonwealth government funded BCA to carry out two research projects complementing the Department’s own service reviews. One review concerned the breadth and quality of orientation & mobility services and the other concerned the breadth and quality of print disability production and library services. These reviews were largely a response to BCA’s ongoing agitation to receive funding as an advocacy service provider under the Act.
* When new service proposals were called-for two years previously under the newly introduced Act, BCA and the blindness agencies all independently completed the 99-question application form seeking new-service funding. For us, it was a huge amount of work. The Department threw up its hands in horror at the fragmentation within the blindness service sector, as a result of which no blindness services were funded.
* During the period 1988–90 the Victorian government became concerned about some practices of several of the blindness agencies, and responded to the agitation of BCA by agreeing in 1991 to fund BCA as a counterpoint to the agencies with a grant for half a unit each of advocacy and information service delivery.
* Meanwhile, we kept up the pressure on the Commonwealth which funded more projects but procrastinated on our recurrent funding requests. One project was the Employment Information File that enabled job seekers to link up with role models engaged in a variety of occupations, but the project lapsed for want of ongoing funding to maintain the database and grow the network.
* We changed our focus from advocacy to secretariat funding, following the devolution of service funding under the first Commonwealth State Disability Agreement, but the Commonwealth responded that if BCA is funded then so must be the deaf, the physically disabled, the intellectually disabled, etc—this was prior to any funding to national associations of people with disabilities apart from DPI Australia.
* In 1994 BCA secured national secretariat funding from the Commonwealth with peak-body status to provide advice to government on behalf of the blind community. By contrast with the other organisations BCA and Deaf Australia received supplementary grants recognising their increased costs of communicating with their members. This national secretariat funding underpinned the organisation’s operations through until June 2015, and was critically important to the organisation’s survival and growth.
* By 1990 some blindness agencies promised to fund BCA recurrently, and some even withdrew from the Australian National Council of and for the Blind stating that they could not afford to fund both organisations. Ongoing funding from only RVIB in Melbourne and RBS in Sydney materialised, underpinning the funding now received from Vision Australia.

During his seven-year term as Executive Officer John Simpson emphasised partnership as a means to a win-win end with advocacy.

* I recall Telstra’s proposal to charge a fee for calls to the 013 Directory Assistance service—Blind people were exempted, and Telstra paid for our 1800 number to handle enquiries and for community service announcements to promote the exemption.
* There was the development of Cashtest Australia funded by the Reserve Bank which began as the resolution of a DDA complaint lodged by Graeme Innes.
* There was the dissemination of electoral information including Party Political content funded by the Electoral Commission and the major Parties.
* And there was a regular series of community service announcements using the national RPH network and other media outlets where practicable concerning these and other projects.

BCA expanded its communication media including Blind Citizens News, SoundAbout and New Horizons; and grew its membership to peak at 3,000. Neville Kerr, Christine Simpson, Lynne Davis, Dale Simpson and Stephen Jolley made significant contributions in gathering, editing and presenting content, with Blind Citizens News and SoundAbout becoming ‘must read’ or ‘must listen’ publications for some agency CEOs.

We introduced the pre-authorised credit card (PACC) program which, although in need of a refresh to include direct deposits and grow the contributor base, continues to be the mainstay of member contributions. Our members have supported BCA financially, a defining characteristic that separates BCA out from among its peers.

BCA’s policy pursuits have been characterised by long and difficult campaigns, and success has largely been achieved through partnership with like-minded organisations, social movements or political philosophies. BCA’s unique contributions have been the inclusion of rich, blindness-specific content in areas such as: pedestrian safety and way-finding in the built environment; information accessibility and product useability in the digital environment; and access to goods and services under equitable terms and conditions with the rest of the community.

When I recall my time as Executive Officer during 1994–2000:

* I think much about the individual advocacy service led by Aileen McFadzean, which made a positive difference to individuals in the fight against discrimination or bureaucracy in areas such as education, employment, access to goods and services, and social security;
* I think about our research projects concerning digital radio, audio description, access to telecommunications and banking services and to electronic information, and services and communication products available to people who were deafblind—much of this work done by John Simpson, Gunela Astbrink, Tim noonan and Mary Ward;
* I think about our cross-disability engagements hosting the DDA Standards Coalition and the Telecommunications and Disability Consumer Representation project;
* I think about our development projects in Zimbabwe, Fiji and Vietnam; and of course the World Blind Union General Assembly held in Melbourne during November 2000.

I also think about the outstanding contributions of numerous individuals, many of whom have been recognised through the *Blind Citizens Australia David Blyth Award*, the BCA Certificates of Appreciation and the *Diana Braun Aspirations Award*. It’s truly been a team effort.

Back to projects for a moment! The one in Vietnam, supported by funding of close to $300,000 from the Australian government, trained 125 women to teach braille and other daily-living skills to blind people and resulted in several thousand blind people receiving community-based rehabilitation. It’s the one dearest to my heart. BCA’s contribution was recognised by receipt of the Friendship Medal from the President of Vietnam—only the second non-government organisation ever to receive this prestigious award.

I will never forget, walking into a make-shift class-room in rural viet Nam, hearing the sound of 20 blind children aged 6–16, writing braille with slate and stylus. Like the sound of gentle rain on a tin roof, reminding me of my child-hood, it reinforced to me the each and the all—that each little effort put all together can change the world. Oh the gift of literacy, that we all may enjoy!

## Conclusion

I cannot close without mentioning BCA’s contribution at the international level. In particular, the outstanding presidencies of David Blyth and Maryanne Diamond of the World blind Union, and Joan Lederman as leader of the International Council on English Braille. I view David and Maryanne as WBU’s two most effective leaders, because they addressed complex issues, they led the hard decisions and they got things done.

Finally, a personal note. My BCA journey has been a privilege—having been placed in positions of responsibility and trust—I have been spiritually enriched and materially enlivened. I wish BCA longevity, prosperity and effectiveness; and to our incoming leaders, headed by Emma Bennison and Leah van Poppel, I wish you every success and offer you the kind of support that parents have for their adult children—shared knowledge and wisdom upon request. Please just relax and feel free to ask!

I thank my close friends along the way; I thank my wife Carmel for her steadfast support—a healthy mix of compliment and critique—she has been with me for the entire journey; I acknowledge and thank my siblings—Christine, Stephen and Bernadette for their solidarity and advice; and I especially thank my children—Bridget is here today—for putting up with a father too often absent or pre-occupied during dinner—but nonetheless whose Dad-jokes have stood the test of time.

I thank you all for listening to my reflections this morning, and I trust that your attention has been rewarded.