



## Chapter 1

# A Short History of Volunteering in Australia

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*It is vitally important for us to understand the history of volunteers and volunteering in Australia. By doing so, we are able to better position its importance and relevance to our social, cultural, political and economic activities, both now and into the future. This chapter provides a brief historical overview of volunteering, voluntary action, and the shifting relationship between the state and the voluntary sector in Australia. It suggests, too, that there is a particularly 'Australian way of volunteering'.*



### Introduction<sup>1</sup>



We have a rich history of volunteering in Australia but as Joy Noble and Fiona Johnston suggest, 'the true value of volunteering has been largely overlooked' and its significance tempered (2001: 151-52). Just like contemporary volunteering, its history continues to be understated and misunderstood. Despite the significant roles played by volunteers in Australia and the large numbers of Australians that volunteer (over one-third of Australians over the age of 18 volunteer on a regular basis), volunteering continues to be under-represented in policy debates and falls outside our economic structures and standard statistical models. The first full-length Australian Bureau of Statistics national report on volunteering in Australia only appeared in 1996. The interest in volunteering by governments at a State, Territory and federal level is also relatively new. Only since 2000 have offices for volunteers and ministers for volunteering been introduced, and even here, in some constituencies in the second decade of the 21st century, the momentum and interest appears to have stalled.

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1 This chapter updates my earlier one in *Volunteers and Volunteering* (2000) and includes elements of chapter 2, 'The Australian Way of Volunteering' in Melanie Oppenheimer (2008) *Volunteering: Why We Can't Survive Without It*. Sydney: UNSW Press.



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