

## Extinction or Survival

### *Probus's future in Queensland*

Rob Neary

*Extinction is the rule. Survival is the exception.*

*Carl Sagan*

It is no secret that the number of Probus clubs and membership of Probus clubs has been declining in Australia and has been for the last ten years. But this is not new information.

For the past few years clubs and associations have been facing the difficult task of finding members willing to take management committee roles within their clubs and, for many, attracting and retaining new members. In the October 2015 issue of the Queensland Probian, Rotary Probus District Chairman (RPDC), Ian Hamilton, pointed out that there were certain characteristics of clubs that had to close and among those was “while there still remained a significant number of financial members, nobody put their hand up to take part in the committee; probably because they had ‘been there, done that’”. He also observed that “the clubs consisted largely of very senior citizens, with corresponding lower energy levels; no excursions or trips around to make things interesting; and there had been no new members for a long time and, as my guess, new younger members did not want to get involved with an inactive group.”

The late Bob Rogers commented, in the February 2016 issue of the Queensland Probian, that “for some members it’s becoming later than you think”. While his comment was directed towards Probians not putting their name forward for committee positions, a perennial problem in February and March of each year, it was also pertinent to the sustainability and membership development of clubs.

Robin Bechly, also a RPDC, in his article in 2016 declared “our motto emphasises three “F” words, *Friendship, Fellowship and Fun*. I believe that we need to add two “R” words to our motto, *Rejuvenate or Recede*. I have selected these words because I believe that it is becoming very apparent that many clubs have faded away or are in the process of fading away because they have not introduced new members at the younger end of the Probus age spectrum over the years.” Robin offered this advice to clubs: “start now to recruit new members from an age group which will provide a balanced and reasonable age spectrum within the club and thus set the club up for long term existence.”

*Our dilemma is that we hate change and love it at the same time;  
what we really want is for things to remain the same but get better*

*Sydney J. Harris*

In 2016 Probus South Pacific Limited (PSPL) acknowledged that clubs would need assistance in redressing the fall in numbers of both Probus clubs and Probus club membership. The project focus was Membership Development and Retention and PSPL called for Probus members willing to undertake the role of Probus Ambassadors and helpers to implement a Membership Development Strategy (MDS) – see PSPL letters to all Probus Clubs 3 March 2016, 22 April 2016 and again on 4 August 2016.

“PSPL’s primary focus is to grow Probus membership so that more retirees can have the opportunity to be part of this great movement called Probus.

Although expanding Probus is our primary focus, PSPL cannot do it alone. Each of us have a key role to play.

Over the coming weeks we will be communicating with all Probus clubs and Probus associations about how we can work together to grow this wonderful community through the use of Probus Ambassadors.”

Silvana Martignago, CEO, PSPL 3 March 2016

And

“Recently, I wrote to all clubs regarding the need for us all to focus on membership growth and retention. Whilst there are currently 135,000 Probus club members across Australia and New Zealand, Probus club membership has been declining over the past decade.

Despite both your and our efforts to address the decline, we have not been able to reverse the trend because of the aging of members, attrition and the impact of competing organisations. Although, many new clubs have commenced over the last few years with some becoming full quite quickly, there has been insufficient growth to replace the clubs that have closed.

The decline in membership is not due to a lack of interest in Probus by members of the Community, as we continually receive enquiries about prospective membership, and we are also aware that many clubs are thriving and have significant waiting lists.

Unfortunately, there are also many clubs that have been unable to increase their membership. In a number of areas, we are aware that there are simply an insufficient number of Clubs to meet future membership demands.

Probus club members are our greatest ambassadors because you are the best example of how great Probus membership is and what a difference it has made to your lives.

PSPL are now seeking the assistance of Probus club members to collaborate with RPDC’s as Probus Ambassadors. The purpose of these members is to provide local support to RPDC’s in your local community.

The PSPL team will also work with the RPDC and Ambassadors to review the membership trends in Probus clubs within their defined area to assess whether or not there is a potential for membership growth. Once identified that membership growth can be achieved through either the establishment of a new club or by working with existing clubs to increase membership, a strategy can then be developed for that community.

If a new club is required, the RPDC’s role would be to obtain sponsorship support from the local Rotary Club. Local clubs will be kept informed of the need to form a new club in an adjacent area.

Probus is a great and worthy organisation for retired and semi-retired members of the community. Let us all work together and make Probus “a lifestyle choice for all retirees”. “

Silvana Martignago, CEO, PSPL 22 April 2016

The project acknowledged that the answer to the continuing decline in Probus numbers, clubs and membership, could not be solved by simply adding new members. Strategies to assist clubs with the retention of existing members was also needed. Probus South Pacific Limited included suggestions for improving club appeal to current and new members in a number of PSPL communications sent to clubs in 2017 – see Probus Community News October 2017 and January 2018.

*Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time.*

*We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.*

*Barack Obama*

In May 2018, PSPL signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Probus Association of Queensland (PAQ) which included a new role for the association beyond that of simply organising social activities for inter-club participation. Under the MOU, PAQ would, within PSPL guidelines and policy:

- Work with Rotary District Probus Chairman, Probus District Chairman and/or Probus Ambassadors in the implementation of the Membership Development Strategy across its affiliated Clubs. It is anticipated that this could be achieved through the existing Regional Liaison Officer Network;
- Identify and support volunteers willing to work as or assist RPDCs, PDCs and/or Probus Ambassadors in the growth of existing Clubs and/or formation of new Probus Clubs with guidance and assistance from PSPL.;

and

- Assist in the organization of Probus Information Days in conjunction with PSPL using information, audio visual aids (AV) and other materials supplied by PSPL in collaboration with the RPDC, PDC and/or PSPL Representative.

In June 2018, PSPL conducted a Membership Development Strategy (MDS) awareness and information seminar for members of the PAQ committee and representatives from the Gold Coast and Northern Rivers Probus Association. As a result of this seminar it is envisaged that PAQ will assist in the implementation of this strategy by identifying Queensland Probus members willing to undertake the role of Probus Ambassadors and assist in the implementation of the MDS throughout Queensland.

*He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution which rejects progress is the cemetery.*

Harold Wilson

All Probus clubs need to confront the need for the establishment of a Membership Development group; either from within their current management committees or with assistance from club members. This is not just a management committee responsibility. Each club member is, in fact, responsible for the success and continuity of their club.

Advice on what this Membership Development group should do was included in the January 2018 Probus Community News and can be summarised by the steps suggested in that memorandum. Set some goals; create Your Club Membership Strategy; Implement the Strategy and Evaluate your success. PSPL and PAQ have materials to assist you in this endeavour

It is blatantly obvious that if something isn't done immediately, Probus will in fact become extinct as average ages in our clubs increase from the current 75 (Qld) towards the national average of 79 years. And in 2019, the averages will increase by a year making it more difficult to attract younger members to our current clubs.

It's up to every one of us to do something now to ensure our club's survival.