

MAKING THE FUTURE

Mike Hill



Mike's Speech at 'Over the Hill'
VLGA Farewell Dinner
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I'd like to start by acknowledging the Wurundjeri People as the traditional owners and responsible custodians of this land.

In particular I'd like to acknowledge the presence of the elected people in our midst:

- Host Councillors, Dick Gross and Julian Hill,
- Deputy Premier John Thwaites,
- Health Minister Bronwyn Pike,
- Local Government Minister Candy Broad,
- Minister for Aged Care and Aboriginal Affairs, Gavin Jennings,
- Cabinet Secretary, Richard Wynn,
- Senator Lyn Allison,
- Kelvin Thomson, MHR,
- Glenyys Romanes, MLC,
- Carlo Carli, MLA,
- Michael Crutchfield, MLA,
- Alistair Harkness, MLA,
- Councillor Brad Matheson President of the MAV,
- Mayors,
- Councillors and
- Julie Hansen, VLGA President and leader of not just an organisation but of a movement and your very special Committee Members.

And what about the once-elected people:

- Alan Hunt,
- Barney Cooney
- Rob Jolly
- Race Matthews and
- Susan Davies, five people who have each made a wonderful stirring contribution in different political fora are with us tonight, along with
- Winsome McCaughey and
- Trevor Huggard, two very special former Lord Mayors (joining Richard Wynn to make it a triumvirate) who keep providing me with inspiration and support.

I would like to recognise the diverse groups who are here:

- the early VLGA activists,
- EPA leaders,
- EcoRecycle Victoria staff,
- faith people,

- friends from various environment groups,
- the comrades from Brunswick and Moreland,
- people from various academic institutions,
- planners and consultants,
- my gambling campaign mates,
- ethnic community leaders including landmine and Afghan campaigner Dr Nouria Salehi, AO,
- members of the media,
- people from far-flung parts of Victoria like Portland and Wodonga and Rutherglen,
- a handful of very special local government CEOs,
- local government members of staff,
- Clare McArdle from the Local Government Division,
- my long-suffering WestWyck housemates,
- my dear former colleagues from the VLGA office with their proud new boss Andrew Rowe, and
- my very extended and blended family including stepmother Lesley Hill who has braved the discomfort of a walking frame to be here.

You are people of a common purpose and mind; you are believers in a quality system of democratic governance and you believe that that quality needs to start with our first level of government, the local. And, you are all contributing in different ways to ensuring that this occurs.

The Preface:

This is indeed a wonderful privilege to enjoy the role of being the catalyst for a celebration; to cause a gathering of such dedicated people to come together.

It will not surprise those that know me well, and there are a large number of you in this category present tonight, that I was insistent upon one thing in the organisation of this event and that was that I could speak and could speak first.

I wanted to speak because I wanted to have another turn at contributing to the local government history of the past decade or so and I wanted to make good use of this event as it might be one of **my** last opportunities to input into the local government history of this State. I am sure to try your patience and your appetites but I want to acknowledge the journey we have all shared and the success we have had in building the new local governments in Victoria.

I also put in a claim to speak **first** so that I could set an appropriate tone and standard for those to follow and so that I could maximise my assault on the carefully selected wines without impairing my delivery.

It has always surprised me that the history of the era of such turbulent change in Victoria's local government system has happened with so little analysis of any sophistication. From its very beginnings the VLGA has acknowledged this need and called for the importance of adequate and balanced analysis and assessment of the period.

The writers of history are not necessarily the participants in that history. One of the few available publications covering the era, a 1998 book edited by Professor Brian Galligan and published by the State Library of Victoria, 'Local Government Reform in Victoria', failed to provide one single mention of the VLGA or the personnel associated with it. Perhaps that was the way things were in 1998 although I recall looking at it in disbelief at the time of its publication. At best, this book with the omission of our part in the history can tell only one aspect of the story.

That book, along with 'Governing Local Communities - the Future Begins' edited by Peter Johnstone and Dr Rosemary Kiss and published by the Centre for Public Policy at Melbourne University, is the sole published record of the tumultuous period although Brian Costar in *The Kennett Revolution*, again through Rosemary, devotes a chapter of analysis in his book.

The very fact that our story, the VLGA story, has been largely ignored should be impetus enough for those of us in the middle of the action during the period in question to raise our voices and ensure that a remarkable story is told from the point of view of those who were actively involved in it.

And of course, the VLGA has been a source of constant comment with articles and media pieces galore since the mid 1990s. Some might suggest we were barely out of the spotlight during the tumult of municipal restructure, but it is time now for the serious analysis to take account of the work so many of us did to make sure that this period of change was ultimately of benefit to our communities.

The VLGA has already made this contribution itself; and perhaps its most significant contribution has been the commissioning in February 2002 of David Williamson's 'What Price Citizenship? The impact of the Kennett government reforms on democracy, citizenship and local governments'.

It is an important contribution, David, and I suspect your presence tonight with other supporters of democracy suggests it was a work of passion.

There are numerous unpublished pieces that need to be collated.

Prime amongst them is Hayden Raysmith's address to VLGA Planning Day 2000 at the City of Darebin Arts & Entertainment Centre: 'Remembering the Past and Planning the Future'. I have recently re-read it and have shamelessly used parts of it in this presentation.

This unpublished material should not be lost, not because of some romantic attachment to it but because it constitutes the foundation stones of our new democratic local government environment. It tells how we, the communities and their local governments, ensured that that history delivered benefit to people and to our quality of governance in Victoria.

The battles fought, the principles established, the issues canvassed and the stakeholders involved in this era have formed part of the new local government culture. And, there is a great deal to be proud of in that history and we are building strongly upon the foundation.

My contention in this presentation is that it is the local government activists and practitioners who have seized upon the changes wrought by the Kennett Government to gradually develop and claim the new local government environment in Victoria. I suspect this sector and its prime place in the Victorian governance landscape is not at all what the original architects intended when they embarked upon their program. However, I also suspect that the Kennett Government is not afforded appropriate credit for its reform program.

Tonight I am not going to be able to provide a definitive history of the era and its impact on local governments and their communities, but I am going to do a bit of scene painting. I am going to tell a few stories that I hope will be able to broaden people's understanding of the era and bring back some painful and productive memories.

The Period:

I am going to focus mainly on the period of the Kennett Government local government reform and its aftermath in Victoria and that basically means the decade from 1993 through until the present day.

This era of local government reform included the Kennett Government's most impressive array of radical change. And, what a mixed bag this turned out to be, driven on one hand by an ideological fervour for free market solutions and on the other by obsession with efficiencies of finance and administration. Fortunately the reform was also influenced by a few enlightened souls who saw opportunity for strengthening the hand of the first level of government.

Let me remind you of how multi-faceted were those reforms.

The administrative upheavals included boundary changes, requirement for appointment of CEOs and the contracting of senior managers. They included efficiency drives embracing rate reductions, rate capping, forced sale of community assets and Compulsory Competitive Tendering. In what will remain one of the most controversial highlights of the reform package, they also tampered with democracy. Councillors were sacked and Commissioners were appointed. The actions included bullying repeat sackings of two Councils and ongoing threats to any Council that aspired to being a 'People's Republic'. To be fair, these changes also had a democratic upside in the form of requirements to introduce more transparency and heightened levels of disclosure and access to information. It is interesting to note that these were requirements that did not even at this stage apply at a State Government level!

However, perhaps more seriously in terms of the story I want to tell the changes were clearly designed to make local governments accountable not to their constituents but to the State Government of the day. The changes laid a most basic challenge to the level and quality of democracy at the local and community level. This was highlighted by the many failed efforts, Melton excepted, to install 'elected commissioners', the introduction of ultimate Ministerial hiring and firing control of CEOs and the briefing of CEOs exclusive of their elected Councils.

The change of State Government in 1999 did not come as a surprise to many of us involved in local governments, particularly those in rural Victoria. It actually occurred at an opportune time for the local government sector. The calm that followed the storm that had been the Kennett Government enabled stocktaking and consolidation. The Bracks Government allowed local governments the breathing space to complete their efforts to reclaim their own sector and to explore its new opportunities and strengths. It allowed the progressives and the activists a chance to survey their own handiwork.

That is not to say that the era of change finished with the disappearance of the Kennett Government. The period of the first Bracks Government also featured quite significant systemic change. This included the relatively benign but quite far-reaching Best Value Victoria and the beginning of the important move towards constitutional recognition of local governments in Victoria. The period was skilfully managed by Bob Cameron, the Minister capable of making a career out of affability.

Essentially the first Bracks Government wisely opted to quietly remove the most objectionable features of the Kennett era and to use the reforms as the basis of its own platform. With some recent impressive local government election policy commitments the second Bracks Government looks set to continue to capitalise on the Kennett reforms.

Let me return to Hayden Raysmith's paper. Hayden baulks at the legitimacy of using 'reform' to describe the Kennett period. Hayden declaimed: '...removal of democratic rights, the removal of checks and balances and the move to secret government were called reform'.

Tonight I feel more generous. The Kennett Government addressed some of the most basic outstanding problems with the structure and functioning of Victoria's local governments. These were problems widely acknowledged from both within and without and from all sides of the political spectrum: boundaries, efficiencies, lack of capacity, cumbersome management structures and unaccountable practices.

It is beside the point that this reform was perhaps an exercise in deceit. The Opposition Leader who said that amalgamations of local governments would happen 'over my dead body' became the Premier who rammed through the sackings of all the State's Councils bar one.

I am happy to acknowledge the changes of the Kennett era as reforms, if reform has that meaning of converting and transforming into an enhanced condition. That of course does not mean that I condone the methods employed to achieve the conversion, the same methods condemned by Hayden.

However I would have to acknowledge that there is an ongoing and I suspect unending debate being had around the rest of Australia about whether the sort of change achieved could have been possible through more benign methodologies. The pragmatists, including the apologists for the Kennett era, will argue that the rest of Australia debates methodologies while Victoria's local governments surge ahead.

In the afore-mentioned Galligan publication, former Local Government Minister Alan Hunt broadens this debate on 'reform' by suggesting that the reforms were undertaken by a Government that looked upon local government 'simply as a service provider, and [upon] service provision as a business'. What may look like comprehensive change was perhaps driven by a fairly narrow reform agenda.

Putting this 'reform' discussion aside, I am more interested in focussing on the impact of the changes. In order to look at the impact we need to do some 'before and after' comparisons of our local governments while our memories still remain sharp enough.

In essence, the pre-amalgamation local government scene was dotted with some clubbish and protected entities that in many cases were so ludicrously small that they struggled to do much more than keep the roads graded. These had not evolved far from the original roads board status.

A key player of this era, Leonie Burke who chaired the Local Government Board from 1993 until she entered Parliament in 1996, rang this week to apologise for not being able to take part in tonight's celebrations. Leonie, with a degree of understatement, described pre-amalgamation local governments as 'struggling to muster respect'.

Collectively, as a force within the State body politic, the local government sector was appallingly conservative in that sense of always hanging on grimly for the status quo on most major issues of the day. The MAV was widely seen as being under the gerrymander of the numerous but not populous small rural shires. Although pockets of challenging activity emanated from the MAV it remained essentially a reactive and negative organisation under constant challenge for legitimacy by groups such as the Metropolitan Municipal Association.

The sector was also amazingly variable with the standing joke of the time being that you would encounter all possible political views on the spectrum as you visited the state's local governments.

In the 1990s inner city Councils like St Kilda and Brunswick were proud of their 'Peoples' Republic' status. Before them Fitzroy had led radicalism with its support for gay rights and road closures.

On the other hand, in some parts of Victoria local governments operated more like exclusive clubs and the position of Councillor was an

inheritance. One Council was famous for all its Councillors having silent phone numbers. The level of competition for election was extremely low and the reality was that most of the Councils had limited capacity to address serious social, economic and environmental planning.

Indeed, State Governments could well be excused for mistaking these local governments as mere service providers as this was often the way the Councillors and staff themselves would understand their own place and purpose in life.

The rather visionary 1989 Local Government Act required a Council 'to provide for the peace, order and good government of its municipal district'. This requirement all too rarely translated into Council discussions around providing good governance for communities.

Victorians have marvelled at the fact that the actual local government amalgamations were achieved with such little backlash. The Shires that threatened dire consequences against voluntary mergers less than a decade earlier surrendered meekly and community reaction was muted. Communities did not rise in anger and even amongst those communities where the Councils had begun to take their responsibility to govern more seriously there was disagreement about the way to greet the changes.

St Kilda Council led an impressive community campaign of resistance to amalgamation while the equally progressive Brunswick Council held numerous public meetings urging the community to accept the change and focus upon resistance to the erosion of democracy.

Brunswick was one of a number of inner-city Councils that supported the formation of the Committee for Governmental Reform in Central Melbourne in March of 1993. The Committee drew upon an impressive array of local government people, economists and social and land use planners to argue the case for 'an expanded central-city regional council.

I suspect this relatively low status of local governments along with the diverse response to the Kennett reforms were largely responsible for the lack of any organised and concerted campaign of opposition to local government restructure. There are those who disagree strongly with such a contention and argue that it was the absolute and total control of the Kennett Government that caused a sense of powerlessness. Here lies another ongoing debate!

There was a band of super optimists that felt that democracy could surface as a State Government election issue in 1996. There was no evidence at all to support this hope and Victorians by then appeared to be less concerned about what **had** happened and were focussing more on what their new Councils were doing now and how to restore them to democratic status.

By the time September 1999 arrived the mood was quite different especially in rural Victoria and it was a mood that was not read by the parties, the pundits and the players. Alan Hunt will testify to a wager he and I made about the outcome, although I confess I had not anticipated the foul mood in rural electorates translating into votes going directly to Labor; after extensive travelling around the State I had expected new Independents to join Susan Davies and Russell Savage from places like Portland, East Gippsland, Swan Hill and Shepparton. Out of these, only Craig Ingram was successful.

The issues were different by 1999 and the reaction against the Kennett Government was against cumulated withdrawal of services but it was also fundamentally about rural Victoria not being treated with respect and dignity. Robert Maclellan was about the worst possible choice for a local government Minister charged with the reintroduction of democracy after a period of such change; however, democracy appears not to have been on the government's agenda. A smarter government would have recognised the community's increasing frustration and provided room and support to enable local governments and their communities to begin the clean-up process.

The Conservatives missed their opportunity and it was Bob Cameron who proved to be exactly the sort of Minister required to allow local governments to grow in confidence. Perhaps that was something Kennett and his colleagues actually did not want?

Personal Perspective:

The pre-amalgamation period in local governments had been marked by some Councils and their communities forging new models of government and beginning to take the governance function seriously.

Two issues from this era played a role in my own readiness to be an activist through the looming period of municipal restructure. (Prior to the amalgamation I had actually determined to declare my local government

involvement over and finished and was ready to get back to more gainful employment.)

The first issue was the growing realisation building within my Council of Brunswick of its own limitations. It struggled to be taken seriously when it communicated with other levels of government and it lacked capacity to undertake serious community planning issues.

The second issue was the effectiveness of the Inner Metropolitan Regional Association (IMRA) and the resultant awareness of Brunswick Council of the power of the sector and of parts of the sector when it worked collectively and cohesively.

Tonight there are so many people who played an influential role through that era. Peter Tesdorpf was the visionary CEO and amongst others John Thwaites was one who gave IMRA drive and direction. Jenny Backholer, John Spierings, Melanie Eagle and Martin Brennan who are here tonight were drivers of different sorts of inner-city local government collaboration.

Like most people elected to local government I started elected life with a very narrow band of interests and objectives. I had the real advantage of being elected as part of an ALP team of Councillors that was backed by a strong community campaign.

Those election policy commitments had evolved into Council Policy and with that had come a responsibility towards their implementation. Through this process was the growing acknowledgement and awareness of the role and responsibility of being an elected representative.

Against this background we were faced with a State Government that continued to convey the subliminal message that local democracy was a bore and that people would be happy to do without it. This is why Kennett's 'Dead Cat on the Table' comment in which he indicated that he was considering retaining Kevan Gosper and co forever as Melbourne Commissioners served as a catalyst for concerted action.

I now concede that it may have been possible to discount this 'Dead Cat' utterance as yet another piece of Premier-speak, Jeff saying the first thing that entered his head. However, given the track record of that Premier up to this point, I interpreted the comment as a piece of very dangerous political kite-flying or mood testing.

By the time of the public furore over this issue the VLGA had been well and truly formed and the vision was unfolding of what the new local government environment could be like. The quality of 'governance' was looming as a serious issue and the VLGA was beginning to realise that the new Councils would simply have to be taken seriously by their communities and by the State Government.

This vision, enthusiasm and idealism was predicated upon the local governments remaining democratic in form and accountable back to their communities. The 'Dead Cat' threat had to be taken seriously. I spent days talking to journalists; 'talking to' might be polite, terminology, I harassed them!

You have all heard the stories about the group of inner-city Councillors deprived of their fix of Monday night camaraderie and claret who determined to form a Kennett-watch process. These people were not just protective of something they once had that was in danger; they were visionary and they did believe in a much stronger sector of governance.

In fact, I am sure they frequently disappointed people as they spoke at meetings around the state at the rate of more than one per week as they were talking not of how to retain the past, but of how to secure the future.

In a very short time some highly articulate advocates for a stronger system of local government joined the core inner city mob from other parts of Victoria. In no time at all the balance of the VLGA changed for the better and the dominance of the inner-city core was broken down. I found my new media contact list stretched a very long way beyond the Melbourne and Emerald Hill Times and the Brunswick Sentinel.

It was fairly hard holding down a job out there in the real world in 1994 and 1995. Not only was the VLGA growing into a beast that required constant feeding, but like many of the people here tonight, I was also engaged in forming and sustaining a local democracy group.

These local democracy groups, progress associations and Council Watch groups with my favourite being the vigorous Tallangatta Watchdogs, were springing up across Victoria and were calling on the VLGA to meet with them and provide speakers at their public meetings. The meetings ranged from five people to several over two hundred strong.

In Moreland, it was through monitoring and harassing John Warburton's group of commissioners that I probably learned again just how difficult it

can be to understand the background to the wide variety of material that crosses the agenda papers of a Council.

Alienation from the political processes is a serious threat to our democratic form of governance and local governments are the easiest access point to those processes. Along with my colleagues at Moreland and in the VLGA I was imbued with new determination to ensure local governments were able to set new standards in consultation and engagement.

At this stage I'd like to try to paint a thumbnail sketch of what it was like to enter the new local government world of the amalgamated Council, the professional CEO and an extremely hostile State Government. I think you need to realise that I had it easy compared to most: I had a wonderful team of comrades and a strong policy base, the most benign and supportive of commissioners in John Warburton and a welcoming and open administration led by an enthusiastic and experienced CEO in Peter Johnstone.

The new team of Councillors was dealing with distrustful communities with all of their preconceptions about what local governments did. To our horror within weeks of our election to the new Council some of our most outspoken community members began denouncing us because we had not embarked on an orgy of sacking and dismissal.

The community expectations were unbelievably high; there were expectations that we would redo the boundaries and immediately re-institute all of the old favourite committees that had existed prior to the amalgamations.

We were also struggling to understand the impact and grip of the Kennett Government policies and how to turn those to meet our own political agendas. I treasure the look on Peter Johnstone's face when one of my colleagues announced that we would be deliberately flouting CCT requirements and 'to hell' with the legal ramifications. We gradually learned to 'do it smarter'!

We, sometimes reluctantly, learned that many of the reforms had brought about great potential advantage to Councils; we had to learn really quickly how to use them. I still regret my tardiness at realising the significance of the Municipal Strategic Statement as one of those tools.

Developing a trust relationship with the staff was really difficult, even in a Council where the staff was itching to get to work with the newly elected team.

I keep using the word 'trust' and it is not an accident that so much of the VLGA's subsequent professional development work with Councillors has placed such strong emphasis on the development of solid trusting relationships, but those of us elected in those early days were cast into an environment of intense mistrust.

'We', the newcomers, felt that 'they', the staff had the advantage of us, that they were part of the conspiracy to neuter the elected Council. We felt they were contaminated by their collusion with the era of unelected rule. We carried with us the collective mistrust of the community that the Council had been taken over. Would we ever reclaim it?

At Moreland we did 'get there' and we did earn a reputation for being firm and for tackling some of the difficult issues. I'd have to confess that taking on a bank or three and a communications company or two (even going so far as to 'capture' a fleet of trucks) earned us community respect, but I hope we were also able to develop community understanding about how these new local governments could be put to work to advantage. Effective advocacy had become truly possible.

Through all of this the VLGA was an amazing crutch for the Councillors! Fellow Councillors flocked to it to learn 'how to do it', how to make the new Council work and how to be effective.

In those early days the VLGA was an informal network and a tool that worked in one Council would be immediately applied in another VLGA Council. An excellent example was the development of the Organisational Status Audit worked on by the tireless Peter Black and taken up by most of the 'Class of '96', those first Councils elected to inner Melbourne.

The VLGA came to formalise its support for not just newly elected Councillors but for candidates as well.

The VLGA's first candidate training course was run in conjunction with the Graduate School of Government at Monash University, in particular, with Professor Bill Russell. This was the start of a series of highly successful candidate training programs, developed initially by Graeme Frecker. Alan Hunt was always a star contributor and performer!

As well as being tactically of use to new Councillors, the VLGA was also quick to learn the importance of 'language'. No matter what justification there may have been to use the term 'customer' it simply had to be jettisoned. It was part of the destruction of governance and the dominance of the market approach to local governments. While Councils used the term 'customer' the community view of their function would remain restricted.

This room tonight is full of friends with whom I have had that argument many times over. I'd have to point out that most of them are CEOs not elected Councillors.

That language: 'competition, customers, corporate plans, purchaser-provider splits, commercial-in-confidence and compulsory competitive tendering' reinforced a notion that we were once citizens but had become cogs in the corporate wheel.

The VLGA evolved its own self-conscious language of: 'good governance'. We restored 'citizens' and thanks again to David Williamson for documenting how important that was. We spoke with care about local governments and assiduously added the plural 's' to remind people that there were actually many of them and they actually were all governments!

Language continues to be so vital: the new language of social capital and rebuilding communities is global. Governments are now using the language of 'triple bottom line' accounting.

Professor Robert Putnam has made two recent visits to Australia advocating the need to connect people to community and community institutions. Language is an important part of that connection.

The People:

I acknowledge that talking about people is always dangerous territory and is even more treacherous when it is ventured into relatively unresearched.

So long as it is understood that this is more scene painting and a collection of tales rather than a serious attempt to do history, I think I need to at least try again to tell some of the stories as I have been one of the people in the very epicentre of a period of such great interest.

In making the effort I offer the immediate apology and disclaimer especially to all those I will inevitably neglect to mention. I just hope an exercise in remembering can provide an insight into the sort of support the VLGA was able to draw upon in its various campaigns.

Community Groups:

Think of the groups that have been critical to the success of the rebirth of local governments in Victoria and you think of the Stegley Foundation and its undying commitment to building communities through local governments. The relationship with the VLGA was a marriage made in heaven and gave new opportunity to both. Stegley may have ceased operations but the Foundation left a legacy of which the family could be proud.

We had fellow travellers and co-conspirators in the People Together and Purple Sage Projects and we were joined by the Council of Progress Associations, another body committed to restoring quality democratic local governments. Jean McCaughey kept the focus on key principles and Mary Crooks was so effective at starting the debates and keeping them rolling.

Melbourne Voters Action Group emerged in response to the sacking of Melbourne City Council in the early eighties and its spirit breathed again through the VLGA. The experience of Lorna Pitt, Trevor Huggard and Martin Brennan as former Melbourne City Councillors was invaluable.

Rejected Senior Managers:

It might sound odd to say it now in the day and age when not too many CEOs would be appointed without a discrete, or often not so discrete, call being made to the VLGA, but it was not a great career move for a CEO or potential CEO to be too friendly with the VLGA during the mid 1990s.

The early VLGA desperately needed the perspective of managers who were likely to enter the system and greatly valued the input of people of the calibre of David Williams and Peter Black, both of whom have remained close friends of the VLGA and active in local government.

In Peter's case he had to leave the state to obtain employment and those of us who have maintained a contact with the thriving Marrickville Council where he is still General Manager know what a loss that has been to Victoria.

We need to recall the tightness of the system of the time and the constraints that existed to prevent people collaborating with the VLGA. These were brave contributors who made a difference to the capacity of the VLGA when it was most needed.

Local government luminaries

In some senses the VLGA made its real movement forward when people with broad understanding and background in the sector cautiously contacted us to see if they could work through and with us.

When Dr Graeme Frecker committed his talent, skills, networks and understanding of the sector the VLGA became a vastly more effective organisation. Graeme followed and worked with Professor Bill Russell, whose local government experience had been in Hawthorn, in designing professional development courses for Councillors and candidates. So many Councillors continue to thank us for the help we provided at that critical period.

Other highly respected players from the old era emerged, ready to join in the battle to create something good from the ashes. Former Portland Mayor and immediate past President of the Provincial Cities, Towns and Boroughs Association, Lynn Murrell, brought a wealth of networks and goodwill. Dr John Jago discovered us and went on to become our second President. John's earlier experience on the Sale Council had made him acutely aware of the possibilities offered by amalgamations if only we could survive the democracy deficit. John remains a prolific letter writer to the newspapers, local and statewide.

We had, and were often ridiculed by Minister Maclellan for having it, great support from across the Murray. Mayor and Local Government Association President Peter Woods could not abide a State Government that appointed commissioners and he was ready to expel them all from the national forum, the Australian Local Government Association.

The NSW Local Government Minister, Ernie Page, was a frequent visitor and supporter.

And all the while, there was that original batch of high calibre local government enthusiasts who kept pumping out the message. We should especially recall the efforts of Tim Costello, Lyn Allison and Glenyys

Romanes who burned up considerable greenhouse gases as they went from one public meeting to the next as VLGA spokespeople.

State politicians, past and present

One person stands out as having a powerful influence over me during this era. Alan Hunt had a passion for democracy and to him this meant local people being able to determine their own outcomes. He was a tactician and a philosopher and as he developed faith in the VLGA's purpose he made a very strong contribution to it as a writer, a speaker and a colleague.

The Opposition Spokesperson for Local Government through this period was Patrick Power. Pat became a very strong believer in the VLGA and its objectives, attending many of its ordinary meetings in Millott Hall at the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Last week I enjoyed lunch and a catch up with Pat Power to recall that close working relationship. Pat said: 'Do you ever stop to think where local governments might be today if it had not been for the VLGA?'

That closeness with Pat and the regular appearances of the NSW Minister for Local Government provided Local Government Minister Rob Maclellan with ammunition to discredit the VLGA. He resorted to the use of terms like 'ALP front' and 'the Friends of John Brumby'. Not only did this tactic seriously offend ardent VLGA members of the non-Labor variety, but also it was far from the truth. A story highlights this.

Under the leadership of John Brumby the then Opposition was conducting a series of Statewide workshops under the banner of 'Labor Listens'! When it came to local government as a policy issue, the VLGA asked to have an opportunity to put its position from the platform.

John flatly refused and Pat Power's intervention was to no avail. At this stage the MAV was at its lowest ebb with its relationship to the State Government of the day being somewhat parallel to the February 2003 model of the relationship John Howard has to George Bush. The MAV was under direction of government-appointed commissioners and was run by a refugee from the banking and insurance industries. When it became clear that the ALP was determined to put this sad and unrepresentative team on the 'Labor Listens' platform activism was applied!

The VLGA notified John that it would then be conducting its own 'Real Listening' forum in the foyer of Storey Hall and that it would be inviting the media and John's audience to join together to hear what was wrong with State Government policy and why the State Opposition would never make an impact on it. Hayden Raysmith quickly got to speak on the ALP platform!

The VLGA, always proud of its broad influence across all political parties, One Nation excepted, would surely use the same tactic with the Liberal Party!

We need to put on record the very strong commitment of the Independent Members of the Victorian Parliament to local government issues. Russell Savage had a passionate hatred of the period of sackings and a well-documented distaste for its principal author. Susan Davies was a regular contributor to VLGA forums and a co-collaborator on various poker machine campaigns.

Local governments benefited from the era of independents and their commitment to principles of good governance. The VLGA is proud to have played some small role in assisting with the development of the Independents' Charter which formed the basis of the first term of the Bracks Government.

Legal people

This period also developed a close working relationship between the VLGA and members of the legal profession with the Association's first resource book, written by David Parsons and Jon Faine on legal issues and local government, being published to help guide Councillors in their struggle for authority.

We were lucky enough to discover Peter Lucas, now of Macquarie Lawyers, in those early days. We used and abused Peter unmercifully for advice on all manner of issues large and small. Like so many other passionate VLGA people, he was prepared to contribute in the interests of a cause he supported so strongly and he has stuck with us as a solid quiet behind-the-scenes supporter. Thanks for coming tonight Peter, but we're not surprised that you're here.

Academics

The strong links the VLGA has formed with universities proved invaluable and reflects its commitment to the improved research and intellectual base of local democracy.

The links and joint programs with RMIT, VU, Centre for Public Policy, Institute for Social Research, Monash, LaTrobe's Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities and the rest has generated new respectability for the sector and provided outlets for tertiary institutions.

I am going to rattle off names like Jamie Doughney, David Ensor, Mike Salvaris, Martin Mowbray, Mark Considine, Brian Costar, Michael Buxton, Charles Livingstone, Nick Economou, Rosemary Kiss, David Hayward, Hal Swerissen and Ken Coghill and in doing so will have left off at least half of our important collaborators.

This collaboration has seen particular local government research projects conducted with and through the VLGA. Professor Mark Considine's 'Innovations' project is well under way and already opening up new understandings of how local governments function and how they facilitate change.

The work undertaken by people of the calibre of Jamie Doughney, Charles Livingstone, Ian Pinge and Professor Jan McMillen has put the VLGA in a position to speak with strong authority about the social and economic impacts of gambling.

CEOs

The VLGA has enjoyed a powerful and supportive working relationship with some of the best CEOs and senior officers in the State. The calibre of administrative leadership is high and the job is as tough as a job can get with so many interests to balance. There is small wonder that the expected influx of talent from the private sector was such a disaster.

The VLGA has strenuously defended the role and the remuneration in the face of vigorous misguided media attacks. The best form of defence from these attacks is improved understanding of the role and function of the Chief Executives and the VLGA has been prepared to publicly explain the difficulty and diversity and importance of the CEO's role in our local government system.

At the time of my leaving I can afford to name some names and probably forget others that I should have named. Peter Johnstone arrived in local

government administration through Federal and State senior postings. I believe the sector has learned a great deal from his thoughtful and creative input.

At the risk of omitting quality Chief Executives, I would like to put on record my enjoyment of working really closely with administrative leaders of the calibre of: Lydia Wilson, Kay Rundle, Catherine Dale, Phil Shanahan, Robert Dobrzynski, Bob Seiffert, John Bennie, Michael Malouf, David Spokes, Maria Mercurio, Mike Ulrich, Rob Hauser, Kevin Hannagan, Allen Bawden, Janet Dore, Rob Skinner, Bill Jaboor, Warwick Heine, Michael Kennedy, Peter Marshall and Gary Cecil. They do the job with such patience and such passion and understand and respect the critical importance of our elected leaders to community confidence in our entire system of government.

Commissioners

I have spoken of the tension with commissioners, but they were not all evil men and women; just misguided. However, some have since gone to great lengths to resurrect themselves and show their passion for true and flourishing local democracy and good governance. I mention John Warburton and Noel Harvey and Jeanette Powell. For their past misdemeanours these three alone are henceforth absolved!

The Activists

There is no category for him, but I have to mention Tom Moloney as one of the most persistent true believers of all time. Tom continues to watch and quietly suggest. He uses the VLGA to advance issues and causes and is one of the reasons why the VLGA adds such value. Where else would Tom be able to work to continue to improve the quality of our local governance if it were not for the VLGA's 'community chapter' of membership?

Presidents

The VLGA has been blessed with a President for the moment.

First there was Liana Thompson, last Port Melbourne Mayor and first at Port Phillip. Liana added lightness and colour and fun when all about her was falling into gloom.

Then John Jago added dignity and experience and a cool tactical head when the rest were wanting bloodshed.

Now Julie Hansen has provided passion and innovation and an irresistible push towards sustainability objectives at a time when complacency threatened to set in.

Staff

The VLGA has attracted the dedicated. It then underpays them and overworks them. It subjects them to all manner of night-time meetings in all parts of the State. It does not send them on overseas junkets and holidays. It forces them to listen to the anger of frustrated Councillors complaining about community members and community activists wailing about how bad are their Councillors.

They continue to do what they do because they are believers also and they continue to be appreciated by the membership because they really live that culture of openness and responsiveness.

Thank you to Andrew and your great team for all sharing an amazing workplace with me.

Those no longer with us

I want to remember two people who shared the VLGA journey for a while but are no longer part of the trip, two very special people of very different calibre and contribution; two friends, Andy Ingham and Mietta O'Donnell.

Family

Over the years I have watched some wonderful young people emerge from the homes of Councillors. This of course is in spite of all indicators to the contrary as you would have to wonder whether there is any more deserted a species than a child from a home of a local government politician. I'd like to congratulate my own Hannah for surviving this neglect and for continuing to remind me that there is another world to be enjoyed and one that offers great joy and satisfaction. I'd like to thank Hannah for contributing to my sanity with her practical concerns and reactions and comments.

And as for me dear partner Lorna Pitt, I'd like to thank her for contributing to my insanity. Lorna has been a source of ideas and inspiration, of vision and grand journeys and has given me eyes to see what is wrong on my own doorstep.

Lorna has believed in the journey with equal passion and has cheered me on through various difficult battles. At times they have been her battles that I have found myself running such is Lorna's capacity and passion for the issues and her persuasive ability to co-opt her friends to the task.

However, I would like to assure my friends and those close to her that I rarely consult Lorna over tactics and strategy. I think Lorna has taught me that there is more to political life than tactics and strategy!

Lorna has never begrudged the time I commit to the VLGA unless it appears to threaten my own health. To Lorna, time dedicated to improving local governments and the quality of our built environment is time well spent. Her knowledge and enthusiasm have transcended her own lengthy period in office as a Melbourne City Councillor and they will outlast my contribution to the VLGA. She is in short, a treasure!

Lorna's family and my extended household at WestWyck has been part of a wonderful support team. I am sure they wonder to what madness I have been setting out in the mornings. Perhaps they now know?

We all have these support teams or we would not be able to put in the hours and dedicated commitment to things so important. I urge you to acknowledge and nourish those that in turn keep you going.

One Commercial:

It would not be a Mike presentation without leaving behind one issue that I would dearly like to see the sector take up. At present we have some wonderful Mayors and Councillors but we have a structural problem that creates a perpetual weakness in local political leadership.

The annual election of our Mayors needs to be replaced with elections for a three-year period or at least until the Mayor loses the confidence of the Council. Until we imbue this important local leadership position with the same status we grant to our political leaders at State and Federal level we will struggle to be taken seriously.

We have strong administrative leadership in our local governments but weak political leadership. This is a dangerous imbalance.

Wrap up:

As a lot of you would know, Leonie Burke is still proud of some of the achievements of her Local Government Board and the impact it had on addressing the boundary question. She said in our phone conversation (and she knows I was to quote it) that local governments are now 'real competitors to the State Government'. That certainly was a claim that could not have been made prior to the period of municipal restructure.

I would like to finish with a quote from Hayden's paper to the 1999 Planning Day:

'The flowering of an organisation is not a linear process. Whilst there may be anchor points and common bonds the development path is essentially opportunistic. It comes from understanding issues, reflecting the views of members, having clear and guiding principles and stunningly good analysis of what matters and what will make a difference.'

I hope my sketching tonight has helped you gain more insight into the evolution of an amazingly effective organisation and some of the people who have helped it be that way. I believe, like Pat Power, that Victorian local governments would be substantially different were it not for that organisation and its people, many of whom are present tonight.

Thanks:

I'd like to express my deepest thanks to you all for coming to this very special event and thanks for making it the sort of occasion it already is! I hope I have not deadened it with a long and earnest speech.

I thank Rod Quantock for being Rod; for being a human of passion and flair and a man brave enough to publicly wear his beliefs right out there where we can all see them. Those beliefs have been succour to me even when I am not in full accord with them and Rod can make me laugh at things I thought were so incredibly unfunny.

To Liz Eastwood I'd like to give one very special appreciative thank-you for all the organisation of not just this event but for everything over the past five years or so. I am not an easy one to organise for but Liz you have achieved this and retained your sanity.