

## **“REMEMBERING THE PAST AND PLANNING THE FUTURE”**

Address by Hayden Raysmith

VLGA Planning Day, City of Darebin Arts & Entertainment Centre,  
29 January 2000.

Every organisation has its history, its stories, its myths and its defining moments.

Mostly born out of adversity, advocacy organisations provide a means for collective reaction with the wider world. They are a means for converting passive victims into active participants, helping to shape destiny and influence the course of events. They are a tool for responding to external circumstances, changing power relationships and asserting fundamental principles that underpin a good and decent society.

Little by little in asserting these principles and in the interactions with the external world, each organisation, almost imperceptibly, shapes its own distinctive organisational culture. The language, the decision-making processes, the openness or secrecy, the inclusiveness, the diversity, the defining of what is acceptable and not acceptable, the priority setting, strategic decisions and the level of trust both internally and externally together with the strategic alliances and position in the matrix of similar organisations.

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.

An effective organisation will be rooted in its past, committed to its principles, constantly adapting and highly strategic in how it will use its limited resources and skills.

The VLGA is no exception. It emerged when democratic rights were abolished by decree and when secrecy, managerialism and corporatisation threatened the very fabric of local democracy.

The VLGA believes in citizenship and democracy and it stands for what those simple terms mean.

Alan Hunt, lawyer, Upper House Speaker and Victoria's longest serving Minister for Local Government said in the VLGA's 1997-8 Review,

*“I have written and spoken often of late, about the importance of active citizen involvement to a healthy democracy. It is local democratic government that people relate to first.*

*It needs leaders, it needs a voice and it even needs elder statesmen.*

*The VLGA has been a remarkable vehicle for bringing this together and providing the leadership that has been badly needed."*

It is important to tell the story of the VLGA, to remember why it emerged and to reinforce the principles and culture that have made it so valued over the last six years.

A small number of people involved in local government believed that the issue of local democracy and the sacking of democratically elected local governments needed to be kept alive. The public policy issues needed to be debated. These were largely Councillors in exile. Liana Thompson, Tim Costello, Lyn Allison and John Spierings, from St Kilda and Port Melbourne, Glenyys Romanes, Mike Hill and Jenny Backholer from Brunswick, John Sawyer from Richmond and Lorna Pitt and Trevor Huggard from Melbourne.

Although elected Councillors had been replaced by Commissioners in the City of Melbourne in November 1993. The cities of Greater Geelong (May 1993) and Greater Bendigo (April 1994) had been created along with Ballarat (May 1994), Surf Coast Shire (March 1994), Golden Plains and Moorabool (May 1994). The major impact, however, came in June 1994 when Commissioners were installed by Special Government Gazette No.S35 in the newly created Cities of Boroondara, Darebin, Hobsons Bay, Moreland, Port Phillip, Stonnington and Yarra.

The media wanted spokespeople but to be credible individual deposed Councillors needed to be speaking on behalf of an organisation; to be representing a wider field of interest. The Victorian Local Government Association was spawned. It met at the old Brunswick West Primary school renamed West Wyck and home of Mike Hill and Lorna Pitt.

Lorna, as a sacked Melbourne City Councillor and Trevor Huggard, as a past Lord Mayor, were able to inject the experience of the Melbourne Voters Action Group that emerged earlier in response to the sacking of Melbourne City Council.

The outgoing Footscray Council gave a grant of \$2000 that paid for postage and other essentials in this formative stage.

Word spread and the experience of a wider range of people began to be harnessed. These included our current President Dr John Jago who was a former Sale City Councillor, Dr Graeme Frecker, a past President of both the MAV and the ALGA, Lynn Murrell, Councillor at Portland and President of the Rural Boroughs and Shires Association, Peter Black, out-of-favour CEO from Keilor and the first VLGA treasurer, to name just some. A membership list was created and quickly grew to some hundreds.

I do not do justice to the individuals and community organisations that nailed their colours to the mast in these difficult and inhospitable times. Being on the VLGA membership list carried the very real threat of being denied employment or losing funding. It was not a casual decision.

Liana Thompson was the first President and Mike Hill the first Secretary, by self-appointment or arrangement, who knows? Nobody much cared so long as things got done. With a passion for purple and the grooviest Vesper in Port Melbourne Liana was no ordinary President but embodied the passion people felt about local communities. Mike could type, had not discovered e-mail and was born with a telephonic ear-piece attached. His ability to be across the detail, articulate the issues and act as media spokesperson soon became legendary although Lyn Allison, to become Democrat Senator Lyn Allison, and Tim Costello were no slouches either.

Even at this early stage the VLGA established its reputation as a competent and fearless advocate and certainly one that got under the skin of a government that had no truck with public debate let alone dissent. The culture of an independent but responsible advocate was being shaped and has become an important part of the persona of the VLGA.

By early 1995 a constitution was drafted and the Association incorporated under the Associations Act with the unusual characteristic of two membership chapters, local governments and individuals and community groups. This bicameral structure underpins the Association's claim that it is the peak body for local democracy, not just a peak body for local governments.

The original name, Victorian Local Government Association was disallowed and the organisation became incorporated simply as VLGA Inc. with the letterhead changing to the *Victorian Local Governance Association*. Nobody at the time anticipated just how profound this simple change would become.

Almost incidentally other key elements of the VLGA culture were being defined. It was an organisation concerned with the processes of government and the principles of democracy, not just the formal structures of government. This placed the new organisation at odds with the managerialist model of government and with the notion that Councils should be shaped in the image of private sector boards of directors. It also was the antecedent of the important work around the Code of Good Governance and the affirmation of local governments as a legitimate sphere of democratic government.

Development of the organisation to this point had largely been reactive and a mixture of head, heart and gut reaction, it was hardly scientific. If the idea of a business plan was floated, it captured nobody's imagination. People talked to each other and did what needed to be done.

The founding group were increasingly being asked to address local meetings across the State and averaged more than one a week during the 1994/5 period.

This has remained a tradition of the Association with organised regional trips to every corner of the State over the last two years and speaking engagements at many local democracy groups.

Not only has this built strong links with other movements such as Purple Sage and People Together but it established unexpectedly important links with independent candidates in rural and regional areas, Russell Savage and Susan Davies being longstanding members of the VLGA.

A year later, March 1996, elections were held in twenty municipalities including those related to the most active members of the VLGA. Moreland, Darebin, Yarra and Port Phillip soon became members and between them contributed enough for the Association to place a small add for a consultant to provide executive services for six months. Hop Step and Jump was engaged in September 1996 and Hayden Raysmith became the first paid officer. Mike Hill still carried most of the workload, combining his Mayoral role at Moreland with Secretary of the VLGA. This became a formidable team and although the money ran out in just three months optimism was high and the arrangement hung together until Stonnington, Greater Geelong and Melbourne joined in 1997.

Establishing the role of Mayors and Councillors in 1996 was not an easy task. The corporate model was in the ascendancy, threats of Ministerial intervention were frequent and the Office of Local Government saw CEO's to be accountable to it, not to their elected Council.

Peter Black developed and helped undertake municipal audits, which enabled the incoming Council to have an independent assessment of the organisation and its finances which they were inheriting from the Commissioners.

Several key developments occurred during this late 1996 and early 1997 period, which were to further define the organisation.

The 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 the strong links the VLGA has formed with universities and reflects its commitment to the improved research and intellectual base of local democracy. It also was the start of the now highly successful candidate training program, developed initially by Graeme Frecker and other members of his committee and run this year in conjunction with Victoria University of Technology and the City of Greater Dandenong.

The VLGA began connecting newly elected Councillors with more experienced Councillors in what became an informal mentoring arrangement where people felt less isolated and less vulnerable, particularly to the criticisms and threats of the State Government.

The alliance between the Stegley Foundation and the VLGA was formed. The first project actively promoted community interests in local government, pushing

the newly elected local governments to address issues of community need. This set up a tension between the community and local government membership chapters within the organisation that has proved healthy in terms of how local governments should work with their communities.

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

Working Groups became the engine rooms for policy development, the first being the work on CCT by Andrew Rowe.

It was also during this period that the logo was developed, *Restoring Democracy* was adopted as the slogan, and the organisation created its 'virtual office'. Moreland answered the 1800 number and sent out mail-outs (until taken over by Yarra in 1997); whilst general meetings were held at the Brotherhood of St Laurence and other forums and meetings were shared around other local governments.

To this day the *VLGA* is a membership based organisation with everyone contributing what they are able. Its strength comes from the contributions of members.

This period became known as the shift from the shoe box to the mail box. The shoe box referred to the typically informal systems used by start-up organisations, where receipts and accounts all get thrown into a shoe box; something Councillor Geoff Baker from Banyule finally sorted out prior to Administrative Officer Elizabeth Eastwood computerising the accounts.

The post box refers to the now legendary article in the Herald Sun designed to discredit the *VLGA*, which featured a photograph of PO Box 369 Williamstown as the only tangible sign of this 'clandestine' organisation.

January 24 1997 was the first planning day. Attended by thirteen people it dealt with issues of organisation and membership development, legal issues, CCT, building regulation and Municipal Strategic Statements. It noted that the fight to save democracy in and support Darebin, Wyndham and Melton had been time-consuming, and a good deal of the future directions discussion was occupied by discussion of the relationship with the MAV.

Although there had been some membership growth and interest from a growing number of new councillors some individual members began to drop out as elected local governments were restored. It was imagined that when democracy was returned to the final raft of fifty-five local governments on March 15 1997, the *VLGA* might have done its job. This expectation was certainly confirmed by many of the early activists.

If this was the business plan, it was a dismal failure. In a perverse way, the more the Association tried to close the books, to describe itself as just part of the transition back to democracy, or avoid becoming too large or see membership growth as an end in itself, the more the momentum grew.

What became clear was that the *VLGA* was not just an organisation; it was a movement of people committed to local democracy.

In a turbulent and inhospitable sea it was a refuge, a point of contact and a reference point for people who were alienated and troubled by the removal of checks and balances, fairness and decency. It became a particularly important as a network and source of advice for newly elected councillors struggling to understand their roles, work with their administrations and fulfil their responsibilities.

Far from fading away the *VLGA* grew in strength and took on even greater importance as a media commentator and advocate for local government and local government issues.

As a consequence, following the March 1997 elections, the *VLGA* went through a further stage of organisational development. It moved into Ross House in August of that year, appointed an office manager and paid its secretary part-time. The October Local Democracy newsletter reported 16 local governments, 86 community groups and 400 individuals to be in membership. (This predated the culling of the individual list to clear those who had not renewed their membership.)

A cursory glance at the press releases and Local Democracy newsletter for that year indicates that the Association moved up a gear in terms of the issues it was running with. FOI, rating reform, rate capping, women in local government, municipal strategic statements, women in local government, the building code, amendments to the Local Government Act, postal voting, human services and the remuneration of Mayors and Councillors, to name just some.

There were, in this year, four defining issues that further established the *VLGA* and built its reputation for strategic thinking, policy analysis and substance. They were;

- The Globalisation and Local Democracy conference held at the City of Port Phillip in conjunction with the United Nations, Swinburne and Monash Universities. Tim Costello chaired the steering committee whilst Mike Salvaris and Ken Coghill made the academic links.
- The superannuation 'black hole'. In addition to a twenty percent rate cut and a rate cap, local governments were faced with an unfunded liability of \$330m for superannuation. Newly elected Councils were not only landed with the debt but were blamed by both the Premier and Minister for Local Government for the situation. Peter McMullin chaired the working group and eight local

governments joined forces to fight the issue. Together they contributed over \$100,000 in order to provide the best advice available.

- The cavalier treatment of local democracy by the State Government, by making constant threats, by increasing the authority of the Office of Local Government over the newly elected local governments, by amending the Act to reduce Councils' powers, by retaining Commissioners at Melton and by directly intervening and ultimately sacking the Darebin Council.
- The launch of the Code of Good Governance. Initiated by Lord Mayor Ivan Deveson at the "Leaders in Local Government" forum held in May 1997, it started as an industry code for self regulation as a defence against centralised State Government control of the newly elected local governments. When launched in December that year it was a code for democratic governance and a platform for raising the standards of governance and administration. Councillor Sam De Gabrielle, then Mayor of Mitchell Shire, chaired the joint MAV VLGA committee with Peter Johnstone, Bob Seiffert, Bob Beynon and Peter McMullin playing leading roles.

Throughout this period continual attempts were made to discredit the VLGA and to typecast it as a Labor Party front. It never was and it never will be. If it were it would never have survived. It is proudly political and it has many participating ALP members including its Secretary, but it would be insulting to other members to suggest that the Association is Party political. Consider the comment by the Mayor of Indigo Shire, Don Chambers;

*"Waste management, recycling, litter and environment issues are important to me personally as well as to our Shire and to regional Victoria. The VLGA has vigorously taken up the concerns of rural shires and provincial towns and has been an outspoken advocate of the impact of the superannuation black hole, and the possible impact of MAI on country areas. I believe that for this state to progress, people of different political affiliations need to get together and work for the benefits of their communities. The VLGA provides this opportunity and this is one reason I am such a strong supporter."* (VLGA Review 1997/8)

The VLGA now has 40 of Victoria's 78 local governments in membership, nearly 100 active community groups that range from powerful peak organisations to local progress associations and still around 400 individuals. It has a dedicated team of staff that others dream of, Rae Perry, Elizabeth Eastwood, Lerna Avakian, Sally Isaac, Pamela McLure and Mike Hill. It has an active and diverse committee and no less than nine active working groups.

I pause reluctantly at this point, with the last two years of the story untold. If I don't there will not be time for me to look forward. But I have made my point. The VLGA we are setting the direction for today has been shaped by its past, has emerged out of difficult times and as a result has developed an important organisational culture.

It is a membership based organisation where people give, contribute and work together. It is a movement of people with similar values and committed to the principles of citizenship and local democracy. It is a support network for those who believe in the importance of citizenship, local communities and good governance. It believes in the value of collaboration and strategic alliances. It is the peak body for local democracy, a media commentator and an advocate. It combines community and local government in the one structure. It values intellectual and strategic excellence and public policy and it believes in constantly raising the standard of governance.

### **HOW THE VLGA FUNCTIONS**

The VLGA has now reached the stage where it has a virtually unlimited range of issues raining down on it, by letter, e-mail, fax and phone.

It has a General Meeting once a month, three of which are devoted to reports by member Councils and two to reports from community organisations. This is the supreme decision making body and all members are sent agenda papers.

A committee made up of the seven office bearers and four elected members meets twice a month to sift the organisations business and make decisions that are reported to the General Meeting.

The work of the Association is undertaken through working groups, of which there are twelve, and through partnerships, strategic alliances and external committees upon which the VLGA is represented.

Judgements are being made constantly about priorities and matters needing immediate attention. Broad directions are set by General Meetings, committee and in particular by the Planning Day. The organisation, however, remains flexible and responsive often being taken over by a wave of media activity. These judgements are made by the Secretary in consultation with the President, Vice Presidents or working group chairs.

The Association has a close working relationship with universities, the Stegley Foundation and a broad range of special interest groups. It has a memorandum of understanding with the MAV and is considering a similar step with VCOSS.

Although there are no neat ways to categorise the activities of the Association it may be helpful to think of work under the following three headings;

- Policy development and advocacy e.g. gambling, human services, building, transport, planning.
- Strengthening local government and good governance e.g. candidate training, code of good governance, best value, voting systems.
- Community development. The Community Development and Social Justice Project, rural and regional development.



If the previous three planning days are any indication there will be no difficulty in eliciting many constructive suggestions in each of these three categories.

What is unique about this planning day for the VLGA is that we have a Government that has a written policy to work in partnership with local governments, a Minister *for* local government who is willing to discuss the issues and a changed political context.

As the first level of democratic government, local governments are constantly reminded of the legislative and financial constraints placed on them by both the Commonwealth and State governments. They were not a party to the National Competition Policy but the previous state government decided that they would be signatories to the agreement. They share the burden of home based services for an ageing population but they are under costed and under funded.

This context defines the opportunity structure for local governments. The recent Local Government (Best Value Principles) Act being a good example.

There are two issues facing the VLGA in 2000 that relate to this unique changing of the opportunity structure.

The first is the need for local governments to forget about core and non-core business and to govern for all of their constituents across all issues. To be planners and advocates for school to work transition programs, for low cost housing, environment and transport policies, for economic development, health services, public safety and information services, to name just some. Inclusiveness and diversity should be the catchcry.

The second is to strengthen local governments as democratic institutions. Improve real participation and accountability. Improve the remuneration for councillors and increase their capacity to act as informed community representatives. Review boundaries and the workable size of local governments and where regional cooperation works best. Develop better and better practice for linking Council, community and the administration. Make best value and good governance real and valued concepts for the improvement of local government.

Both of these would be helped by reworking the now patchwork 1989 Local Government Act and further developing the Code of Good Governance together with conventions and protocols and for the State Government to give the Code its imprimatur as part of the partnership between the two levels of government.

To achieve both and to make a significant leap forward, however, is dependent on the context and the opportunity structure.

Local government and the rights of citizens are not adequately recognised in the Victorian constitution.

In fact it is my contention that the State of Victoria does not have a constitution. To be a constitution a document must contain principles and rights and belong to the full body of members or citizens to whom the document applies. To alter it requires a vote of these members or citizens. What is referred to as the Victorian constitution is but a document of the Victorian Parliament, to be changed by a simple vote of both Houses. That is not a document of the people, nor the people's constitution and it certainly does not offer local governments any protection as democratically elected governments, as we have seen in recent years.

The challenge for the *VLGA* is to achieve constitutional recognition for democratic local governments, but this will be meaningless if the constitution is not an expression of the will of the citizens of Victoria and unless it can only be changed with their agreement.

We have just emerged from a very disturbing period of government where removal of democratic rights, the removal of checks and balances and the move to secret government was called "reform". We have seen fear and competition used to quell dissent.

People's memories can be short, about how the *VLGA* came to be, why it exists and how fragile democracy, particularly local democracy can be.

The challenge for the *VLGA* is to do what it can to promote real development, sustainable development of which sustainable democracy is a necessary and integral part.

"Sustainable development has been likened to concepts such as democracy, liberty and equality---which have all taken considerable time to evolve." Maria Sillanpaa, Body Shop International.

"...sustainable development is not just about the environment, it is also about socially and economically sustainable development in their own right."

The challenge for the State Government is to create the context within which this can be achieved.

And the real partnership is in how to make this happen while the memory of a less democratic government is still fresh in people's minds.

To quote Czech novelist Milan Kundera, "*the struggle of people against oppression is the struggle of memory against forgetting.*"