

**Local Government Community Services Association of Australia
National Community Development Conference
“Riding the Rapids of Change”
President’s Welcome
Perth 2001**

Welcome to “Riding the Rapids of Change: the Local Government Community Services Association’s national conference to develop skills and values for cohesive, just, and vibrant communities.

At the outset, I would like to thank the Local Government Community Services Association of Western Australia and Wendy Wardell from Eventedge, who have worked tirelessly and creatively with the national association to make this conference happen. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the National Bank, our primary sponsor under its Community Links Program and our other sponsors.

Delegates at this conference in this wonderful city of Perth, include Councillors, senior executives responsible for community development and social planning, community development workers, academics and international visitors.

With the wealth of experience we have collectively, this conference offers opportunities to learn and reflect on the theory and practice of community development both here in Australia and internationally.

This is your chance to make contact with people grappling with the same issues as yourself and to hear of challenging new developments and innovations. It is also your chance to meet people, to network, to contribute, to participate, to create and to have some fun.

It is through listening, sharing and learning that we will equip ourselves to deal with the changes ahead of us, to tame the rapids and influence the future.

The title of the conference "Riding the Rapids of Change" made me reflect on what we have experienced in the last decade and particularly in the past two years, since our last conference in Sydney.

Just what rapids of change have we had to negotiate to a lesser or greater extent, depending on which state we come from.

Well, we can say that we have all experienced the excesses of the economic bottom line being the sole measure of growth and progress and that this has brought about a deep malaise in our communities and disenchantment with government structures.

And because of this unbridled free market the trust and confidence the community once had in their governments has very much diminished.

This is true of all governments.

However, whilst Local government is not unscathed by this view it is comparatively undamaged.

In the last decade there certainly have been various degrees of prescription from other spheres of government towards local government including;

- competition policy
- compulsory competitive tendering in Victoria and now Best Value
- legislative requirements to undertake planning and
- Of course amalgamations.

Local Government has largely been seen as an agent of state and Commonwealth governments and in many ways it has complied without question.

At the same time our communities have experienced, in the name of efficiency and freedom of the market place, shrinking government and a loss of social responsibility, which has lead to:

- a reduction in services
- user pays policies
- privatization
- outsourcing and loss of jobs, particularly in rural areas
- increasing casualization of labour
- a growing gap in our society between those on higher and lower incomes
- a loss of opportunity for the more disadvantaged

As a consequence:

- rural areas have been hollowed out
- communities have been fragmented and
- Access to services and community structures that people thought was their right has severely diminished.

Human rights have also taken a battering. We have seen the introduction of mandatory sentencing in the Northern Territory and in this state and the inappropriate internment of people fleeing from other countries, mainly Iraq and Afghanistan, for political and religious reasons.

Despite the United Nation’s attempts to intercede because Australia is a signatory to several human rights covenants these situations remain.

Reconciliation has been and remains on the agenda but whilst there has been progress there is still no parliamentary apology from the Commonwealth government for the stolen generation and the dispossession of the aboriginal peoples.

The statistics below demonstrates some of the challenges and issues we have in the wake of economic rationalism.

There are 283,000 young people unemployed. Of these, the ABS figures show that 19.9% of 15-19 year olds and 11.7 % of 20 –24 year olds are unemployed.

In areas such as Moreland where I work youth unemployment is as high as 36% and this would not be unusual in more disadvantaged areas.

The above figures are likely to be an under estimation because of the stringent administrative requirements and activity tests implemented by Social Security that penalize the most disadvantaged.

There are an estimated 2 million Australians who are classified as the working poor.

The gap between the average per capita income of people living in the five top income areas and the five lowest income areas is 82% and the gap between the top income areas and areas such as Moreland, a relatively disadvantaged metropolitan area, is 59.4 % (derived from ABS census data).

Gambling taxation revenue has nearly doubled over the last ten years and accounted for just under 12 per cent of state and territory governments’ own tax revenue in 1997-1998 (latest figures available).

In 1997 –1998 the amount lost on gambling in Australia was around \$11.3 billion.

Problem gamblers represent just over 290,000 people or 2.1 per cent of the Australian population and those with severe problems loose approximately \$12,000 per year and affect on average a further five people.

Australia has 21% of the world’s pokie machines with more machines located in low-income areas.

When you think that socio economic status has a strong association with health inequalities the above statistics have a sobering effect.

But there certainly are changes on the horizon, which seem to spell the end of an economically driven era and a greater sensibility to other societal and community needs.

- Recovering social responsibility and humanity;
- Democracy;
- civil society;
- ethics and justice;
- triple bottom line planning and measurement; and
- collaborative partnerships

are all part of the new wave of change being talked about. We need to continue with the conversation to ensure that the above is not merely rhetoric but has a basis in policy and practice.

The majority of citizens have certainly shown in the recent state elections that they want a return to just, community values.

Local Governments have a major part to play in these changes.

Other spheres of government and local governments are recognizing that with increasing globalization the local is important.

Local Governments with their strategic integrated local area community planning responsibilities and their closer relationships to citizens and communities can provide the glue to:

- build democracy and citizenship;
- develop trust and networks of reciprocity and support;
- enable and facilitate community building;
- plan socially, economically and environmentally sustainable communities;
- address social justice; and

- advocate on behalf of its community.

As a level of government closest to its communities local government is critical to the growth of a more civic, just, cohesive and environmentally sustainable society.

Given that it is still the sphere of government in which citizens have the most confidence it is key to building vibrant communities, essential for well being and a healthy democracy.

The fact that Councils represent:

- a greater number of people,
- bigger geographic areas and
- are responsible for larger budgets,

allows them to be much more strategic in an integrated way – in the social, environmental, economic and cultural domains.

Paradoxically Local Government is more able to assume a strategic role due to amalgamations. I say paradoxically because the intent of amalgamations was efficiency and not for Councils to gain in strength.

Over the last two years there has been much questioning of the economy alone being a measure of national progress, to the neglect of important measures of social, civic and environmental well being.

This is evidenced by the Tasmanian and Victorian governments' commissioning of Swinburne University to undertake benchmark and indicator development and other projects across the nation.

At this conference we will be discussing benchmarks and indicators, identified through democratic processes that more accurately reflect the quality of life and well being of communities.

Local Governments must get sophisticated in democratically engaging with their communities to:

- identify what is important to citizens and communities and to set priorities through real consultation
- make integrated policy that addresses the triple bottom line
- measure progress in all its dimensions and

- advocate on behalf of its community.

We must adopt ways of consulting and listening to our community to ensure that no groups or citizens are excluded from the process.

Well developed intergovernmental relationships and partnerships are also essential to good community outcomes.

The themes of the conference:

- Place Making
- Local Democracy and Community Building
- New Management
- Measuring Community Wellbeing
- Rediscovering Social Responsibility and
- Recognizing the international year of volunteering

have been chosen to develop skills to equip us to join with the community and hopefully other spheres of government to create a new future – a future with a lot more humanity and social, environmental and economic responsibility.

I hope you enjoy the conference in this lovely city of Perth and that you learn from and share with each other.