

ALGA President Speech to National General Assembly

17 June 2013

Delegates, good morning. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting – the Ngunnawal people - and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending this event and welcome all my local government colleagues and our guests.

I am delighted that you are able to join us for the National General Assembly of Local Government.

Delegates, we meet today on the eve of making history. By that I mean achieving a Referendum that will change the Australian Constitution to confirm, once and for all, the capacity of the Commonwealth Government to fund local communities directly through their councils.

Six years ago, this Assembly unanimously passed a Summit Declaration calling on the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) to work with the Australian Parliament, Governments of Australia, political parties of Australia, the Australian Council of Local Government and most importantly the people of Australia, to progress the constitutional recognition of local government.

We have, we are, and we will continue, to do that - and delegates, working together, on 14 September 2013 we will win the Local Government Referendum.

[Pause]

We will talk more about that over the next 3 days.

[Pause]

Delegates, it is an honour for me to preside over this, my first NGA, as President of ALGA. While ALGA provides the organisation for this Assembly, it is your Assembly. It is your opportunity to engage on the national agenda and inform our work as the national body for local

government. Over the next 3 days we will debate your motions and throughout the NGA we will hear from a range of people who will discuss the big issues that face local government and our communities nationally, both now and into the future.

I encourage you to fully participate and get the most out of your attendance.

Many of you will have attended the Regional Cooperation and Development Forum on Sunday. Regional development, in all its guises, is very important to ALGA and indeed to this nation. The common theme that has run through the regional forum over the last decade is that Australia's national prosperity is dependent upon the combined economic, social and environmental performance of all our regions. It's important that no-one is left behind. This is why we have worked closely with National Economics to present new ideas and raise the level of debate on regional development - on policies of equity; investments in key drivers of economic growth in every region from 'global metropolitan' - to 'resource and agricultural' regions. I commend this work to you and hope that you will find this year's *State of the Regions Report* interesting, challenging and useful.

While I have made special mention of the Referendum, obviously we recognise that we are just 13 weeks out from the Federal Election. Yes - for any of you that have been in a coma; working too hard and have not been outside or read a newspaper; or otherwise just missed it - on 14 September there will be a Federal Election.

During the course of the Assembly we will hear from Senator Barnaby Joyce, the Opposition spokesperson for Local Government, the Hon Warren Truss, the Leader of the National Party, Senator Christine Milne, the Leader of the Australian Greens and in just a moment Minister Anthony Albanese, Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, Regional Development and Local Government.

This is the opportunity for the major political parties to set out their agenda for local government, and for us to highlight your issues to them.

On Tuesday I will be launching ALGA's Federal election document - *A 10 Point Plan for Resourcing Community Priorities*. This Plan outlines our national priorities to the next government. This document has been informed by past NGA's and state and territory associations, and over the next 13 weeks we will be closely monitoring the major political

parties for the release of their Local Government Policy and their response to our priority issues. So more about that tomorrow.

I am really looking forward to hearing from our key note speakers, Geraldine Doogue, Fred Chaney and Peter Fitzsimmons, and also Rupert Myer the Chair of the Australia Council. All of these speakers come with outstanding credentials and reputations, as thoughtful and challenging presenters on aspects of Australian life, its history, its governance and local communities. I should also acknowledge and thank Rupert and Fred for their involvement in the newly established Local Government Cultural Development Network which will have its inaugural meeting on Wednesday.

We also have Will Steffen from the Climate Commission to presents us with the findings of their latest report on climate futures and extreme weather. I am sure I do not have to tell anyone in this room the importance of this issue and the implications of extreme weather events on local communities. It seems that every year we experience a major natural disaster somewhere in Australia and local government is front and centre in managing the community response.

Delegates, the financial sustainability of local government has been a major issue for all of us. The health of local government balance sheets and its capacity to fund local services and infrastructure is fundamental to the sector's future and a concern to all communities.

Local government spends around \$30 billion per annum. We manage assets valued in excess \$300 billion. We are also responsible for the management of more than 80% of the national road network by length. To put it in perspective, the expenditure of local government, in aggregate, is greater than the expenditure of the South Australian Government, the Tasmanian Government and the ACT. This is big business however you look at it, and while the delivery of planning, services and infrastructure is our core business, sound financial management and public administration and accountability underpins all our work.

In this regard we will hear from a strong panel of experts later this morning in a session we called 'Money Matters - local government financing'. Don't miss it - it should be interesting and challenging. We all know 'money makes the world go round' - it's our responsibility as councillors to understand our budget and financial position.

We also have an extensive business paper with over 60 motions listed for debate. We received around 150 motions from councils, but many of them cover the same issue, so to expedite this process we have grouped these under a single lead motion that attempts to covers all the concepts.

Delegates, I want to tell you that I am a very strong believer of evidence-based policy. If we are to be taken seriously and to argue a policy position to the Government, or to the local community for that matter, we must have the evidence to back it up. So I encourage you to engage in the debate on motions and ask yourself - is there sufficient evidence to support this motion, and vote accordingly.

Before I introduce Minister Albanese, I would like to make special mention of just a few highlights for me over the past seven months as President of ALGA. I will select just a couple because I will cover off on a number of matter over the next three days.

As President of ALGA I am a member of the Council of Australian Government (COAG). In addition, ALGA is a member of a number of very important COAG Standing Councils and Select Councils. These positions ensure that local government's views are taken into account, in high level discussions between the Commonwealth and states, on major national policy matters.

I know it is dangerous to pick particular issues out of a complex agenda to highlight, but on this occasion I would like to mention just three things that stand out - for two reasons: first they are very important to the nation, involving all levels of government, and second, they have multi-party support.

The first is the COAG work on the National Disability Insurance Scheme - this is a wonderful achievement, and it is great to see how the federation can work effectively in addressing inequity. This was, and still is, a very complex negotiation, but everyone is committed to working on this with good will and all are prepared to work through the challenges in order to achieve a common and worthwhile outcome. The NDIS is very important and will make a significant difference to the lives of many Australians.

And while I am on topic of disability can I also mention the National Disability Strategy 2012 - 2013. It is a ten year national policy

framework for improving the life for Australians with disability, their families and carers.

I know that this objective is important to many of you and your councils, and can I encourage all of you to continue your work on building inclusive and accessible communities. Councils can make a real difference in shaping the physical environment including the infrastructure that supports public transport; parks, buildings and housing; information; civic life including social, sporting, recreational and cultural life, creating employment opportunities, the provision of accessible services, and finally, advocacy within the local community. The Commonwealth, the States and ALGA worked cooperatively on the development of the strategy and I commend this strategy to you.

The second thing I wanted to single out for special mention is the collaborative work between the Commonwealth and states and ALGA on transport reforms. And here I want to acknowledge the leadership of Minister Albanese as Infrastructure and Transport Minister. These reforms are critical to productivity and our nation's prosperity and Anthony Albanese has been a driving force in achieving these reforms. I think it is important for you to know that ALGA is at the table in these negotiations and we seek to ensure that transport reforms include strategies to invest in local roads and transport systems, including public transport, while maintaining environmental and community amenity outcomes. For those interested in the details of this, I encourage you to attend our National Roads and Transport Congress in Alice Springs in November this year.

The last specific issue I want to talk about, and again, this is directly relevant to Minister Albanese, is the need to have a Local Government Ministers Council re-established under COAG. There is a history behind the demise of the former Ministerial Council, which I do not need to go into here, but it is sufficient to say there is a very strong reform agenda that local government ministers, and I particularly want to include the state governments here, need to pursue collaboratively and the current arrangements do not seem to work as well as they should.

Minister Albanese has only had this portfolio for a short period of time and we have not had a real change to talk about this issue in great detail, but I can flag to him, as I am flagging with you, that the need for a cooperative forum is something that I want to work on. Minister Albanese probably understands better than most where I am coming

from here, because he chaired the last Ministerial Council when he previously held the portfolio.

Ladies and gentlemen, we live in a wonderful country. While our system of government has its problems, it generally serves our people well. But it is absolutely imperative that the three levels of government work collaboratively for our communities, and for the nation as a whole. This does not happen automatically. It needs work - continual work and good will.

At the national level, ALGA works to ensure that local government matters are heard, and taken into account, when national policies and programs are developed, both at COAG and associated meetings and directly with the Australian Government. At the state level your state and territory associations, who make up ALGA, work to ensure that state government policies and programs take into account local government needs. And at the local level, I know that you all work with your state and federal members of parliament to ensure that your community's needs are represented and taken into account, when state and national policies and programs are developed.

Delegates, this is what the National General Assembly is all about. It is about working together to ensure the best outcomes for our communities. It's about you supporting your state and territory associations, and both they and you supporting your national body ALGA.

It is no surprise to me that this year's Assembly is the biggest on record, with over 1000 delegates.

Together we send a powerful message to the Government, the Opposition and the Greens, that we are committed to leading our communities and to strengthening our partnership with the Australian Government.

Delegates, it gives me great sadness to note the passing of a long standing and highly respected local government leader - Mayor Joy Baluch.

Mayor Joy Baluch was a former past President and a long serving Mayor of Port Augusta. Joy passed away in March, after a long battle with cancer.

I would also like to acknowledge the long service of Daryl Dutton, Daryl devoted over 40 years to local government, starting his career as a Shire Engineer and will soon retire as General Manager of Upper Hunter Shire Council. I understand Daryl's wife Judy Dutton, Judy thank you for taking the time to join us here today.

Delegates, thank you for your support and keep up the good work.