



The Hon Anthony Albanese MP

Minister for Infrastructure,
Transport, Regional Development
and Local Government
Leader of the House

ANTHONY ALBANESE

**MINISTER FOR INFRASTRUCTURE, TRANSPORT, REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**2010 NATIONAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

TUESDAY 15 JUNE

10.00 – 10.30 am

NATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE

*****Check against delivery*****

I am pleased to be here to open ALGA's National General Assembly.

As you know, I am passionate about local government – you are the level of government that is closest to the people.

Local government plays a vital role in people's lives.

The local council oval is where kids kick a footy around on the weekend.

The pool that young athletes train at in the early hours of the morning is most often run by the local council.

The country hall where people get married, become citizens or hold community meetings generally belongs to the shire.

Even the local airstrip used to drop off food, medicine and bring in doctors and teachers into a rural or remote community is maintained by the council.

Not so long ago, it was the local council that owned the house where I grew up.

As the Local Government Minister, I know firsthand the difference that local government makes in the lives of people every day.

You understand what your communities need and you work tirelessly to make it happen.

I understand that this is the 17th meeting of the National General Assembly.

Your theme this year – *Population, Participation and Productivity* – is right on the money.

These three Ps are, after all, key drivers of economic growth.

PARTNERSHIP

Let me throw another 'P' into the mix – partnership.

The Rudd Labor Government understands that strong local communities add up to a strong nation.

That's why we established the Australian Council of Local Government to provide a platform for our dialogue and a structure for our new partnership.

The ACLG meets for the third time since November 2008 at the end of this week.

Many of you took part in that historic first meeting of ACLG.

You have witnessed the adversities that local communities have faced in the intervening eighteen months.

Our new partnership has been forged against the backdrop of climate change, devastating natural disasters and the worst global financial crisis in our lifetimes.

Over the past eighteen months, we stood shoulder to shoulder to meet these challenges.

The Government's Economic Stimulus Plan has helped to shield our communities from the worst of the financial crisis.

Australia emerged from the global recession with stronger growth, the second lowest unemployment, and lowest debt and deficit compared with major advanced nations.

We were virtually alone among the world's developed economies to not go into recession.

You played an important part in the delivery of the Economic Stimulus Plan.

The Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program has supported jobs while building local community infrastructure that will benefit generations to come.

Along with the RLCIP, we also put local government at the centre of the National Bike Paths program and the Better Regions program.

Together these programs come to more than \$1.2 billion.

They have supported over 5,000 local infrastructure projects.

One of the great privileges of my job is having the opportunity to visit communities – large and small – across the nation.

Everywhere I've been I have had the pleasure of seeing the local infrastructure that we have built together.

Over the last few weeks, I opened the new Milleara Integrated Learning and Development Centre for Children in Melbourne's Moonee Valley, the brand-new West Park sports facility in Burnie, the upgrade of Mascot Library in Sydney and the upgrade at the Broome Aquatic and Recreation Centre.

All of these projects sat on dusty shelves or at the bottom of drawers for years.

All have been made possible through our partnership.

I have seen the pride that these communities feel in showing off their brand new facilities.

I have seen the enthusiasm and sense of community generated by local infrastructure projects coming online.

I have met workers who got a job because of these projects.

Of course, our new partnership would not have been successful if it didn't start from a secure base.

It's what Labor governments do.

We have continued to provide record funding through the Financial Assistance Grants program, first begun by the Whitlam Government in 1974.

In the coming financial year, those grants total \$2 billion.

We are bringing one-quarter of it forward to assist communities to recover from the global financial crisis.

We are also providing \$1.75 billion in funding for the Roads to Recovery program over five years to support the more than half a million kilometres of local roads that local government looks after.

This funding is under threat.

Also under question is the untied nature of Financial Assistance Grants.

Don't just take my word for it.

I'd encourage you to take a look at the transcript of the Senate Estimates committee from the 26th of May this year, particularly pages 8 through to 12.

I also want to draw your attention to last week's announcement by the Prime Minister of a \$6 billion Regional Infrastructure Fund.

The Regional Infrastructure Fund will invest in projects with potential partner funding from States, private investors – as well as local governments.

The Government believes it is time to give a fairer share of the massive super profits enjoyed by private mining companies back to the communities which support them.

That means more rail, roads, ports, and other crucial infrastructure to support the workforce in critical mining regions and in the communities that support mining regions.

And that means partnering with you and others to invest where it is needed most.

REFORM

Our partnership through the Australian Council of Local Government and with ALGA has been matched by record funding for local and regional communities.

It has also been supported by our mutual recognition that we need to reform the way local governments operate in serving their communities.

That's why at last year's ACLG, the Prime Minister announced the Local Government Reform Fund to support collaborative reform between federal, state and local governments.

Each year, Australian councils and shires are responsible for more than \$20 billion of expenditure.

You employ nearly 178,000 people and own \$212 billion worth of infrastructure and non-financial assets.

Yet many councils and shires have not been able to put in place the asset and financial management systems necessary to allow their leaders to make fully informed decisions about the state of their infrastructure.

The Reform Fund is about working with you to fix that.

It is fast tracking improvements to local government asset and financial management.

It is building the capacity of local governments to partner with other levels of government to meet community needs.

This isn't the kind of work that grabs headlines, but it is absolutely fundamental to good long term planning and reform.

States and territories, in conjunction with local government associations, have submitted proposals and we are working with them to get projects under way.

As part of our commitment to collaborative reform, the Government has also provided an endowment to the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government based at the University of Technology in Sydney.

I had the pleasure of officially opening the Centre six months ago.

Its Board of Management includes your President, Geoff Lake.

The Centre's mandate is to strengthen skills and professionalism within local government, showcase innovation and best practice, and facilitate better-informed policy debates.

The Government is also supporting the 2010 Year of Women in Local Government to increase the participation of women in local government.

It is time for us to recognise that much more needs to be done to redress this gender imbalance. For the sake of equity and fairness but also because there is a compelling economic case.

Before the global financial crisis, skills shortages were a constant refrain in most meetings I had about local government.

Finding, attracting and retaining the staff that you need to keep improving what you do for your communities was then and will be again a major challenge.

So it makes economic sense to increase women's participation in local government leadership and its workforce.

I am pleased to see from your program that tomorrow you will be looking at this issue of participation in a session on Women in Politics.

RECOGNITION

Over the next few days, you'll be talking about the three 'P's' – with the fourth one of partnership thrown in by me.

Now, let me go further down the alphabet and throw in a couple of 'R's'. Respect and recognition.

The Rudd Labor Government recognises that local governments – the councils and shires that you represent – have an absolutely vital role in building and strengthening our communities.

Local government knows its community.

That's why the Regional and Local Community Infrastructure Program is being delivered through local government.

It replaced Regional Partnerships, a discredited program where people sat here in Canberra and decided what was good for local communities, often choosing to fund private sector businesses.

We think that locally elected representatives are in the best position to determine what the local priority is in a community, whether that's Moree, Gladstone or Blacktown.

Our partnership is based on recognition of the role that you play and respect for the local knowledge that you have.

As you know, the Labor side of politics is committed to formalising that recognition of the role of local government.

The recognition of local government within the Australian Constitution has long been a part of the Australian Labor Party platform.

Two previous Labor Governments have taken this issue to a referendum.

And we are committed to doing this again when the time is right.

I understand that ALGA is today releasing a document, '*A 10 Point Plan: National Resilience – Local communities*', which calls for a commitment to a referendum on this issue.

We both recognise that there is some way to go in bringing the community with us on this issue.

In order for a question to be successful the third time around, we need to work together to persuade the people that formal recognition is about improving our partnership to support local communities.

Over the past few years, ALGA, first under the leadership of Paul Bell and now Geoff Lake, have put much effort into planning and in preparing local governments for the community campaigns that will be needed on this issue.

Today, I am pleased to announce we will support your efforts.

The Rudd Labor Government will provide \$250,000 to ALGA to raise the profile of constitutional recognition of local government, particularly in local communities.

This funding will assist the national body to support local councils engage their communities on this important initiative.

It will build on the research that ALGA undertook last year to inform the strategy to prosecute constitutional change in support of local government.

It will help raise understanding about why constitutional change is important for local government and what benefits it will achieve for local communities.

CONCLUSION

The Rudd Labor Government understands the role that local government plays in keeping the community's heart beating.

We have begun our journey to support local communities.

We have achieved a lot in our partnership even though it's in its early stages.

As you know, later this week, mayors and shire presidents from across Australia will be hosted by the Prime Minister and other ministers at Parliament House for the third meeting of the Australian Council of Local Government.

I have no doubt that we will keep working together to make a difference into the future.

I wish you well with your program over the next couple of days and I look forward to meeting with you later this week.

Thank you.