

**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD
AC TO OPEN THE CENTENARY LOCAL GOVERNMENT
CONFERENCE, HOBART, THURSDAY 12TH JULY 2012**

Last year when I was privileged to open your annual conference I was able to begin by wishing you all Happy Birthday for 2011 marked the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the then called Municipal Association of Tasmania. Your conference theme was appropriately “100 Years Long; 100 years Strong”. However, it appears that although last year marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Association, last year’s conference was only your 99th and it is this conference that is the 100th conference. So today is the centenary conference of the Local Government Association and your theme, again appropriate to the occasion, is “Treasuring the Past and Transforming the future.”

The opening of the 1936 Local Government Conference by Governor Sir Ernest Clark, who was obviously anticipating your theme for this anniversary conference, was reported in these terms:¹

“Councils as advisers of their own communities often had to make decisions affecting, not only the future, but the present, and their best guide often was what had happened in the past. He did not suggest that older methods should necessarily be followed and no changes made, but the principles and general methods of government did not change materially, and just as councils had received

¹ *The Mercury newspaper, Thursday 28 May 1936*

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benefits and burdens from their predecessors, so they were bound to influence the conditions of persons who would be living in their municipalities in the future.”

I think that it is fair to say that these days amalgamation is the most frequently used word in discussions about local government in this State. I think that it is equally fair to say that there simply is no consensus about the way forward in this respect. I see from your programme that after morning tea today you will have the benefit of hearing from respected Professor Brian Dollery on this issue, but with some trepidation, I thought I might take the liberty of dipping into this hot debate by taking a leaf out of Governor Clark’s book and see whether the past will provide you with the best guide as to the future.

In the beginning there were just two councils, Hobart and Launceston. They were formed in 1835 and 1857 respectively. Then between 1860 and 1863 16 rural municipalities were proclaimed - so obviously amalgamation was unheard of in those times. Au contraire, the P-word - proliferation - must have been on everybody’s lips for in 1865 the 16 rural municipalities were replaced by 30 municipal districts - 1 more than we presently have. But that’s not all. After 1865 a number of Boards and Trusts began to provide various Local Government services

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with the result that by 1906 Local Government services in Tasmania were provided through no less than 149 local authorities of some significance as well as a number of other minor bodies.²

However, in 1906 the A-word gained traction and the Local Government Act that was passed in that year introduced sweeping changes. Councils, town committees and road committees were brought together and the Act provided a proper legislative context in which Local Government could function. All local authorities other than those for Hobart and Launceston were abolished and replaced by 47 municipalities. That may sound like a lot but remember all these decisions were taken in times when there was no telephone, no wireless, very few horseless vehicles and primitive roads.

The 1906 Local Government Act remained substantially unchanged for many decades and if he were here today Governor Clark would tell you that there is nothing new about the Jude Munro panel report, for there were enquiries into Local Government structures in 1939, in 1960 and in 1974 and all of them recommended substantial reductions in the number of Tasmanian Councils. Perhaps, Governor Clark was right to say,

² http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/lgd/local_government_in_tasmania. Accessed 24th June 2012.

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as he did, that “the principles and general methods of government [do] not change materially.” Certainly, there was a majority of Tasmanians who thought that the principles and general methods of government *should* not change materially, for nothing came of the recommendations for amalgamation made in 1939, 1960 and 1974. This was so even though the nearly 40 years in which there were these three enquiries saw the development and widespread use of new and efficient machinery, motor vehicles, telephone, radio, television, and airplanes.

In fact, as I have no doubt you all know, no less than 87 years were to pass before the 1906 Local Government Act was substantially reviewed and the number of municipalities reduced from 46 to 29 by the 1993 Local Government Act. Well, what would Governor Clark say about? It’s a legitimate question to ask for I think that today there are many people who think just as he did in 1936, viz, that “the principles and general methods of government [do] not change materially”.

In one sense you may think that is right but in recent times things have changed even more dramatically than they did in the 40 years during which there were these three enquiries into local government. The population of the State has passed the half

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million mark and almost every aspect of modern life is governed by the silicon chip. For example, today it is possible for a number of people from all around the State to hold a meeting where each can be seen and heard clearly without any of them having to leave their homes. Have these kinds of changes impacted on the services traditionally delivered by local government? I wonder if today, Governor Clark would adhere to his statement that “the principles and general methods of government [do] not change materially”. It might be said that Governor Clark’s statement holds true today, if the cornerstone of local government is that everyone should be able to have a say in their local affairs and wholesale amalgamations which result in increased distances between the ratepayers and their elected representatives will put this cornerstone at risk. But there are those who argue that a reduction in the number of municipalities will reduce the cost of delivering local services; but there are just as many that say that this is not so. There are councils who say that they have difficulty getting expert advice in planning, engineering and so on and that amalgamation will enable them to get that advice more easily.

Perhaps it is not a case of either amalgamate or leave the status quo undisturbed. There may be other options and it occurs to me to respectfully suggest that perhaps it is time to go

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back to basics and ask a first question, what do we – the ratepayers–want our local authorities to do? For instance, do we want each local government to develop a planning scheme, different from all the others, but all subject to scrutiny by another body? A major function of local government was the delivery of water and sewerage services but these services are now delivered by three separate authorities each of which is owned by a number of municipal authorities. You could say that was a sort of amalgamation, but of only one aspect of the services traditionally delivered by local government. So before we ask whether we are for amalgamation or not, maybe we need to ask: What are the aspirations of our community so far as local government is concerned? What is the thing we value as the most important so far as local government is concerned? Is it good roads, is it lowest rates, is it good public amenities or indeed is it local government at all? It seems to me, but of course I may be wrong, the only questions that are presently asked are should we amalgamate the existing structures and if so which ones? But maybe it is time to rethink the whole question of the role of local government and identify the communities' needs that will be best satisfied through the medium of local government and those needs that will be best satisfied through other structures that are not necessarily constructed by amalgamation simpliciter. Answers to those issues may well

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greatly assist the task of defining the shape and size of local government for the next few decades. Or is all that unnecessary because, as Governor Clark said, “the principles and general methods of government [do] not change materially.” I am sure that Professor Dollery will have some interesting and insightful views on this important current issue in Tasmania.

For my part I will step back, declare this centenary LGA Conference open and express the wish that you all find it stimulating, interesting and profitable.