I have one clear message I'd like to deliver today, about your core purpose, as I see it…(based on the needs of the community I report on and am pretty fascinated by….despite (or maybe even *because* of) the awful public tone that's prevailed in our nation in the last 18 months of so).

 I sense that if *you* were asked right now for a blunt, Pavlovian response to the question: what is your essential core reason for existence as local government representatives? You'd probably say "**services**"…the provision of them.

Yet I also know that at this particular time in your lives, the two words that might trump "services" and rise to the forefront of any Pavlovian reflection…would be…"**financial recognition".**

But I would like to suggest another word that I think should actually move through the ranks right to the summit is…**identity**!

In my judgement, a key need within our communities these days is to observably boost a clear sense of *identity and belonging* for individuals, to counter the impulses towards fragmentation, anonymity and what I'd call values confusion that I detect among us.

I am NOT a pessimist btw about our communities. I believe basically in the vigour and potential, the talents, abroad in modern Australia. I think we could be standing on the cusp of a century of considerable achievement…given our part of the world…depending on whether *we* can seriously believe that, then marshal the discipline and self-belief required to break out of established patterns of negative self-talk.

But I also detect that the pace of change *is* taking its toll of clear-sightedness and sure-footedness, if I can put it like that, within our public culture especially, our politics, probably into our households….though it's hard to completely judge the level of this. But I do think about this a lot.

And I've decided to name this need that I detect, quite bit more: for more explicit identity-confidence, where a good sense of **Place, of The Local**, is constructively used for the broader good. I don't think it's been considered part of your repertoire necessarily. But you know, I think it is.

What's more I think it could have a *double effect*: that it would *elevate* local government's status in the eyes of the community. I think it may well be the best lobbying tool you have in the medium term, quite a bit more than good service provision ultimately, though that could never be sacrificed.

I've been reporting on Australia for 40 years, I realised last year, to my shock. I started in Perth at The West Australian in the year Gough Whitlam was elected…and I've loved my chosen path from that day till this.

I was first thrown into the Perth community as a young cadet journalist at "The West Australian", the venerable (if boring) paper of record, introduced first to the very sure world of court-reporting then hurled into the turbulent industrial round, reporting unions, when union membership conferred a lot of identity; also when Churches were much more sure of themselves… again conveying clear membership rules and regulations, security-giving even if you disobeyed them; this was a time with stronger joining-communities like surf lifesaving, tennis clubs, Rotaries, garden clubs, turf and yacht clubs and so on. Gym membership now is a quite different affiliation, in my judgement.

Predictable hierarchies existed with predictable grievances and indeed, some amazing breakthroughs occurred as we all know, with the big changes brought during the 1970s. I remember just a very small story from this era: when I started out in journalism, only a rarified few were ever permitted to ask a question of a Chairman of a big board, like a BHP….well remember the flurry if such an eminent personage descended upon Perth.

Within a few short years---and not just because I went up the ladder a bit---that assumption was really thrown over. If the company was under scrutiny, they simply had to show up at press conferences and subject themselves to the 'humble little girl reporter' who had the temerity to bowl up a question.

I learned a great deal more as I moved into television and radio, first on the ABC then onto that stalwart of middle Australia, Sydney radio station 2UE, taking over the afternoon shift from Ita Buttrose…and being told to pitch my work at the woman pushing the super-market trolley and NEVER to forget her! Then Channel Ten's Eyewitness News, with all its different emphasis to the ABC.

My years at Life Matters, on Radio National which *specialised* in the changing community were immensely revealing about a whole swathe of aspects of life: the shift to less privacy, to more democratic families, to more diversity in our choices and cultures, plus my Compass commitments on ABC1---a totally different audience, I might add---ending up where I am now, on Saturday Extra, with its more regional focus: ALL this has informed me, replete with copious, routine, direct responses from these different publics. So it's been a privilege, to compete with yours as local govt reps, of which I've always (I assure you) been incredibly respectful.

And I haven't even mentioned social media or Facebook! The point is, I *loved* most of this eventfulness…and still do. But I acknowledge that the *secure identity goal-posts* within the community were moved during this last generation. We have been *stretched,* as a

community. The altered states of our codes and institutions have challenged us as well as delivering a lot more liberation, I think.

And one could argue that quite a vacuum has emerged around robust, durable identities, for significant numbers of us. This could eat away, insidiously, at our pretty young society if we're not careful.

I was struck recently on a visit to London, a favourite place of mine, on how the burden of history weighs heavily on that Old World. But it's very grounding for them even though some recent work on social trust and mobility in societies around the world turned up the result that new arrivals felt more accepted and capable of moving within the society in the immigrant-based cultures like the US, Australia and Canada: a very *good* finding.

Indeed, some of the biggest conversations being had in the UK concerned the tough interface between welcoming new arrivals and their cultural preferences and re-emphasising a confident Englishness or British-ness, in terms of a *public feel*, a tone. Hard thinking is underway.

Some of you may have heard Peter McKinlay speak at local government conferences. He's very curious about shifting self-perception and actions in this arena, as you may know. English councils, he says, have always sensed a responsibility to delivery much more than services to their communities.

They emphasise building-up significant social capital, seeing it as an *investment approach* fitting into organisational purpose and long-term strategy.

"Is it mere 'community development'…or something that should be seen as building organisational capability…a discretionary expenditure of council funds or a form of investment?" he asked in one of his recent bulletins.

He's come to the view that this is far more than mere discretionary or even crisis expenditure, to something much more akin to a core role for councils.

"We want to propose the concept of councils as venture social capitalists…as an investment…capturing the value not just for the specific activity at the time but for the community over time in terms of increased social capital, community capability and the council's understanding of its role as a facilitator and enabler."

Now that, to my mind, amounts to *boosting identity*, even though I know that's not how Peter put it: he was speaking much more in the acceptable language/jargon of this sector. (He has some terrific examples, I might add, of a Lambeth Council initiative called Made In Lambeth which was described as a 'way of persuading highly skilled residents to give up

their time to solve social challenges within their borough…the council knowing that standard engagement techniques were unlikely to work with this group')

The point is that maybe local govt IS in a uniquely good position to answer the (maybe) paradoxical need for *more explicit local* identity reinforcement amidst a globalising world….which once seemed counter-intuitive.

But various researchers have been noting something for the last 5-8 years that a very prescient advertising executive Jackie Huie forecast to me at a conference 15-20 years ago now: that considering the barrage of continuous technological change coming down the pipeline, she thought the global and the local would become *disproportionately* emphasised in people's lives; she actually predicted that the national level would suffer rather more.

Now we could probably argue about that. But certainly various social researchers have noted the rising need for strong local identity building IN LOCKSTEP with the trend towards supra-national identities…though the lack of strong supra-national *institutions* is another problem again.

Hugh Mackay has been speaking in related terms for years about this and has made a big impact on my thinking. He's a good observer of nuances within our society I believe. He has a good corporate memory. He's very good with his language at conveying what he's seen and he doesn't shirk what he sees; but he's not sensationalist either, I don't believe.

Right through the 80s and 90s and Naughties, I was interviewing him. And during those first two decades, he had one pretty doleful message: we're withdrawing, he'd say, from the speed of everything. We're pulling back to what we think we can manage: accordingly, all the home renos, the huge Bunnings growth etc: we were all tackling the small parts of our lives because they seemed do-able.

And he want on and on about this to the extent that some of my colleagues, who hated this message, said "he's stuck…like a broken record…he's too pessimistic and he might even be anti women's emergence (cos that was definitely happening too and putting pressure on families)".

Anyway, he kept convening his small focus groups throughout these years and gradually in the early Naughties (before Sept 11) he came onto Life Matters and said something quite important: that he'd noticed a small group, pretty well-endowed, who were Net-connected (above all) and who'd started to believe they could make all the flurry work FOR them: that they were starting to find their own community…many of them were early-adapters, that curious phrase, a lot of them had done well due to the 'long boom' and were doing pretty well thank-you; and a lot of them listened to Radio National.

They were starting to *re-group*, he said…adding this key phrase I've never forgotten: they were demonstrating, he said, what he believed was a hard-wired trait of humans: to **re-tribalise.** He'd waited and waited to see it…and it had eventually started to emerge.

I think the most adaptable among us ARE learning to manage this busy, never-still and pretty fluid world, to make it work for them. But a gulf could be opening up which bothers me quite a bit: where people who are less adaptable, who perceive themselves less connected durably with technology, yes, but also work, their physical place around them, their neighbours….that they just *withdraw* into very small, very family-orientated, rather stripped-down groupings.

Andrew O'Keeffe is a psychologist who consults to companies and has watched change in big and small ways. He's had great success with a book about 5 years ago called "The Boss"; he contributed to an AFR series with a piece called "Basic Instincts" which I thought nailed it really.

People are fine with change, he wrote, provided it meets one criterion: *that it does not involve loss*. We're hard-wired for loss aversion, more ironically, than the opportunity to gain.

We fight frantically if threatened or at risk of loss. When change is presented to people, if we detect gain, we support, if we detect loss, we resist. If we are *uncertain*, we err to resistance, as we cannot yet classify the implications. (Great observation)

Here's another gem. "Humans are hardwired to deny reality—to emphasise what is possible and to underestimate what is practical. This is the instinct that causes business leaders to plan optimistically and disregard implementation…it means leaders underestimate the required effort, resources and time and the capability of people to manage the change".

I must say in thinking about this Richard Sennett, a bit of a wise old thinker now, who's written about dignity at work…but he's become fascinated by what he dubs open versus closed societies, closed systems have an equilibrium, even a harmony. Open systems…exist in unstable evolution.

But he refuses to succumb to nostalgia. He's fascinated, eg by cities because he sees them as a real crucible of the tension between say 'tradition' and 'change', between anonymity and attachment; that they are seriously dynamic places, bewildering and never still; but which may offer us better models for success about living well in this century.

After much consideration, he's moved to a position that's surprised him a bit. That, as he puts it, "the great quest for equilibrium in a social order can sacrifice dissent for the sake of harmony: And that this noble-sounding quest can actually be counter-productive…that

closed, rigid systems or places can end up sucking the oxygen out of people and are worse than the fractious, apparently more impersonal bigger centres".

That is, he's come to consider whether to live in a good, socially cohesive community, requires you to necessarily **know each other** intimately, to know and share each other's rituals. He's come to favour what he's dubbed a cosmopolitanism…not just 'suave manners or chic clothing…more fundamentally a sense of comfort and security in the midst of strangers…*the essence of which consists of stimulation by the presence of others but not identification with them*." There is so much to ponder her about the boosting of achievable, modern identities.

Personally, I think this offers you a lot. I think it's forward-looking. This is *your bailiwick*, the refreshment of our *public, community identities,* the clear interest in *well-being* for your rate-payers…for which I believe they would genuinely thank you! It implies the creation of new, clever modern events that act to boost social cohesion, boost the personal over the impersonal and social drift.

I'd like to see your forums prompt further conversation on how you might *imagine* new venues for the community to ENJOY each other…get that happening, and a lot of ther good things, good re-tribalising in ways you CAN"T imagine, will probably just evolve. And your role will be so much more satisfying than merely the provision of services.

There are some real examples already well-underway:

*Writers Festivals…growing solidly, drawing in a wider group and spreading, quite observably.

*Big Swims and City-To-Surfs…drawing people out of their little territories and gradually I think, setting up strong affiliations sufficient to bolster people's sense of some peak experiences.

*Festivals generally…often quite artificial at first and definitely needing to be led…but invariably developing their own confidence and status.

*Arts-based events: Sculpture By The Sea, people set their diaries by it as you know now; MONA in Hobart…both have become so much more than the sum of their parts and broaden the *ballast*, if I can put it like that, in people's lives.

*New Years Eve celebrations….anniversaries…gee I believe in these and think there's really a lot more to be done here, borrowing from the Brits: I'd like to see some game step-ups (more…refer to that Perth exhibition about mining equipment?)

In other words, they all play the role of a modern town fair, I suppose, but I would add this component of *identity-formation*, which as you can see, I believe will be boosted by the sheer naming of it.

This does fit very nicely too into some of the findings of that Happiness Research which distinguishes between **Comforts and Pleasures.** As you may know, there'd been quite a lot of curiosity as to why citizens in cultures like ours whose physical needs were observably met, and whose broad, economic standing was secured…were nonetheless fretting at best, highly unsettled at worst.

And they came up with this comforts vs pleasure finding: that comforts are provided by things like refrigerators, microwaves or vacuum cleaners, items which people fairly quickly adapt to and come to take for granted; so they don't consciously contribute to the perceived happiness quotient even though without them, life would be considerably altered.

They're 'givens', in other words…considered guaranteed hallmarks of a civilised society…and govts are not thanked for them either!

Pleasures, by comparison, are derived from feasts, events, rituals, anniversaries…things which evidently people found harder to '*adapt'* to, as it were, harder to be cavalier about. Accordingly, they were more durable providers of happiness.

This is why I think they have such a chance to confer identity on people. That they're narrow and deep, not broad and shallow.

"They help reinforce in people that crucial sense: *This* is who I am.

I'm not floating-free

I'm *anchored*

I *trust* enough to lower my shoulders and say...for better or worse, I *belong!"*