

Thank you [President of ALGA, Mayor Troy Pickard]

Acknowledgment of country

Firstly I want to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people and their elders past and present as the traditional owners and custodians of land on which we meet today.

Acknowledgment of importance of local government

I am very pleased to be addressing you this morning as leader of the Australian Greens. Our party has a strong presence in local governments around the country and a deep respect for the work you all do.

Mysister, Deb, was one of the first Greens local government members in Victoria. I very much appreciate from her experience the importance of local government, and the energy and commitment that local councilors around the country bring to their communities.

The Greens are represented on councils around the nation and I want to acknowledge my Greens colleagues in the audience along with councilors from all political persuasions here today.

One of the key roles of government at any level is to deliver services that people value and this is no truer than for local government. We understand that you are at the forefront of providing services to communities around the country in very varying circumstances –

from some of the most remote place in the country, to regional areas, our suburbs and cities.

As the theme for this gathering acknowledges, local government is the level of government closest to the community. Participatory democracy is a core Green principle. We hold that the people closest to an issue should be involved in the decision-making on that issue. It is a principle put into practice in local governments around the country.

However there continue to be real roadblocks to local government being genuinely treated as the third tier of government in Australia – not the least of which is constitutional recognition and financial security.

Federation and Constitutional Recognition of Local Government

As I am sure you are all aware the Greens have long been committed supporters of Constitutional Recognition of Local Government.

It was of course a condition of our agreement with the last government that they pursue constitutional recognition. We participated in the Joint Select Committee process and signed up to the majority recommendation that the referendum be put at the 2013 election. And all Greens voted for the legislating enabling the referendum.

Like you we were deeply disappointed that the referendum was not able to occur at the last election. It is even more disappointing that the current Government seems content to let the issue languish.

While the Reform of the Federation White Paper is another opportunity to prosecute the case and we acknowledge your work and involvement with that process. As far as we are concerned the work has already been done, the arguments made and the issue is now one of political will.

The Greens, and in particular my colleague and Greens spokesperson on local government, Lee Rhiannon, will continue to advocate for constitutional recognition and work with you on this important matter.

Of course one of the key issues at stake with constitutional recognition of local government is financial security and access to federal funds on a similar basis to the states.

Funding

The importance of secure funding has been brought into stark relief with the current government's attacks on local government in last year's budget.

Last year's cut to local government through the freezing of indexation to financial assistance grants was unnecessary as it was harsh. Despite indexation now being restored in 2017-18, councils have

been left almost \$100 million worse off last year and will be around \$200m worse off this financial year.

Another example of unnecessary cost-shifting by this government was the removal of federal support for rates rebates for pensioners. The federal government has left state governments to pick up the tab. And some state governments have been trying push it onto local governments to absorb the cost.

There is no need to rip off local communities for the sake of numbers in the budget. Local councils should not be left in dire straits because the Government does not have the political will to raise more revenue from those that can afford it. We live in a wealthy nation that has the resources to support the provision of services to our community – whether delivered by federal, state or local government. Local government budgets should not put at risk at the whim of federal treasurers when delivering such vital services for our community.

I understand rural and regional councils have been particularly hit by the federal budget cuts. These are cuts to funding that help councils maintain roads and other public infrastructure. While the government is slashing vital support to regional councils, it is delivering billions of dollars to private motorway projects that will not improve congestion but will boost the profits of private developers.

Just on road funding – I want to make it perfectly clear that the Greens support the Roads to Recovery program. We do not support billions of dollars being wasted on new toll roads at the expense of public transport but we do appreciate the need for the Roads to Recovery program and the burden faced by local councils in keeping local roads safe. Equally, local communities benefit from public transport infrastructure – both urban and regional public transport is essential to making our cities and towns more livable.

In the Greens we appreciate the financial difficulties local government can face, including the inability to raise revenue, except via rates and even there rate caps are putting even more pressure on local budgets. We do not want local government to become just an appendage of state government. Instead it is and should be recognised – in all ways - as the legitimate third tier of government in Australia.

Local governments – innovation

Local governments are often also at the forefront of innovation in our political system. Being closer to the community you are closer to the needs and desires of the people, you feel the responsibility to respond and are often prepared to pursue transformational agendas to enhance our communities.

When federal or state governments fail, local governments are often there to fill in the gaps. When there is a vacuum of leadership, by at a federal level, local councils are prepared to step up and ensure the

voices of their communities are heard. While there is some criticism of local governments passing motions on matters that fall outside their immediate jurisdiction, I believe it is an important and vital part of a robust democracy. It is an essential part of being the level of government closest to the community.

The lead that many local governments around the country have taken in welcoming asylum seekers into their communities is a wonderful example of stepping up at a time when the federal political debate has descended into such a toxic morass, distant from the caring and compassionate nature of so many Australians.

TPP

An issue that I understand is before your meeting this week is the potential impact of the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement on local government. A number of councils have already passed motions expressing concern with this secretive trade deal.

It is the biggest trade deal in Australia's history. However, it's being negotiated in total secrecy, with the community shut out. It's unacceptable that large corporations have been able to see portions of the text, and lobby to effect changes, while the public at large and people within local government get no say.

We need to know what the federal government is preparing to trade away in our names.

This deal has the potential to have far-reaching negative impacts across our society, including on your ability to do what is best for your community.

Of particular concern are clauses that would enable foreign investors to sue governments, including local governments, over policies, laws or regulations - the Investor State Dispute Settlement clauses. These clauses have the potential to take power away from local governments in relation to policies that look to encourage local employment and support local economic and industry development. Also at risk are policies to encourage good environmental practices and initiatives and, importantly, this secret agreement could restrict local government in their procurement policies such as giving preference to local suppliers. Instead local governments could be at the mercy of very large and powerful multinational corporate interests.

While we don't yet know for sure if these sorts of clauses will be included in the TPP, it is very likely they will be. The government must release the details of the TPP and allow you and me, the parliament and the community to know what is being negotiated in our names and allow us to participate in the process.

I call on all of you to consider what your council could do to stand up against this damaging deal, including passing motions calling on the government to release the details and protect the ability of local councils to act in the interest of your local communities.

Climate Change

Many local governments are also leading the way on addressing climate change and I understand climate change is a priority for ALGA. With the federal government completely failing on this issue it heartening to see local governments taking it on.

Actions by councils such as committing to become carbon neutral or have their own ambitious emission reduction targets play an essential role in assisting Australia to play its part in addressing climate change. Councils have also been active in the divestment movement – taking their investments out of dangerous fossil fuels. As the 4 Corners report last night the fossil fuel era is ending and investing in renewable energy is the way of the future.

And all of this makes sense because local governments all too well understand the challenges and impacts of climate change.

Australia is seeing the increased frequency and severity of natural disasters. Local governments are there on the ground in the event of such disasters, helping the community, re-building essential public infrastructure – all of which costs money. Furthermore, you are the ones looking to prepare your communities to better withstand the affects of climate change.

We agree with ALGA for the need for more federal funding to assist with mitigation and disaster relief in the face of climate change.

Our increasingly hot summers are devastating for some and local government are the ones managing the local infrastructure, like libraries and community centers, that can be havens for people in the heat. In planning, local councils are paying attention to the urban heat island effect and the need for open space.

Democracy

However, the federal and state governments continue to put barriers in the way of local governments doing the best by their communities. The power of local councils have been whittled away with state governments taking more and more power away from local communities, particularly around planning.

As Greens we value the input of local communities into decision-making on the issues that affect them.

We value the role of local government in our federation and as the tier of government closest to the people who make up our community.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is a pleasure to address the Australian Local Government Association's national assembly today. I and my Greens colleagues look forward to working with you not just on cementing the proper role of local government in our federation but on all the issues that affect us as a community and that require federal, state

and local government engagement. Issues such as climate change, affordable housing, reinvigorating our democracy, protecting ourselves from dodgy trade deals, safety on our roads, investing in public transport and providing livable cities, towns and communities across our nation.