

2023 National General Assembly of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) 13-16 June 2023 Canberra

Report from Councillor Janet Giles to Adelaide City Council - 22 June 2023

Overview

The National General Assembly (NGA) is held every year in Canberra and is an opportunity for elected members of local councils across the nation to come together to hear about and discuss local government issues and propose and debate motions that form the policy of the national peak body in order for them to carry our voice directly to the Federal Government.

This year's assembly was more significant as it also included a day forum for the Australian Council of Local Government (ACLG), a body representing both Federal and Local Government which had been abolished ten years ago by a previous Government and was promised to be reinstated by the current Government. This forum provided an opportunity for council representatives to hear directly from cabinet Ministers and ask questions.

Approximately 1,000 mayors and councillors from right across the nation attended the Assembly and 660 attended the ACLG on the Friday.

The theme of this year's Assembly was *Our Communities, Our future*.

In the afternoons of the first and second days, motions from councils were debated and voted on. There were in total 145 motions which were grouped into the areas of Transport and Infrastructure, Funding and Finance, Skills and Workforce, Emergency Management, Housing and Homelessness, Climate Change and Energy, Community well-being, Circular Economy, Environment and Biodiversity, Digital and Cybersecurity, Arts and Culture. The motions which passed will become policy for the ALGA.

The most significant outcome was a vote that gave support for a First Nations Voice to Parliament. This was an important step to provide national leadership in Local Government on this issue. A memorable part of the debate was when a young First Nations councillor from East Arnhem Land Council rose and spoke in favour of the motion in his own language and then translated into English seeking support for him and his community to be able to have a say and to be listened to.

Summary of Assembly sessions

Wednesday 14 June

Session 1

The assembly was opening by Aunty Violet Sheridan who welcomed us to her country followed by a welcome from the Governor General.

The Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, Hon Catherine King MP spoke followed by the President of the ALGA, Cr Linda Scott.

Key points

- There is additional grant funding for Local Government in this year's federal budget. The Association welcomed this but is still lobbying for 1% of Commonwealth Assistance Grants to be provided in un-tied funding to local Government.
- The government is in the process of developing a national urban policy.
- The Government acknowledges that partnerships between local, state and federal Government is necessary to address the significant challenges we are facing, particularly in relation to climate change and housing.
- David O'Loughlin represents Local Government on the federal housing committee
- There is a need for community facilities and community building to be factored into the growth of housing.
- Skill shortage is dire in Local Government nation-wide. 9/10 councils are facing jobs and skills shortages; local government has around 200,000 staff and 409 occupations and leads the nation in apprenticeships and traineeships.
- Climate change is hitting local Government hard with an increase in national disasters. There were 46 declared disasters in 2022 in 56 Local Govt areas. Councils across the nation have needed to manage with the local recovery issues, road and infrastructure repair and post disaster community well-being. Disaster affected councils are seeking additional funds from the Federal Govt for disaster recovery and climate change measures.
- Addressing first Nations social and economic disadvantage is a priority and the Association has developed a First Nations support partnership network and is working to have a policy office in every council.

Session 2

We heard from the Australian Ambassador of Ukraine who proposed the involvement of local council to partner with Ukrainian cities as part of the sister cities program to assist in the process of rebuilding post the war. The current priority is winning the war against Russia but there will be much to do to rebuild the country.

The Hon Peter Dutton, leader of the Opposition spoke about the previous Government commitment to local govt. He stated he believed in the importance of autonomy for Local Councils and also claimed his government's funding contributed to the growth of Adelaide's population. He was asked about his support for social and affordable housing and if he would support the inclusion of Local Government in the constitution. He gave no clear answer to either question.

We then heard from comedian Jimmy Rees.

Session 3

The future of Local Government – On this panel we heard about the situation of Local Government in the UK, where the national Government has cut funding to the local councils by 40% in the last 10 years making a number of councils unsustainable. We also heard from the Foundation for Young Australians who are working with local councils on a project that creates democratically elected councillors aged 11-17 who then advise council about issues for young people. <https://www.fya.org.au/program/young-mayors/>

Building a stronger workforce – This was a panel of three mayors (Melbourne City Council, Mitcham Council and Victoria Park in Perth). They talked about a number of innovative strategies they were using to attract and retain staff.

Thursday 15 June

Session 1

This session was about the First Nations Voice to parliament and involved First Nations Mayors from Yarrabah, West Arnhem and the Torres Strait Islands as well as a first nations councillor from Queanbeyan council. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend this session as the capital city councils had a meeting with the Assistant Minister for Climate Change at this time, which I attended on behalf of the Lord Mayor.

Leading Communities through change – This was a presentation by Jennifer Michelmore from Studio THI about their approach to engaging the community and enabling participation in key decisions and driving outcomes focused on community needs and aspirations. They do it in a way that helps to solve urban development challenges and shape more equitable and sustainable urban futures. <https://www.wearethi.org/about-us>

Session 2

Cyclones, Fires and Floods – in this session we heard from a panel of Mayors who have been leading their communities through natural disasters in the last 12 months along with the National Emergency Management Agency.

The stories were extremely moving and distressing as these communities are facing floods and fires more and more frequently and the resilience of the community is waning. The mental distress and exhaustion of Mayors of these communities is palpable, especially when they have had to advocate for funding, support and rebuilding for their communities past the actual event.

Saul Griffith, re-wiring Australia then addressed the conference which was very fitting following the panel about climate disasters. He spoke about the absolute urgency to reduce our carbon emissions to zero and how electrification can do this faster and cheaper than any other option. He was commissioned to design the electrification legislation for President Biden in the USA and has written extensively on why and how to move to electrification from the national to the household level. He advocates that Local Government has a major part to play in this switch.

It is worth getting hold of the quarterly essay he wrote in March this year
<https://www.quarterlyessay.com.au/essay/2023/03/the-wires-that-bind>

Or connecting with his organisation, rewiring Australia
<https://www.rewiringaustralia.org/media/interview-the-big-switch-saul-griffith-says-the-answer-is-electric>

Session 3

Australia's Affordable Housing Crisis – The panel included the CEO of the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation and the CEO of the Community Housing Industry Association. The general picture was painted of the inadequacy of social and affordable housing in Australia caused by a lack of investment over years. The need for local government to partner with federal, state govt and community housing providers and the private sector was explained, especially in relation to the money that will be made available from the Federal Government housing fund. However, rental affordability is the biggest issue and has largely been ignored.

The Federal Government is currently in the process of negotiating a new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement with State Governments. Local Govt is not part of this discussion yet can play a crucial role. There is an opportunity to feed in to this process before they enter into another 5-year agreement.

Cyber Security and Local Government – this session talked about a recent survey of local Government to determine our collective capacity to manage cyber-attacks. JLT conducted the survey and it is available on line.

<https://lgiswa.com.au/documentlibrary/documentnew/publicindex?documentId=391&fileName=JLT%20Public%20Sector%20Risk%20Report.pdf&libraryGuid=892c2b10-8544-411b-9e4e-0f6ae08c214a>

Friday 16 June

On the evening prior to this day, to mark the occasion of the re-establishment of the ACLG, a dinner was held in Parliament House where both the Prime Minister and Minister for First Nations, Linda Burney spoke. The Prime Minister emphasised that Local Government is crucial in solving our nation's challenges and Minister Burney talked about the importance of a voice to Parliament if we are to improve the lives of First Nations peoples at the local level.

The day was divided up into a number of panels of key Ministers and an opportunity to take questions from the representatives of around 600 councils nation-wide. It was a great opportunity to hear firsthand and in more detail, the focus and priorities of the Federal Government and how we might better connect with these.

Some of the issues/ comments from Ministers were:

- Grants available by the end of 2023 – community energy grant, infrastructure grants, housing, social housing.
- Need to address the inequality in infrastructure, support parks, recreation spaces, invest in people, places, services, economies and industries.
- Federal and local Govt partnership on national priorities of net zero emissions and affordable housing.
- The cost of insurance is a problem nationally, including for councils with the increase of climate related events. The cost of risk is being discussed in the finance portfolio.
- The infrastructure minister is undertaking an infrastructure pipeline review to identify unfunded, unplanned, over promised project and to prioritise spending and make it more cost effective in line with national priorities e.g. around 800 projects currently committed.
- A new grants program of \$100mill for batteries etc direct to local government

- Policy areas of housing, climate and infrastructure are being discussed much more together.
- a competitive funding process opens on July 5 for a project *growing regions and thriving suburbs*
- The national urban policy forum is a great example of how to transform precincts.
- They are looking for well thought through proposals that are funding and investment ready.
- The priority of the Arts is reflected in the national policy and is considered to be vital social infrastructure.
- The NDIS is currently being reviewed and all levels of Govt need to consider their responsibilities to provide services and support for people with disabilities, not just shift everything into the NDIS.
- A national building ministers meeting has discussed heat, climate, national construction code, net zero challenge, the energy environment and economic benefits.
- Renters' rights rather than rent control is the focus working with states and territories.
- A project is currently underway to identify the national risk of climate change and proposals for mitigation and adaptation.

Key Take Outs

The agenda of the Federal Government is clear, connected and focussed and we need to be more aware of the direction and opportunities if we are to benefit from this.

Councils right across the country are being very innovative and we need to be brave and forward thinking, especially in the areas of climate change, community development and housing. We need to model our thinking on a joined-up approach to tackle the issues we face locally, state-wide and nationally. We should also connect with progressive thinking and innovative councils in our state and share ideas and strategies.

The focus of this Government is on addressing inequality, housing, social services and building communities and the funding will follow these.

There is a current priority to deliver the commitment to implement the Uluru Statement of the Heart in order to better address issues facing First Nations peoples. We can be an active part of making this happen.

Electrification is an opportunity to address our community carbon emissions, generate electricity and raise revenue. We need to connect with the work of Saul Griffiths and tap into other councils who are developing this as a strategy. We also need to put this in the agenda of the Capital City Committee.

What are we doing to engage and connect with our community, especially young people, and are we engaging our community effectively in shaping our city to be equitable and resilient?

Are we up with the funding opportunities available? Are we funding and investment ready? Are our projects well thought through? Have we adequately tapped into the opportunities for infrastructure funding from the Federal Government? e.g active transport, community infrastructure etc.

