

Commonwealth Local Government Conference

Speech notes for opening address at Commonwealth Local Government Conference. Aotea Centre, Auckland

I acknowledge the other two patrons, Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller from Jamaica, who sends her best wishes for the conference, and President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni from Uganda who will arrive later in the week.

I also acknowledge Prime Minister Hon Edward Ngunyi Lowassa of Tanzania and the Deputy Prime Minister of Malta, Hon Dr Tonio Borg, who are with us today.

Gathered here today are also ministers, mayors, and other local government leaders; senior officials, practitioners; and representatives from non-governmental organisations across the Commonwealth. You represent not only an association of 53 countries, but a family of over 1.7 billion people from around the globe.

Many of you have travelled a long way to be here - from Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean, Africa and Europe. Thank you for coming. Your presence here is important to us. In turn, we are proud of our system of local government and what it is achieving through strong community partnerships and for sustainability. Hosting this conference enables us to showcase what we do.

Each of you brings a unique perspective to the conference. Yet the power of a gathering like this also lies in its collective wisdom. Here we share experiences, learn from each other, and we work towards our common goals within the Commonwealth family.

This is the fourth Commonwealth Local Government Conference. The outcomes of the last conference in Aberdeen were endorsed by Commonwealth Leaders in Malta, and they are guiding central and local governments as they strengthen their democratic processes and their service delivery. In November, as your patron, it will be my pleasure to take the outcomes of this conference to CHOGM in Uganda, and advocate for their endorsement.

I extend a special welcome to colleagues on the stage today:

- Mayor Robert Montague, chair of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum;
- Hon Dr Tonio Borg, Deputy Prime Minister of Malta; and
- Hon Samuel Abal, Minister of Provincial and Local Government in Papua New Guinea.
- Basil Morrison, President of Local Government New Zealand, representing regional and local government in New Zealand;
- Dick Hubbard and Bob Harvey, the Mayors of Auckland City Council and Waitakere City Council respectively.

The support of the local government sector generally in hosting this conference has been crucial.

Particular thanks are also due to our Minister of Local Government, Hon Mark Burton; Associate Minister, Hon Nanaia Mahuta; and all government officials who have worked on this conference, especially those from the Department of Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

To ensure that the conference is as representative as possible, New Zealand has fully sponsored 20 delegates from the Pacific and Asia, and partially sponsored 30 from Africa and the Caribbean. A further 10 delegates have received assistance from other agencies, including AUSAID, the Scottish Executive, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the Canadian International Development Agency.

I also acknowledge the 35 councils from around New Zealand who hosted sponsored delegates in their communities for two days last week. I understand that this is the first time this has happened at a Commonwealth Local Government Conference. Thank you for your generosity and for your willingness to exchange ideas and best practice.

Finally, I thank the Auckland councils which are conducting study visits during the conference. This will be an invaluable opportunity for delegates to look at how community leadership is translated into positive local action, and our councils will learn from conference delegates too.

Delivering development through local leadership

The theme of this conference is 'delivering development through local leadership'.

This tells us that local councils are not only about roads, rates, and rubbish. They are a fundamental part of our system of democratic governance. Part of their role is to provide strategic leadership. That role is increasingly recognised as essential, in promoting the well-being of citizens and acting locally on the challenges we share at a nationwide and global level.

For the next three days, this conference will explore the theme of local leadership and how it can help create strong, thriving communities. As well as seeing first-hand some of the recent innovations in community leadership in New Zealand, you will learn about good leadership from case studies across the Commonwealth.

The Aberdeen Agenda from the last conference stated that:

"Effective leadership is essential to strong local democracy. It is important to strengthen and build the capacity of councillors, officers and local governance institutions to ensure that local democracy can enable local government to deliver quality services to the local community. Community leadership is an

important and growing role for local government in the creation of sustainable communities.”

The Agenda goes on to say that local government needs to build the capacity of civil society organisations so that they too can participate effectively in the local democratic process, and that local government also has a role in developing international partnerships.

In other words, local government can't go it alone.

To meet the challenges of our fast-changing world, we must work on them together. Local leadership will only be effective if it involves partnerships with communities (including indigenous and minority peoples, the not-for-profit sector and business), with central government, and across national boundaries. I might say that this is also true of central government – we need effective partnerships with key stakeholders to govern effectively.

Before I comment on how some of these partnerships work in New Zealand, let me briefly tell you a little about how local government operates here.

We are a small country, with just over four million people. Close to one third of them live in the Auckland region.

We have 73 territorial authorities or local city and district councils, and also twelve regional councils.

Representation of women on our councils has not reached the Commonwealth target of 30 per cent, and I regret to say that the number of female councillors actually dropped from 28 per cent to 24 per cent at the 2004 elections. Nor is the cultural diversity of our communities as well reflected in representation on councils as it should be. I hope that this year's scheduled elections will see more women, and more citizens from ethnic minority communities standing for office – and succeeding !

In New Zealand, social services like education and health are the responsibility of central government. Councils provide much core network infrastructure, environmental protection, regulatory services, and a wide range of community amenities from social housing to museums, and galleries; community halls, auditoria, and events centres; and sport and recreational facilities, including parks and reserves. They promote community and economic development, and arts and culture.

The New Zealand model of local government demonstrates a number of characteristics:

It is self-sufficient, both financially and in the way it operates. Under the 2002 Local Government Act it has a general power of competence, enabling it to make its own decisions and choices about what it does and how it does it.

This leads to considerable diversity in local government across New Zealand.

While the law defines councils' overall responsibilities, they are able to find local solutions to local problems. Their responses will be a reflection of their local circumstances – of their resources, leadership style, organisational capacity, and the make-up of their communities.

For example, all councils must engage citizens in planning and decision-making processes. The processes employed, however, will be very different for the Kaikoura District Council in the South Island which employs 26 staff and has a revenue base of \$6.6 million a year, as compared with Auckland City Council which employs over 1700 staff and has \$595 million a year at its disposal.

What is clear is that being small isn't a barrier to doing well. The Kaikoura District Council I just mentioned has the enviable record of being the first local authority in the world to achieve Green Globe certification, in recognition of its commitment to protecting the environment and working towards sustainability for residents, visitors, and future generations.

Alongside the autonomy our councils enjoy runs a very strong emphasis on transparency and accountability, two key principles of the Aberdeen Agenda. New Zealand's councils operate very openly by any standard.

Partnership with communities

The Aberdeen Agenda states that “the building of a robust relationship between local government and civil society is central to local democracy and to the development of sustainable communities”.

Our local government legislation mandates strong community involvement in decision-making processes, and sustainable development.

As well as preparing annual plans and reports, our councils must also develop clear statements of their communities' aspirations across social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being. They develop 10-year plans which show how they can help achieve those aspirations. The plans are open to ongoing discussion and adaptation.

Preparing such plans requires an enormous amount of engagement with communities, and it requires councils to be strategic and future focused. Both the aging of our society, and its growing diversity, will have an impact on the design and range of services which our councils offer.

In New Zealand today a commitment to social cohesion and a willingness to be inclusive across ethnicity, culture, and faith is more important than ever before. Both central and local government need to show leadership in this area – and we do. By international standards our diverse peoples live in relative peace and harmony, and it is important to me that we keep it that way.

Our local government legislation also ensures that relationships are built with New Zealand's indigenous Maori people. Much of what local government

does relates to Maori interests and needs.

Two of the conference study visits in the next few days will focus on interaction between Maori and local councils.

The visit with Ngati Whatua, will include a tour of sites to be returned to their people as part of the Treaty of Waitangi claims settlement process. Ngati Whatua and Auckland City Council jointly manage a number of sites as public reserves for the use and enjoyment of the people of Auckland. The positive relationship they enjoy is enabling historical grievances to be recognised and addressed in a peaceful and constructive way.

Another visit is to Papakura marae, which is contracted by government to deliver health promotion and other social initiatives. The marae has close links with the Papakura District Council, whose strategy to embrace the aspirations of local Maori is part of its broad community plan.

Partnership with central government

This brings me to the relationship between local and central government in New Zealand. For many years this was an antagonistic relationship, but over the past seven years my government and Local Government New Zealand have worked together in a constructive and structured way.

We meet twice a year in the Central and Local Government Forum, jointly chaired by me as Prime Minister and the President of Local Government New Zealand, with ministers, and Local Government New Zealand's executive members present. At these peak level meetings, we review the issues we are working on together, and mandate our officials with an ongoing work programme.

The truth is that central and local government need each other. We represent the same people – the citizens of New Zealand. The issues we address can't be neatly pigeonholed into the different levels of government. It makes sense for central government to take local government into its confidence when we are designing legislation and policy – a good deal of which impacts directly on local government and how it serves its communities.

I believe that the dialogue between central and local government has built stronger relationships and a better understanding by each of us of the challenges we face respectively.

Out of the collaborative relationship we enjoy have come new central government subsidies for critical local infrastructure, such as sewerage and drinking water systems, and services to cope with rising tourist numbers; joint responses to natural disasters and flood management; and co-operation with councils on the provision of affordable social housing.

International partnerships

New Zealand is a small country determined to play a constructive role on international issues. We are known for our passion for sustainability, disarmament, and peaceful conflict resolution; and for democracy and human rights. We are proud to support the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and its focus on action for local democracy.

Hosting this Forum has given me the privilege of being its patron, Local Government Minister Mark Burton the privilege of serving as vice-chairperson, and Basil Morrison the privilege of being a board member.

Partnerships with the South Pacific are important for both central and local government in New Zealand. We are a Pacific nation and migration from the Pacific Islands to New Zealand has been significant. Increasingly Pacific peoples are having an impact in shaping our unique national identity.

I know that some delegates will be visiting the Pacific Events Centre in Manukau City to see first-hand how that Council addresses the issues and needs of local Pacific people in partnership with them.

Our strong Pacific communities, deep linkages, and long history with the region place us in a good position to engage with Pacific governments at all levels.

We are one of the partners in the Pacific Regional Project under the auspices of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum. This five-year project aims to build local government capacity by establishing a regional network of local government practitioners to help Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu overcome the challenges of low levels of resources and increasing urbanisation.

New Zealand local government can also be involved in offshore initiatives, including providing emergency relief and support for rehabilitation in the Indian Ocean. In the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami, for example, some councils donated money and resources or sent staff to assist directly in the rebuilding programme.

In the Solomon Islands, New Zealand and Australia are involved in a project to help re-establish local government in the capital, Honiara. The Kapiti Coast District Council, one of our North Island councils, is a strong supporter of this project.

After last November's riots and destruction in Tonga, Manukau City has been supporting the planning for the rebuilding of the capital Nuku'alofa. Manukau City has also signed memoranda of understanding for promoting economic development with Samoa, the Cook Islands, and French Polynesia, and has facilitated young people from those islands coming to Manukau for technology education.

In areas where there has been recent conflict, re-establishing local government services is critical to the well-being of local people. Our

involvement helps bring communities together again.

Sustainability

I would like to end by encouraging you to make sustainability central to your discussions over the next three days.

The quest for sustainability has taken on a new urgency because of the scale of the environmental challenge our world faces.

Traditional patterns of development and fast-growing populations have put an intolerable strain on our planet. The future economic costs of doing nothing are dire.

That's why issues around sustainability and climate change have become the compelling issues of our times, dominating international agendas and forums such as this.

In my annual Prime Minister's Statement to our Parliament last month, I called for boldness in our approach to sustainability. I said that I believe New Zealand can aim to be the first nation to be truly sustainable – across the four pillars of the economy, society, the environment and nationhood.

I believe we can aspire to be carbon neutral in our economy and way of life.

I believe that in the years to come, the pride we take in our quest for sustainability and carbon neutrality will define our nation, just as our quest for a nuclear free world has over the past 23 years.

Our government intends to lead by example. This year the first group of six government departments will commit to reaching carbon neutrality by 2012. Over the next year, all other government departments will also develop plans to become carbon neutral, and the wider state sector will be encouraged to join the programme.

I am delighted that this conference will also be carbon neutral. The emissions resulting from international and domestic air travel, accommodation, venue use, and social events associated with the conference will be offset by a payment to Landcare Research's CarboNZero programme. It will invest the money in indigenous tree planting programmes.

Creating genuinely sustainable communities requires determined action at the local level. Many of the core activities of local government – water use, transport, and waste disposal – relate directly to sustainability.

Local councils can lead by example on sustainability. Through their efforts, they can involve and encourage people to make more sustainable choices. Sustainability lies at the heart of New Zealand's local government legislation. The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was a stimulus for action, and much has been achieved by far sighted councils.

During the study visits, delegates to this conference will have the opportunity to look at local government projects which contribute to sustainability, including:

- the development of regional transport and urban renewal projects, known as the Northern Busway and Britomart;
- a council-community partnership in waste management on Waiheke Island;
- environmental education for schools and the public at the Arataki Visitors Centre in a large regional park;
- a partnership between the Waitakere City Council and the local community to achieve better stormwater management and improve water quality;
- a collaborative project to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of children and young people in North Shore City; and
- a partnership between the Franklin District Council, and its biggest employer, the steel mill.

These are all excellent examples of thinking globally and acting locally in the interests of sustainability.

Complacency will not do. Our collective future is dependent on long-term sustainable strategies for our economies, societies, environment, and cultures. Those strategies have to be driven by strong leadership and sound policies at all levels of government.

That is the personal and political challenge we all face. To use the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “you must be the change you want to see in the world”.

It is an honour for New Zealand to be hosting this conference, and showing delegates what we are achieving here. I wish you all the best during your time in New Zealand, and I look forward to promoting the outcomes of your discussions at CHOGM in Uganda in November this year.