

Local Government Voices Series

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A Conversation with former Shires Association of New South Wales President Mayor Col Sullivan OAM.

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Abstract: As an elected representative in New South Wales since 1974, and a long serving Shire President and Mayor, Councillor Colin Sullivan OAM has been a long term local government stalwart who has represented with distinction at the highest level on institutions, including The Shires Association of NSW, Local Government Boundaries Commission of NSW and the Australian Local Government Association. In August 2012 Councillor Sullivan provided information to local government colleague Ian Tiley and discussed his very substantial and extended involvement in the sector and future prospects for local government.

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1. Introduction

Councillor Col Sullivan is a long serving, fourth generation member of the Sullivan family to have represented as an elected local government Mayor or Shire President and councillor in the Richmond Valley on the far north coast of New South Wales. Since the mid-1970s, Councillor Sullivan has been a key figure and leader in New South Wales local government. At the September 2012 council elections, he was again elected as a Councillor on the Richmond Valley Council and subsequently as Chairperson to Rous County Council, a water supply authority, thus continuing his outstanding contribution to the local government sector. His views on the local government sector, its challenges and future prospects were explored in an interview with Ian Tiley on the eve of the 2012 local government elections and as part of an emerging tradition of securing the views of prominent local government luminaries (Dollery B and Grant B 2011).

Ian Tiley: Good afternoon Col and thank you for your time and for agreeing to share your reflections on your almost four decades as a local government councillor concerning some of the current and major matters presently being addressed in the local government sector. The Sullivan name has been synonymous with local government in the Richmond Valley and the Northern Rivers for several generations. Would you like to share the story of the Sullivan family involvement in local government?

Col Sullivan: The Sullivan family have had a long and probably unique tradition in Australia of community service, especially in Richmond Valley New South Wales local government, and also in other local organisations. Four generations of Sullivans have contributed to local government, commencing with John Sullivan who was the President of the Tomki Shire and later a Mayor of Casino Municipal Council. Remarkably, at the same time that John Sullivan was Casino Mayor, his son William Sullivan served as President of Tomki Shire. William's son and my father, Percy William, also served as President of Tomki Shire. So there were four generations, four councillors, and four Mayors or Shire Presidents, a very proud family tradition and contribution to the Richmond valley community. John, William and Percy William were, at various times, Chairpersons of the Casino Cooperative Dairy Society. The Sullivan family have also had a long association with Casino Show Society. I

have served the Society for 48 years, including nine years as President and remain on the Committee, while my brother Kevin has served for over 40 years and was President for five years. Our mother Freda was President of the Show Society Ladies Auxiliary for many years, while my wife Dorothy and Kevin's wife Gail are still Ladies Auxiliary members.

Ian Tiley: You have had a very long and distinguished commitment to local government. Could you chronicle the period of your involvement commencing with Tomki and Richmond Shire Councils and, since the voluntary 1999-2000 amalgamation of Casino Municipality, with Richmond Valley Council? For what periods have you been the Shire President and Mayor of these councils?

Col Sullivan: In September 1974, I entered local government as a councillor to the former Tomki Shire Council and agreed to serve one three year term on the Council. In 1976, as part of the CJ Barnett Report and Recommendations into NSW local government, the Tomki and Woodburn Shires were amalgamated. Little did I realise that, over 38 years later, I would be again nominating to serve another term in local government!

In 1976, I was elected to the new Richmond River Shire Council where I was a councillor until the year 2000. I was elected Shire President for the 1982-1983 term and, after the introduction of the 1993 Local Government Act, when the Council leader's title changed to Mayor, I served as Richmond Shire Mayor from 1994 until the year 2000 voluntary merger of the Casino Municipality and Richmond Shire to form the Richmond Valley Council. I continue to serve on that Council, was the first elected Mayor of the merged Council from 2000 to 2002 and again served as Mayor from 2008 to September 2012.

In addition to my service to local government in the Richmond Valley I have been honoured to represent the sector at State and National levels. After several years as A Division delegate to the Shires Association of New South Wales, I was elected as Vice-President from 2001 to 2005 and as President of the peak Shires entity from 2005 to 2007. I held the position of a member of the NSW Local Government Boundaries Commission from July 2003 to June

2005 and also served as a Vice-President of the Australian Local Government Association from 2006 to 2007.

Ian Tiley: What is your experience and perspectives regarding the voluntary amalgamation process which occurred from 1998 and 2000 between the former Casino Municipality and Richmond River Shire Council and do you consider the merger a success thirteen years on?

Col Sullivan: I strongly supported the amalgamation of the two councils. At the time, and even now I have received strong criticism over my supportive position on the merger. I believed that both councils, as relatively small entities, could not have survived in the longer term, or at best would have always struggled, but that as a single local government entity it had far better prospects to become a sound economic unit and more capable of effectively serving the ratepayers and residents of the larger local government area.

Ian Tiley: In 2003-2004, during the turbulent period of the NSW forced council mergers, you were a member of the NSW Boundaries Commission. How did you see your role at that time and could you share some of the highlights of that position?

Col Sullivan: As a member for four years on the New South Wales Government Boundaries Commission, a rewarding but frustrating period, I discovered that while I undertook the role proscribed by the Local Government Act and advised and made recommendations to the Minister for Local Government on the Commission's decisions, quite often the Minister would make his own decision and not heed the Commission's advice or recommendations.

I have always considered that amalgamation of councils should be planned on a State-wide basis. A decision should be taken as to the appropriate number of councils for New South Wales, and the State local government boundaries accordingly determined and legislated. However, communities of interest should always be maintained and councils with similar characteristics placed together. For example, rural councils should be amalgamated with other rural

councils, coastal councils with adjoining coastal councils, etc. I would welcome the opportunity to be involved in pursuing this concept.

Ian Tiley: Would you like to share your core beliefs concerning what should be the role and functions of local government?

Col Sullivan: I maintain that the traditional 'roads, rates and rubbish' role remains relevant in terms of local government providing the services that communities desire. Unfortunately the increasing requirement to consult with community, usually only minority interest groups, often does not allow councils to sufficiently provide leadership and direction. As an example, a recent Council special rate variation (SRV) request to the Minister for Local Government for a rate increase of three per cent above the permissible rate peg limit was rejected after two public meetings, attended by approximately 80 persons, did not support the proposed additional rate increase. Given the Council area population approximates 22,500, I question whether that small number of active, vocal citizens should be able to have such a persuasive influence on the SRV request outcome. Is this genuine democracy?

Ian Tiley: What has been your philosophy over the years in terms of your approach to the role of an elected representative?

Col Sullivan: As an elected representative I have always tried to listen to our community. However, there have been occasions when I have had to make up my own mind on difficult and sometimes divisive matters for what I believed were the best interests of the community. My approach at these times has simply been to be honest with myself. The role of a councillor is now frequently more demanding than it was when I was first elected in 1974. Community expects more from their council and elected representatives and are probably better educated and informed and take a greater interest in local issues and decision making.

Ian Tiley: How have you managed the important relationship between Mayor and General Manager? What works and what does not?

Col Sullivan: Over my years as a Councillor and Mayor I have worked with at least six Shire Clerks and General Managers. Perhaps the most important aspect of the working relationship with the chief officer of council is to always be open and honest. The Mayor and General Manager must be able to cooperatively work together with mutual trust and in the best interests of the Council. I consider that the 1993 Local Government Act removed much power from the Mayor and Council and effectively transferred that power to the General Manager. My continuing view is that the Mayor, especially when directly elected by the community at large, is the legitimately elected leader of the community and should have the support of the Local Government Act to allow him or her to act in the capacity of community leader.

Ian Tiley: What in your view are the biggest issues facing the local government sector now and in the future?

Col Sullivan: I consider that the ongoing most difficult matter facing local government is its lack of adequate capacity to maintain existing infrastructure and to provide the vital additional infrastructure needed to accommodate the rapid population growth in the Northern Rivers region as the 'baby boomer' cohort enter retirement. Under the 'rate pegging' regime, which has been in place for almost 35 years, councils will never have the necessary economic resources to properly address the infrastructure problem. In my view rate pegging must be discontinued if local government is to adequately provide essential services and infrastructure for communities.

Ian Tiley: What is your view on constitutional recognition of local government, what ought to be the nature of such recognition, and how might the Australian people be persuaded to support a referendum question on the matter?

Col Sullivan: For many years I have strongly advocated for recognition of local government in the Australian Constitution. Provision of legitimacy for local government in the Federal system under which Australia operates, is long overdue. A sustainable financial future for the Australian local government sector will be

contingent on obtaining a share of Commonwealth income tax. Fair funding for local government to effectively undertake its roles is a matter of vital national importance.

Ian Tiley: You are rightly described as a long term local government stalwart and luminary and you have many significant achievements over the decades. Could we discuss some of your roles at regional, state and national level? Let's commence with your perspective on the Northern Rivers Regional Organisation of Councils (NOROC) of which you were Chairperson for several years? What do you believe has been the value of NOROC and do you believe it could accept a greater regional role in the future?

Col Sullivan: At long last I believe that NOROC is becoming a much stronger and effective organisation. NOROC must become a regional entity which legitimately speaks on behalf of the entire region, and should in future play a more active representative role for the Northern Rivers region. I suggest that ROC's could in future become the preferred regional entity which effectively controls local government in the regions.

Ian Tiley: You were also a member and Chairperson of the Northern Rivers Area Consultative Committee (NRACC). What are your recollections of that period and of the value of that former institution?

Col Sullivan: Area Consultative Committees were effective organisations which played a substantial role in attraction of Commonwealth funds to a significant number of important developments in the Northern Rivers region.

Ian Tiley: How would you compare and contrast the roles of the NRACC and the current Regional Development Australia Northern Rivers Committee (RDANR)? Do you consider that there are emerging or growing tensions between local government and RDANR?

Col Sullivan: I really have only one comment to make concerning NRACC and RDANR. To be effective each entity should have been provided a sound financial budget and extensive autonomy because, without those ingredients, they amount to

little more than a “talk-fest”. I believe that there needs to be serious consideration to the merging of RDANR and NOROC and give the resultant entity the financial and legal capacity to develop the region.

Ian Tiley: You spent many years as a representative on the Shires Association of NSW and rose to the position of President of that peak NSW organisation? In hindsight how do you view your involvement at that level? What is your view about the impending merger of the Shires and Local Government Associations?

Col Sullivan: I enjoyed the role of President of the NSW Shires Association and derived much satisfaction from visiting and being able to assist many councils across the State, and especially the smaller rural shires, which is my background. I am pleased that the Local Government and the Shires Associations have now agreed to merge. As Shires Association President I attempted to bring about this change. However, due to strong opposition from the Local Government Association at the time, I was unsuccessful. Provided with a good constitution and setting workable rules to give equal opportunity and fair representation to all local government areas in the State, I believe would ensure a successful new peak representative body for local government in the years ahead.

Ian Tiley: You have also represented the NSW Shires Association on the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) and you rose to the position of Vice-President of ALGA? What are your favourite memories and achievements of that period?

Col Sullivan: In my role as Vice-President of ALGA I found serving the Australia-wide community was a highly rewarding experience, as was being involved in meetings of the Council of Australian Government (COAG). I probably regret not remaining as a member of ALGA and becoming its president. I had reached a stage in my life of wanting to spend more time at home with family, and in hindsight, I believe that my decision was the correct one.

Ian Tiley: Looking back on your outstanding local government career what would you regard as three personal highlights?

Col Sullivan: I consider my greatest achievements in local government were becoming an elected representative for the first time in 1974 and being continuously elected at every local government election since that time; becoming the Mayor of Richmond River Shire; and being the first elected Mayor of Richmond Valley Council after the voluntary merger of Casino Municipality and Richmond River Shire.

Ian Tiley: What would you regard as your greatest local government experience?

Col Sullivan: I was elected to represent Australia on a goodwill tour to the Republic of China, sponsored by the Chinese, and to celebrate 100 years of local government in China.

Ian Tiley: How do you see the future of local government?

Col Sullivan: In my view there will always be local government in Australia as it is the legitimate grass roots government which truly represents peoples' everyday interests and concerns. The sector needs greater financial support from the Commonwealth to properly conduct its role for communities. An end to State government rate pegging and cost shifting will be important for the financial sustainability of the sector.

Ian Tiley: What changes do you believe are likely to come from the current Local Government Review Panel process as a consequence of the *Destination 2036 momentum*?

Col Sullivan: There is no doubt in my mind that the current Independent Local Government Review Panel will propose changes to the NSW local government sector. Change is needed and is inevitable. I believe that the current process is the most positive I have witnessed, and I fully support it. My great hope is that the State government of the day will have the courage and foresight to take

decisions which will put the key Panel recommendations into effect. In the past, lack of political will has often impeded desirable reforms for the sector. Difficult decisions will need to be taken. I just hope that the 'local' will always be retained in local government.

Ian Tiley: Col thank you very much for your time and valuable perspectives and reflections.

References

Dollery B and Grant B (2011). A Conversation with former ALGA President Geoff Lake. Local Government Voices. Armidale NSW, Centre for Local Government, University of New England: 1-22.