

Local Government Voices

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A Conversation with former Shires Association of New South Wales President, Emeritus Mayor John Wearne AM.

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Abstract: John Wearne AM is an outstanding, highly regarded and respected Australian local government luminary who devoted over two decades of his life to the service of the local government sector. From 1987 to 2008, he became an extraordinary leader at Bingara Shire, New South Wales and in Australian local government. Now retired, he has graciously and thoughtfully reflected on, and shared his experiences, views and perspectives of his period of leadership in local government.

Keywords: Bingara; John Wearne; local government

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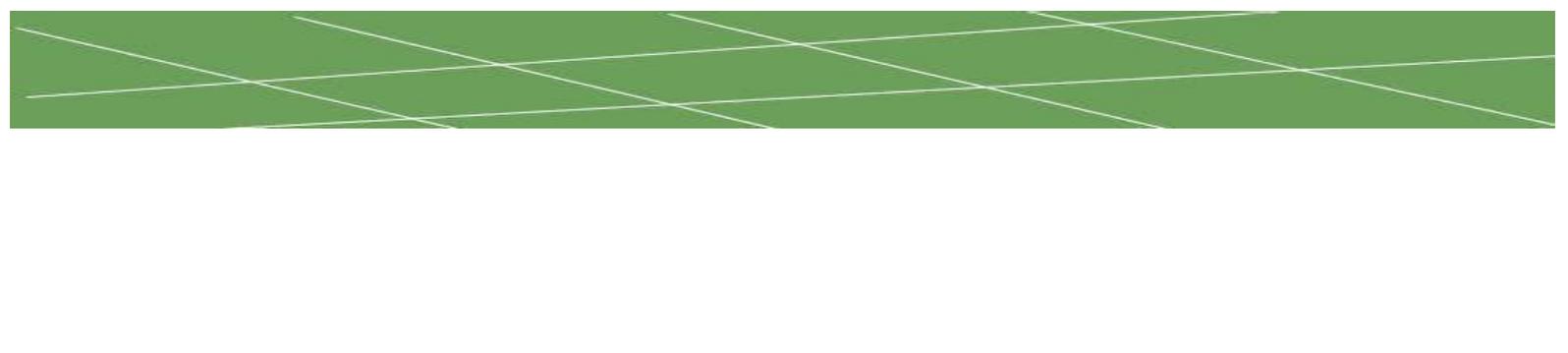
Dr Ian Tiley, NSW Local Government Acts Taskforce, retired Councillor and Mayor

Note: All papers in the WP series have been refereed

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Introduction

John Wearne has had an illustrious and distinguished career in public and community life and in the year 2000 was conferred membership of the Order of Australia (AM) for “services to local government and to the community through arts, conservation and sporting organisations”.

He served as an elected local government representative from 1987 until 2008, and is a former Shire President and Emeritus Mayor. From 1991 to present he had a close leadership relationship with the former Shires Association of New South Wales, including serving as its President from 1995 to 1997. He achieved the position of Senior Vice President of the Australian Local Government Association and has undertaken many high-level appointments and portfolios at State and National levels. His outstanding commitment to many community and local government organisations is provided in some detail in this conversation.

Born in Bingara, he lived there all his life until, in late 2018, with his wife Wendy, he relocated to retire to Armidale. He has had a long experience in community organisation, development and advocacy. In early April 2019, his views on the local government sector, its challenges and future prospects were explored in an interview with Ian Tiley, as part of an emerging tradition of securing the views of prominent local government luminaries (Dollery and Grant 2011).

Ian Tiley: Good afternoon John and thank you for your time and for agreeing to share your reflections on your time as a local government councillor and leader, concerning some of the current and major matters being addressed in the local government sector. Your name has long been associated with local government in your home town of Bingara and also much more broadly at New South Wales and national local government levels. Would you like to commence by sharing how you became involved in local government?

John Wearne: Becoming involved in local government for me was probably a typical small-town journey. While there was not an abundant precedence in my family history when it came to political leadership roles, my great grandfather's brother Joseph was the member for West Sydney in one of Sir Henry Parkes' governments around 1870. My grandfather Walter Wearne was leader of the Progressive Party, Minister for Lands and Deputy Premier of New South Wales through the 1920's. He and Sir Earl Page were probably the key proponents in the establishment of the original Country Party. Grandfather Walter, at the age of 21, had been the first Town Clerk of Bingara Municipal Council when established in 1889. My father resisted invitations to stand for Council, but was a prominent person in the Bingara community in leadership positions. Therefore, my involvement in public life was probably natural enough.

After considerable involvement in local organisations including the Show Society, Race Club and sport – I was President of the Cricket Association for

many years – in 1987, two long-serving Councillors persuaded me to run for Bingara Shire Council. I knew absolutely nothing about local government, but believed that I would either love or hate the role of Councillor. I was soon to realise that the former applied! I nominated in one of the four wards against two sitting Councillors and received 211 out of about 350 available primary votes.

Ian Tiley: You have had a very long commitment to local government. Could you describe the period and nature of your involvement?

John Wearne: From 1987, I was a Councillor on Bingara Shire Council for 17 years, including five years as Mayor. In 2004, Bingara Shire was amalgamated with Yallaroi Shire based at Warialda. I then nominated for the new Gwydir Shire Council and was elected from a strong field of 29 candidates. In 2008, after four years on Gwydir Shire, I did not seek re-election and retired as an elected representative. I considered a tenure of 21 years to be quite sufficient!

I broke local convention by running for Bingara Shire President after only two years as a Councillor. A longstanding tradition of “treadmill” leadership at Bingara saw very long tenures “in the chair”. I was urged to break this nexus, and was elected as Shire President in 1989 by 5 votes to 3 in what was a very tense meeting! I relinquished the Mayor’s position when, in 1995, I became President of the Shires Association of NSW. I was a member of the Executive of the Association for eight years, and also held the position of Senior Vice President of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) for two years.

During my time with the Local Government and Shires Association I was Chairperson of the Roads and Transport Committee and a member of the Community Services and Planning Committee, Industrial Panel, Joint Executive Committee, and Conference Committee. Other appointments from the Associations included; Alternative Chairperson of the NSW Community Relations Committee; Chairperson of the NSW ILAP Advisory Committee; member of the NSW Tree Forum (now NSW Native Vegetation Forum); delegate to the Country Public Libraries Association; delegate to the Rural Health Forum; member of the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) Roadside Environment committee; member of the Local Government Reform Taskforce; member of the Rural Health Workforce Reform Committee; member of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Health Councils; member of the State Regional Investment Committee; member of the Regional Development Taskforce; member of the RTA Liaison Committee; delegate to the Roads and Traffic (RTA) Advisory Committee; and Trustee and Judge on the A. R. Bluett Memorial Awards Trust. In 1995, I was the Shires Association Delegate to the International Union of Local Authorities (IULA) Conference in The Hague.

At the national level of Australian Local Government, I was from 1996 to 1998 the Senior Vice President and the NSW Delegate to that Association from 1995 to 1998. I had responsibility for the ALGA Portfolios of Regional Development

and Roads and Transport, was the ALGA delegate to the Austroads Council and the Australian Ministerial Transport Council. I also served as Chairperson of the Local Government Roads and Transport Forum and the ALGA Local Roads Committee; the ALGA representative on the National Committee for Regional Cooperation, the National General Assembly Taskforce, and the Civics and Citizenship Taskforce. I was a member of ALGA delegations to China (1995) and New Zealand (1996).

I enjoyed a very long involvement in road transport and had prominent roles in the Rural Local Roads Congresses at Moree, Mildura and Toowoomba, which provided much of the background research for the ground breaking Roads to Recovery program which continues today. From 1999 to 2005 I was a Commissioner on the National Road Transport Commission and the National Transport Commission, which developed and made recommendations to all State, Territory and Federal Ministers on the regulatory reform of road, rail and maritime systems.

My other roles were diverse, and included five years as a Director of Greening Australia NSW, five years as a Director of Country Energy, five years as a member of the National Rural Communities Program Advisory Committee, ten years as a Director and Investment Committee Chair of the Local Government Superannuation Scheme, three years as a Director of Local Government Financial Services, seven years as a member of the Arts NSW Capital Infrastructure Committee (three as Chair), three years as the Chair of Arts NSW Museum Committee, ten years as a Director of Arts North West (seven as Chair), four years as a Director of Teletask, and nine years as Deputy Chair of Railway Street Theatre Company at Penrith. Other directorships included Beyond Empathy Ltd., the North West/New England Small Business Centre, and the international engineering company PEECE Pty. Ltd.

I was a board member of the Australia Day Council of NSW between 1996 and 2007 and for four years also enjoyed a major role on the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee, chairing the Committee responsible for planning community-based celebrations across NSW. I also chaired the successful Country Summits at Tamworth (1996) and Wagga (1998).

I remain active as a member of the North West/New England Advisory Committee for the Westpac Rescue Helicopter Service, have enjoyed operating a Film Club at Bingara, continue as Patron of a number of organisations in Bingara, and continue a close association with the famous Roxy Theatre and the North West Theatre Company.

Ian Tiley: What is your experience and perspective regarding council amalgamations since your time in local government and do you consider the mergers with which you are familiar have been successful?

John Wearne: Throughout my time in local government amalgamations were front and centre. In my view, the need for amalgamations in the early 1990s was plainly apparent, and it was difficult to represent councils that 'clung to their turf'. For example, the smallest council in NSW, Windouran, with a population of approximately 450 persons, and no villages to service had road maintenance as its only service function. There were a number of "doughnut" cities and towns including for example Armidale, Bathurst, Glen Innes and Goulburn whose situation was untenable. At the 2003 annual Shires Association Conference, Premier Bob Carr bluntly told the

delegates quote, "fix up your own house, or we will do it for you". We believed the Premier and Bingara Council commenced discussions with Yallaroi Shire which, in 2004, led to one of the few "friendly" council mergers. Unfortunately, there was no financial assistance offered or given towards amalgamation expenses, and the cost of integrating the two councils ran to millions of dollars. The NSW government claim that these costs would be recovered by efficiency gains proved to be a nonsense.

The northern part of NSW had their local government boundaries assessed by Councillor Chris Vardon, which brought about major changes. For example, five councils were rolled into Tamworth. Surprisingly, Uralla escaped what seemed a sensible absorption into Armidale City Council. Political disaster then struck. Such was the political backlash from the mergers that the Government abandoned a boundaries review in the south of the state, and the small councils were untouched when in all probability most of them should have been merged. This situation largely continues today. The overall result of the mergers uneven and in my view unsatisfactory.

My comments on this matter would suggest support for consolidation. That is largely but not completely correct. For example, the merger to create Gwydir Shire has been very difficult for that region. As one of the architects of this merger I did not foresee the problems created. The merged Gwydir council had a huge area of about 10,000 square kilometres but a total population of less than 6000, located in two towns and five villages and contained an insatiable road network to service. Applying the depreciation schedule to that road network alone makes it impossible to achieve a balanced budget. My view now is that two or more councils that already have disability factors should never be amalgamated. In hindsight, Bingara Council may have been much better off merging with Inverell Council, and Yallaroi Shire with Moree Plains Shire, even though at the time these two options were opposed as being too threatening to local interests.

Another factor in the ongoing council's consolidation process is the composition and role of the NSW Local Government Boundaries Commission. Compared to the days when the Commission was designed for community engagement and consultation, it has been politically emasculated and is now, in my view, little more than a government tool.

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

John Wearne: Local government roles and functions pose some interesting questions. It is no secret that, as a “child of the state”, local government authority and responsibility are at the beck and call of the political landscape of the day. Local government has to adjust and adapt constantly to changing circumstances, particularly for example with the degree of autonomy it retains in planning and development matters. A primary local government responsibility to represent and reflect the views of the community is becoming increasingly more difficult as powers are withdrawn. Over the years I have often been asked to describe the main roles of local government. One of the most overlooked is also one of the most important, namely advocacy on behalf of the community.

Ian Tiley: What has been your perspective over the years in terms of your approach to the role of elected representatives with council officers?

John Wearne: The working interface between the elected council, or the Councillors, and the Executive staff changed dramatically and pleasingly with the introduction of the 1993 Local Government Act. No longer could councillors stop at the roadside and tell staff how to operate a grader (yes, it used to happen). The new legislation set out, and distanced, the political and operational roles of councils. A hierarchical pyramid of reporting was established within the staff structure which served to prevent councillors from inappropriately directing staff, and streamlined and in my view improved the council organisation.

I was always amazed, after the introduction of the 1993 Act, at the number of Councillors, and even some Mayors, who claimed that they had “lost all their powers”. These often are the same elected representatives who do not read their business papers, do not prepare properly for meetings, and do not realise that they have ample power through the setting and adoption of the annual operational plan and budget.

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

John Wearne: Nowhere I believe has the 1993 Act worked better than in describing and sometimes separating the functions of General Managers and Mayors. I was fortunate to work with some excellent General Managers, and became close friends with them all. I was probably lucky that the councils I led were relatively small, and that there were not factions drawn along political lines. One aspect that is really important, particularly for General Managers, (GM) is their regular performance review process. Good reviews are the best career references a GM can obtain. A series of poor reviews, and inability to correct shortcomings that have been previously identified, is the only fair way for a

council to dismiss a GM. Another strong belief I have always held is that all councillors should either be involved in General Manager performance reviews, or at least have the ability to have input to reviews. This usually disarms frustrations that councillors may feel towards a GM that they would otherwise feel powerless to have addressed.

Ian Tiley: What do you consider are the biggest issues and challenges facing the local government sector now and in the future?

John Wearne: Regardless of the roles and functions of local government, the most crucial sector issue is the quality and ability of the people involved. The qualities of leadership are vitally important. Good leadership will take you anywhere. The quality of people seeking office, and their motives for doing so, is the key to local government survival as a respected governing authority. I often ask people, whose opinion I respect, if they consider that the quality of councillors and executive staff has diminished in recent years. Almost without exception, the answer is yes. The consistent view is that there is now excessive self-interest, and too many single-issue candidates. There will be a constant challenge to remain relevant and to protect the reputation and standing of the local government institution.

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

John Wearne: The whole question of local government recognition in the Australian Constitution is only as important as the surety of powers and functions that can be obtained within the Constitution. The likelihood of a 'pat on the head' and a set of meaningless weasel words would represent pure symbolism, and a major lost opportunity. A referendum will probably only succeed with bipartisan political agreement, and a separate referendum question. It almost happened years ago with those ingredients. I am a supporter of constitutional recognition of local government but with the forgoing conditions.

Ian Tiley: You are aptly described as a long-term local government stalwart and luminary and you have many significant achievements over the decades. Could you describe some of your roles at local, regional, state and national level?

John Wearne: My most significant Federal level achievements were probably related to roads and transport. I held the National Roads and Transport Portfolio for the ALGA in a very important period. I represented local government as a delegate to Austroads which was the key representative body of senior transport executives in Australia. I also participated in Ministerial Council meetings with all Federal and State roads and transport ministers. As the local government representative, I could speak but not vote. That did not stop me lobbying the

ministers, and sometimes enabled me to halt some real “nasties” such as, at one time, requiring that local government be fully responsible for one third of all local road funding. This was also the period when ALGA conducted the initial Rural Road Congresses. At this time, I was heavily involved in designing the database and case for the eventual Roads to Recovery Program. Initially, the Roads to Recovery Program secured local government 1.2 billion dollars over four years, and was to be a “one off” allocation. It is most satisfying that the Program continues and on a larger scale than originally.

My successes with roads and transport led to my being nominated by NSW Roads Minister Hon. Carl Scully as a Commissioner on the National Road Transport Commission (NRTC). There were 12 nominations for 4 Commissioner positions with each federal, state and territory ministers voting. That I was appointed, though not then ‘wearing a local government hat’, was very satisfying. The role of the Commission was to advise all the Australian Ministers on regulatory reform of the trucking industry and to regularly review the Australian Road Rules. During my five years as a Commissioner, the NRTC morphed into the National Transport Commission through having rail and shipping added to its responsibilities.

The formation of the Local Government Superannuation Scheme (LGSS) was a major initiative with which I was associated. During my term as Shires Association President, I participated on a working party to develop the guidelines for an acceptable superannuation scheme for local government and associated employees. When the scheme eventually commenced, I became one of the Employer Trustees. I was also appointed Chair of the Investment Committee and, later, to a Regional Development Fund managed by Deutsche Bank. I held these positions on the Local Government Superannuation Scheme for ten years. When the scheme commenced it managed assets of around three billion dollars. Recently I noted that, in late 2018, this had grown to investments of 11 billion dollars.

My happiest times were spent outside of, but working with, local government. For ten years I was a board member of the Australia Day Council of NSW in the formative years. I played a significant role in development of the Ambassador Program, which quickly encouraged the celebration of our national day by local councils everywhere. For four years I chaired the Community Relations Committee of the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee, which was responsible for organising local celebrations and events throughout the state. My knowledge of, and connections with local government, was fundamental to this role.

My other great love in public life was working in the arts. I was fortunate to chair two key Arts NSW committees, the Capital Infrastructure Committee which allocated grants to projects including to local councils, and the NSW Museums Committee. I also enjoyed a ten-year role of Deputy Chair of the Penrith Railway

Street Theatre Company, and when Regional Arts Boards were established, I was Chairperson of Arts North West for its first seven years.

Several other leadership opportunities came my way at various times over the years. I was a member of a high level National Rural Communities Advisory Committee reporting to the Federal Minister of Agriculture, a Director of Greening Australia (NSW) for five years, a Director of Country Energy for its first five years of operations, a Trustee and judge of the A.R. Bluett Awards Trust for ten years, and a Director of Beyond Empathy Inc. when that organisation was first formed.

Ian Tiley: What is your view as to the value of regional entities such as the former Area Consultative Committees, Regional Development Boards and Regional Development Australia Committees? What are your recollections of that period and of the value of those institutions?

John Wearne: Regional co-operation really began during my early days in local government. I think Regional Organisations of Councils (ROCS) have generally never met their potential, and that regional bodies that included councils have often struggled. The reasons go to the very nature of local government with constantly changing personnel, council cultures and changing priorities and competing interests which have contributed to making consistent effort and emphasis difficult to maintain.

Ian Tiley: Looking back on your outstanding local government career what would you regard as the most significant periods for the sector?

John Wearne: This is a difficult question as local government is constantly changing. There have for example, been dramatic changes in waste management as local government, often unwillingly, has been compelled to change in the wake of higher environmental standards. Water management has improved as government support funding has increased. The most significant change in my time has been managing the expectations that communities now enjoy and expect which has compelled a greater degree of advocacy by councils for communities.

If I was to select one core function that local government can undertake that others cannot, then that would be the capacity to intervene for communities. Councils and councillors are the defence mechanism for our communities. Often there comes a situation where if council does not act then the question arises as to who will act or intervene? As an example, when Bingara's only service station closed, how were 1500 people to obtain their fuel needs? The Council intervened, purchased the business, effected essential maintenance, and leased the premises until, the lessee purchased the business. Also, at Bingara, who else but Council could have purchased and restored the famous Roxy Theatre and Café complex? Government provided 90 percent of the funding, and the Roxy is now one of the premier tourist attractions in northern NSW. On a long road trip through

Queensland in 2012, I was amazed at how councils had supported their communities in areas never considered part of the traditional local government role. A hotel, a museum, even north Queensland's premier private school at Charters Towers were saved from closure when the council accepted these assets and was able to retain them for their communities' benefit.

Ian Tiley: What in your view are the most significant current challenges facing Australian local government?

John Wearne: I believe that staying relevant and keeping connected to the community, attracting the best people to elected and executive staff positions, effectively communicating success stories, and never ceasing to maintain the very best image are all major ongoing challenges for local government.

Ian Tiley: How do you believe the issue of local government financial sustainability and asset management ought to be effectively addressed?

John Wearne: I have sympathy for smaller councils that have a difficult task in complying with accounting standards. That is not to suggest that they are unviable and need amalgamating. There are going to be massive challenges in financing remote councils in the west of the state as climate change inevitably drives people east and populations continue to decline. I question how one should value equity and believe that the only answer is what I term positive discrimination or giving greater support to Councils in remote areas. Even in the 1990's some western councils raised only 10 percent of their revenue from rates.

All this means that, like never before, funds will need to be carefully allocated and expended. I support some grant funding being conditional on proven asset management systems. I dislike compulsion, although it usually secures better outcomes. Compliance in asset management is no different to compliance generally. Many councils comply to the minimum acceptable standard instead of realising the benefits that they are able to accrue from higher level asset management.

Ian Tiley: What would you regard as your greatest achievements?

John Wearne: At my retirement dinner in 2008, I was asked this question. I searched my mind for something that emotionally affected me at the time, and told how, in the early days of my Shire Presidency at Bingara, I was asked at a meeting in a rural fire brigade shed near our Narrabri boundary if I could do something about dust affecting several houses close to the road in that area. I acted and facilitated what was the first many short dust seals near houses on gravel roads. I thought no more about that meeting until approached at Bingara Show by a friend whose elderly mother had been one of the project's beneficiaries. She said "John – Mum wants to talk to you". Her mother then proceeded to burst into tears and tell me that, for the first time in 30 odd years of

living there, she had been able to hang washing on a clothesline. I cannot describe how good that made me feel. It is what grass roots local government is all about.

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

John Wearne: Local government reform will always be necessary to embrace beneficial change. The local government sector has always been reticent when it comes to doing things differently. Technology and climate change will be major challenges for local government on in the years ahead. I am now happily retired in Armidale and remain a Patron of Local Government NSW, a position of which I am very proud. I still attend annual local government conferences if my masochism levels sink too low!

Ian Tiley: John thank you very much for your insightful, valuable perspectives and reflections. I wish you and your wife Wendy a long and happy retirement in Armidale.

References

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