

# Local Government Voices

## Series

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01-2011

March 2011

## A Conversation with former ALGA President Geoff Lake

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*Centre for Local Government, UNE*

*Abstract: Abstract: As the youngest ever President of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), Geoff Lake led the local government sector through a critical period in its history, which not only saw the transfer of substantial additional federal government funds to local government as part of its stimulus package, but also the establishment of Australian Council for Local Government and the Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government. Moreover, President Lake managed to secure Commonwealth Government agreement for a referendum on constitutional recognition of local government. On the eve of the end of his term of office as ALGA President, on 22 September 2010 Brian Dollery and Bligh Grant recorded a conversation with Geoff Lake to secure his views on past and future reform of Australian local government, as well as the prospects for the local government sector.*

*Keywords: Australian Local Government Association (ALGA); Constitutional recognition; Geoff Lake; local government reform*

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## **Introduction**

For students of Australian public policy much can be gleaned about the nature and direction of contemporary public policy formulation from leading participants. A key figure in the Australian local government milieu over the past several years has been Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) President Geoff Lake, who completed his Presidential term in 2010, and who has pioneered a number of significant new initiatives for local government, especially in relation to the Commonwealth Government. It is thus useful to the broader Australian local government community to explore the views of Geoff Lake on the eve of his period as ALGA President.

The conversation recorded here with ALGA President Geoff Lake at the University of New England Centre for Local Government in Armidale stems from an established tradition deriving from Arjo Klamer's (1984) pioneering discussions with leading economists in his *The New Classical Macroeconomics*. A nascent Australian tradition also exists, originating with Christopher Higgin's (1989) interview with Colin Clark, John King's (1994) conversation with Craufurd Goodwin, John Lodewijks' (1994) interview with John Neville, Brian Dollery and Joe Wallis (1996) conversation with Clem Tisdell, and Brian Dollery's (2002) conversation with Peter Groenewegen.

In addition, an embryonic literature in Australian local government discourse has begun with the conversation conducted with Byan Pape by Blich Grant and Brian Dollery (2010), which dealt with his High Court challenge to the Commissioner of Taxation paying a tax bonus as part of the Rudd Government \$42 billion Nation Building and Jobs Plan, and had important ramifications for federal funding of local government. The interview with Geoff Lake in this paper forms part of this emerging tradition.

*Brian Dollery:* Good morning Geoff and welcome to the UNE Centre for Local Government. There is quite comprehensive information on the ALGA website about you: You're from Victoria, and you're a lawyer. Nevertheless, we wondered if we could just ask you two autobiographical questions. Firstly, please briefly tell us how you got into local government in the first place?

*Geoff Lake:* I developed a keen interest in politics and how government works during high school, mainly from the dinner table conversations with Mum and Dad. I was actively involved at my local high school in student representation issues. I enjoyed debating. I was not good at football or cricket. I played them both but I was a little bit better at debating and student representational activities, ... and I enjoyed it too. I think basically from that background I developed an interest in politics, in government. I joined the Labor Party in my final year at high school. I got very involved in it upon leaving high school and as a result took a slower progress through university and I have remained very involved and active ever since.

I ran for Monash City council when I was 19, turning 20. I did that because I'd had a couple of years of experience in the Labor Party. I'd helped different State and Federal candidates win election, first in the 1999 Victorian State election and also the '98 Federal election. So I'd learnt a few campaigning skills and I was really interested to have a go in my own right rather than simply working for somebody else.

Local government elections came around in my community. I had a look around the council table and saw a bunch of predominantly old men making all the decisions. I thought I can't do much about the gender imbalance, but I can certainly do something about the aging balance and I've got a different perspective. So I decided that I'd run for council as much going through a campaign in my own right

rather than any great optimism that I'd be elected. I worked hard and was lucky enough to be elected. I guess my involvement in local government has remained just as strong for the 10 years that have elapsed from then to now.

*Bligh Grant:* Were there any issues in particular that you latched on to at that initial stage that really galvanised your efforts? Or was it more just a matter of the experience of running for council and being involved in politics in general?

*Geoff Lake:* I've always focused from that first election, and probably even more so in more recent times, around smart government and local government that is really interested in efficiencies and just competently delivering services and facilities. So that's remained my focus. I've always campaigned on a mantra of keeping rates low, but at the same time aiming to improve the quality of services with the focus on efficiency improvements and doing things smarter.

I'm pleased today that Monash is the metropolitan council of the 31 metropolitan Victorian councils with the lowest rates. That was achieved about four or five years ago; we've held that since then. But at the same time I think when one compares our level of service provision to any similar councils, there's no discounting on what we do. We're a very efficiently run council. We tend not to be the most innovative, or at the front of the pack, on a lot of things but that's quite deliberate. I think we try and position ourselves at the lower point of the first quartile as far as still being modern and looking to try new things and do things better, yet having the advantage of seeing how others eventually get it right rather than being 'first cab off the rank' and having to invest more money into the 'trial and error' of getting service delivery right.

*Brian Dollery:* Secondly, I wonder if you could say a little bit about your experience and role with MAV [Municipal Association of Victoria]?

*Geoff Lake:* Sure. I was elected as President of the MAV in August 2004 and that was a surprise. It was something that I'd never really thought about or contemplated. It came about purely because I was on the Board of the MAV and our President at the time, Brad Matheson, who'd been president for about six years, was engulfed by a bit of a scandal and that occupied some media attention at the time. He had to resign and all of a sudden there was this vacuum. Everyone had assumed that Brad was going to be around for the next 10 or 20 years because he was a good President.

So I put my hand up along with another Board member. It was a very competitive election. I visited just about every council in the state and won by one vote. I think this surprised a lot of people because they thought a 24 year old was a bit young for that type of position, particularly when, in the view of many rural councils, you feel that they think that young people should be doing something else than being involved in the affairs of local government.

I was MAV president for two years and I left my second term early in August 2006, having made a decision that because local government on the elected side is certainly not a career; it's not a job for life. Having completed the law degree at the age of 26, if I was ever going to go off and do articles and become a lawyer, it was going to have to be at that stage. If I didn't do it then it was probably something that would pass me by. So it was a hard decision because I loved the MAV position. I decided that I would leave, did articles with the law firm that I'm still at and essentially my role at MAV was very similar to the ALGA role but focused at the state level. The President [of the MAV] attracts a lot of media attention. Whenever the media wants a view on state wide basis from local government, you're the person they'd call.

Most of local government representational clout is at the state association level rather than the national association level. So there's great policy development coming out of state associations and that's a key role for a state association President -- just being part of the negotiations with the state government around how things should run that affect councils.

The key role really is trying to herd 79 councils to some sort of common position on issues where that can be achieved. We have a state council meeting twice a year, which was the most challenging part of the role: Chairing a meeting of the representatives of 79 councils and trying to get them to get through about 70 motions and come up with sensible, sane, rational, collective positions with hopefully as much support as possible for each adopted position that set the strategic approach of the MAV, the policy objectives that we pursued.

## **Observations on reform processes across Australian jurisdictions**

*Brian Dollery:* We thought the next step in the interview would be to ask your retrospective views on the five types of change or reform of local government: structural reform, functional reform, financial reform, managerial reform and jurisdiction reform. So we wondered if we could just take them one at a time.

If we could start with structural reform. As you know amalgamation's a big issue in Australia. They've tried it everywhere, except WA, and they're bubbling away there now...

*Geoff Lake:* You could almost put New South Wales in that boat...

*Brian Dollery:* Indeed, it is starting to be revisited as a policy option -- right here in Armidale. What are your views on amalgamation?

*Geoff Lake:* Well I can remember reading a lot of your articles and deciding that, if you're a proponent of amalgamations, you're a proponent generally because you believe that they lead to greater efficiency. I think based on your articles and the dearth of other sort of academic opinions in this area, that you'd have to say the literature in Australia points to significant doubt as to whether there are the promised efficiencies brought about through amalgamation. I guess I have the benefit of the situation in Victoria that it's probably the best example of ruthless amalgamation where 230 odd councils were sacked overnight, unelected Commissioners were appointed for a couple of years and at that time 78 -- it's now 79 new councils -- were formed, which generally bore no relation to the ones they replaced were set up and they're still in place today...

I think looking back on that process in Victoria, I haven't come across anyone today who would mount an argument that local government was better in Victoria 15 years ago under the old structure compared to now. A lot of people would be critical of the *process* that Jeff Kennett used at the time to do it and I'm obviously not a fan of forced amalgamations when wearing my local government hat. But I've got to say in defence of Jeff Kennett, there's no way that Victoria would otherwise have achieved the rationalisation of councils had there not been forced amalgamation. It doesn't make it right but that is, I think, a fairly important reason as to why Victoria's in the position it is now.

My personal view around amalgamations is that I think it makes sense in metropolitan areas. I can't necessarily see the justification or can argue the justification as to why a city like Melbourne needs 31 metropolitan councils. However, I would struggle to see the benefit of Victorian's currently quite large rural councils being made any bigger. I think local government, the intrinsic part of what makes local government local is its connection to local communities. I guess

someone living in Glen Waverly in Monash in Victoria -- they're a citizen of Melbourne essentially -- they don't see themselves as a citizen of Glen Waverly. So they could associate with a larger eastern suburbs council or even perhaps a Melbourne wide council.

But somebody living in Mansfield in country Victoria I think would struggle with the identity of their town, where they're from if you were to take the Shire of Mansfield and simply dilute it into a huge council covering the entire North East of Victoria. So I guess because of my position in local government I'm careful how I approach the amalgamation issue because generally the view of local government is amalgamations are fine when they're generated from the bottom up by councils and it's all voluntary. It's problematic and it's opposed when it's imposed top-down and that's my public position.

But my private position is I understand what Jeff Kennett achieved in Victoria. However badly executed, it would not have been achieved through a voluntary process.

*Bligh Grant:* With regard to functional reform, we want to ask you to consider cost shifting and the 2006 Inter-governmental Agreement on cost shifting and ALGAs view on how that's progressing. Are people are sticking to the script or otherwise from your perspective?

*Geoff Lake:* Cost shifting has gone off the boil a little bit. It's not the issue that it was four or five years ago. Now whether you can put that down to the success of the agreement, or just a change in direction, or the fact that there has been a couple of other key issues I'm not too sure. But you'd have to say that either because of the agreement, or just by chance, the heat is out of what was a really big issue for councils a few years ago.

I think we can only point to a couple of examples where that agreement hasn't been honoured by governments in the last five years or so. One is in the Northern Territory and the other is in WA. I can't even recall exactly what those examples are; that lets you know it's sort of dropped off our agenda a bit.

*Bligh Grant:* In other words, ALGA's had bigger fish to fry in terms of looking at the funding basis for local government rather than picking fights about functional responsibilities of councils. Your focus has been, at least since you've been there, 'let's get the money right': Let's get finance following function and then worry about other things.

*Geoff Lake:* That's right. There hasn't been any particular obvious shift in new services on each local government that's caused significant outcry and frustration at the local level. But I've also got to say that I sometimes get a bit tired of what I see as the sort of simplistic arguments that some councils or councillors put up around cost shifting. They talk about cost shifting around libraries. Once upon a time state government pretty much delivered libraries and councils are now doing more than 50 per cent of the heavy lifting with libraries. To me, libraries have become -- whether they were historically this or not -- a basic local government function.

I'm frustrated with declining state contributions to libraries, but there's got to come a point where we actually say: 'Let's pin our colours to the mast and say that there are some things that we don't currently do now but we will do in the future, whether it's because of statutory compulsion by state governments legislating in areas, such as emergency management, or whether it's through things, like libraries, that just emerge to be an innate function of local government because it just makes sense and it fits in with the general thrust of what local government does.'

I think the sector needs to get a bit more sophisticated about being a genuine government, like the state or federal level, and not worry about having a final way to meet what are always going to be an infinite number of service areas that you could be resourcing from obviously a scarce amount of resources.

I also think there's some danger in the cost shifting debate for local government. I'm personally a believer in bigger local government. I'd like local government to do more than it does. I think there are functions at a state level that could be better delivered and more efficiently delivered at the local level. The priority for us in local government, and the priority for government in general, needs to be on getting the funding structures right and the revenue transfer arrangements right so these things are properly dealt with. Ideally there would be a revenue source created at the level of government that will deliver the services, or if that's not possible, that there's an appropriate shift in general taxation revenue to local government to deliver these things.

We don't look to simply put a fence around what local government does today and say 'no more cost shifting'. If we did this we would be closing our minds to future possibilities. That's not local government at all. Local government is fluid, it's responsive to communities and it will always be different five years from now from what it is today because that's the nature of communities.

*Brian Dollery:* The third area of reform is financial reform. There's been a huge amount of attention paid to this issue, notably all these inquiries into financial sustainability, with big problems in defining what constitutes financial sustainability because government theoretically can't go bankrupt because it's always got the ability to tax. I wonder if you'd comment on financial sustainability and if you think progress is being made.

*Geoff Lake:* I think if local government was going to be treated in the same way as an ASIC-policed company or ASIC-administered or regulated company, you'd probably say that about a third of councils are trading whilst insolvent. This is a significant issue. In fact it's the most significant issue facing the future of local government: how we pay for it and how we resource it. The Productivity Commission has concluded that local government is achieving something like 90 per cent of its potential revenue raising or its revenue raising potential. So local government is just about doing all that it can do.

Even if we were to be able to lift own-source revenue to 100 per cent -- which I think is more of a theoretical thing than a practical aspiration -- you're never going to have a situation where a rural council will ever be financially sustainable. That's why the Federal Government's already subsidising local government to the tune of about 50 per cent of their budgets. So I think we need to get serious about how we fund local government and I think that's appropriate as well. I think 100 years ago when all local government did was deliver roads, rates and rubbish and a few other physical infrastructure services, it was appropriate that local government was largely self funding and that it raised what it could manage to raise through what it could collect from its rate payers and its property owners.

Today local government is far more than that. At least 50 per cent, perhaps more, of your typical council budget is now aimed at the same sort of 'people-services' that in the past either weren't delivered or were delivered mainly by state government. There are things that, equitably and fairly, ought to be paid for out of more progressive forms of taxation like income tax, perhaps what's collected from consumption tax and to me that's the future for local government. At the moment we're achieving that to some extent, although only about 15 per cent of local government's collective revenue is being transferred from other levels of government. But over the next 20 years or so, the aspiration should be that about 50 per cent of the total local government revenue is being transferred from other

levels of government, mainly the Commonwealth, collected through progressive forms of taxation in recognition that 50 per cent plus of a modern council's budget is aimed at services to people rather than services to property.

*Brian Dollery:* The next area of reform we would like you to comment on is managerial reform.

*Bligh Grant:* There has been an increasing salience of leadership in the local government sector. What has been your experience of this heightened role for leaders?

*Geoff Lake:* I guess that leadership is hard in any context -- whether it's in education or local government or in political representation. There's not much we can do about choosing political leaders because that's part of the democratic process, but certainly there are things we can do around skilling them up and training them once they're in place, as well as providing those opportunities should they want to seek them out. I think local government's getting better in that regard. There's lots of good stuff going on at State Association level. I see that the Australian Institute of Company Directors now make quite a bit of business each year from people in local government undertaking their Company Directors training. I've done that course. I think it's a great course. I think it's perfectly suited to people involved in local government.

It should be encouraged and that to me is about as much as we can do on the political side of things. I don't support the idea that some people have touted, namely mandatory or minimum training for councils -- that you ought to have some sort of minimum competence in financial management, or that you've got to commit to a certain number of hours training each year. I don't support that. I think that is contrary a democratic principles -- no-one suggests something like that for our

Federal or State Members of Parliament and I don't think there should be an introduction of [hurdle] requirement of that into the democratic process. I think it works for accountants and lawyers and other professional bodies but that's different to democratic politics. It shouldn't be confused.

On the staff side, again I guess I only have a short frame of reference in terms of my involvement in local government, but I actually think that the office side of councils is in pretty good shape at the moment. I think just like a school's best asset and how a school performs is to me the leadership at the top in the principal, I think so much of a council's performance relates to the quality of CEO and general manager that you have in place. That is the other main argument in favour of amalgamations where you create, by their very nature, a bigger, more talented gene pool to pluck CEOs from.

I think a good CEO can make a poorly politically governed council still a high performing council and similarly a well politically governed council can enhance a poorly performing council where an only 'just competent' CEO is in place. I think people underestimate the role of CEOs in local government. There's almost no comparison in the broader public service. The reality is that many are in charge, in the case of larger councils, approximately 1000-plus staff across 150-plus service areas. A secretary of a state or federal department might be in charge of thousands more staff than that but it might be across five or six service areas. Neither case has the extreme breadth of what local government does.

It's a difficult job but by and large -- and if you remember my point of reference is predominantly Victorian councils that I'm most familiar with where we tend to have bigger councils, bigger staff forces and certainly a high calibre of CEO -- I think things are in good shape. But we shouldn't drop the ball. To me the future for management excellence in local government lies not in creating new pathways just

within local government but through 'piggy-backing' on general public service training models that already exist and local government being treated no differently from the approach used for developing senior state and federal public service leaders, with local government CEOs being seen as comparative positions to secretaries and deputy secretaries of departments.

*Brian Dollery:* The final of the five categories is jurisdictional reform, which centres on the relative powers and competencies of the three tiers of government. The big question here is constitutional recognition of local government. I wonder if you'd talk a little bit about that. Some people say that the Australian Constitution recognises all state governments, but this hasn't really helped them with their finances. Some state constitutions afford partial recognition to local councils, and that hasn't helped these councils much. Why should constitutional recognition of local government help as opposed to being just a symbolic gesture?

*Geoff Lake:* I don't like to talk about constitutional recognition as just symbolism. I couldn't care less if local government was or wasn't in the Constitution if it's mere symbolism. But to me the change that ALGA is pursuing is quite pragmatic; namely changing to the substance of Section 96 to simply extend the current power of the Commonwealth to make financial grants to the states on whatever terms the Commonwealth sees fit to enable them to do the same to local government.

This doesn't trample on state sovereignty over local government or any state rights. It simply recognises what has been the practice for at least the last 10 years through the *Roads to Recovery* program of federal governments wanting to fund councils directly in order to meet community needs and their own policy priorities. I can't see any sense in opposing this referendum change. The alternative is that an extra level of bureaucracy becomes entrenched at the state level to govern financial assistance grants going through to the local sector. That would amount to

ridiculous duplication. It's unnecessary in 2010 and we're simply trying to bring the Australian Constitution up to modern times that everyone accepts, whether it's the rate payers, the state minister for local government, or the federal minister for local government. Federal Government has a role in funding councils. No state government would argue with that. So why do we accept the current situation where at best there's uncertainty, at worst there's an illegality going on in the Commonwealth directly funding local governments. Let's simply clear it up. Let's have a Constitution that enables the three governments to work together to better increase the capacity of the three levels of government to deal with one another.

That's what we're on about. We're pleased that we've at last got some traction. It's been pursued twice before; spectacular failures on both occasions. It's going to be a hard task to get it supported, but to me I think it's been poorly prosecuted previously and I think there's a great capacity to win a public debate this time round if it's approached a bit more smartly.

## **Prospects arising from recent institutional reform**

*Brian Dollery:* We now arrive at the third section of the interview, the prospects for the Australian Council for Local Government, the Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government -- which of course you're an important part of -- and ALGA's 10 point plan, its prospects and so on. Perhaps if you could address the potential of the Australian Council for Local Government?

*Geoff Lake:* This is when all the mayors from across the country get invited to come to Canberra for their once a year meeting with the Prime Minister and Cabinet. There have been three meetings of that body since it was set up by Kevin Rudd. It's supported outside of that annual meeting by a Steering Committee of

about 30 local government leaders that up until now has met about three or four times a year and does a little bit of work outside of that annual meeting. I think it's a great initiative, but it's no silver bullet to solving the world's problems or local government's problems.

To me it's more of a symbolic importance than real sort of functional importance. By its nature, what can a group of 500 people meeting for half a day once a year really achieve? But symbolically, it's very important; it's the Prime Minister and its senior members of the cabinet being available for half a day in what are obviously extremely busy schedules and seeing sense and seeing value in having that dialogue with local government. It's all about the same thing that we're interested in achieving through constitutional change and increasing the value of the direct link between local government and the Commonwealth.

We envisage a federation where there are three strong levels of government; we don't want to get rid of one of them - three strong levels of government with all of them independently having relationships with one another, so that the relationship between local and Commonwealth doesn't need to be through the filter of the states. To us that's the great thing about the ACLG. It's got potential. Anthony Albanese, as the former Local Government Minister, was a great champion and he led it really well and we hope it will continue and further develop under Simon Crean.

*Brian Dollery:* Secondly, what about the prospects for the Australian Centre for Excellence for Local Government?

*Geoff Lake:* I think this is a great initiative and I commend the Commonwealth for funding it. There is a significant lack of academic interest in local government in Australia. Local government is a \$26 billion, \$27 billion per annum industry. It

employs about 180,000 Australians and it touches the life of just about every single Australian. It deserves more regard and more attention academically than what it currently receives and it would be better for it. With ACE, it's about a year old now, it's too early to judge how effective it's been, but the proof will be in the pudding at the next two years or so.

I have confidence that it will be able to deliver on its mandate and that is to increase the academic interest in local government and also to pursue training and development for particularly senior management and young emerging professionals with potential future management roles in local government.

*Bligh Grant:* Do you have any highlights that you'd like to point to with respect to the ALGA 10 point plan, just briefly Geoff?

*Geoff Lake:* You could throw out the 10 point plan and just deliver the first point addressing the funding issue with local government and you'd be very, very happy and you'd think about bagging up ALGA and going home. So there's that priority, then there's daylight to the other ones and the other dot points deal with important issues that start to go to policy outcomes. Local government has a keen interest in roads. We manage 80 per cent of the road network throughout the country. It's our biggest asset. It's about 50 per cent of the budget of most councils or many councils.

So that's a priority for us. Local government has been a big leader in climate change consciousness, so that's in the 10 point plan. They're all things that I think if you were to go out and focus group, test them, there'd be few people who would find fault with them. If you look at our 10 point plan from the previous Federal election as well, you wouldn't find a lot of difference. There are different nuances, but it's pretty much the local agenda for a better Australia of the future around

provision of infrastructure, funding the institutional place of local government and a commitment to effectively managing environmental issues.

*Bligh Grant:* There is a large regional component in the 10 point plan. How do you see that fitting with the 'new regionalism' that's coming out of Canberra at the moment? How does ALGA perceive itself as interfacing with that? Is this a time of opportunity?

*Geoff Lake:* I think local government is the answer to the Federal Government's political needs but also policy priority to deal with that new approach to regionalism in Australia. They've got these Regional Development Australia boards set up and that's good. This infrastructure and IP infrastructure can provide the Federal Government with ideas and identify projects that might be good in a particular region. But you can't give any of these bodies any money and expect them to do anything or deliver anything because they just don't have the infrastructure, the clout or the ability to - they're not administrative units. The administrative units I think that the Federal Government needs to tap into are councils. You've got these regional development boards but they perhaps can overlap councils and perhaps can help to be the catalyst for councils to get better in their approach to a regional issue rather than a local council issue.

To me councils should be seen as a tool to the Federal Government in responding to its priorities and policies for regional development over the next few years and that's the sort of partnership that we'll be attempting to broker with Simon Crean when we meet with him shortly.

## Conclusion

*Brian Dollery:* Are there any comments you'd like to add?

*Geoff Lake:* A question I often get asked by people is: Do I think Australia's over-governed? Do we need to get rid of one level of government? Of course to that sort of a question the only answer you can give is that if you were going to get rid of a level of government, the only one that you could possibly get rid of really is state level. No-one suggests that there could be a future Australia without some sort of local government or some sort of central national government. I think that if you were to design the Australian system of government today from a blank canvas, which of course we can't, but if you were to do that, I don't think there's any doubt we probably wouldn't have three levels of government. If we did, we'd have as the middle level probably regional government rather than state government, but probably not even that. You'd probably have central government and local government, a bit like New Zealand.

But we don't have that. We have a government that was struck back in the times when it was states or the colonies that had all of the jurisdictions besides that residing in the Crown. They built the system that we have and we'll always have I believe. I'm not unrealistic enough to think that's there's any hope ever that you're going to get a referendum up in every state and territory to abolish the states. You can't. It wouldn't even be enough with a two-thirds majority. You'd have to have every single state voting itself out of existence. How you'd ever achieve that; the smaller states let alone the bigger states. It's absolutely pie in the sky. The future therefore that I see is how the three levels of government can operate better together. I see that as the COAG model being the way of achieving that. Governments have to work better. There's no policy issue really that can be solved solely at one level of government. It requires collaboration on just about any policy

issue you look at with two or three levels of government working to achieve a common purpose for a common stakeholder, common customer that we all serve.

That's our great challenge. I do see in the future an increasing role for local government at the same time as a declining role for state government. I think state government is going to get squeezed. It's being squeezed from above for a long time and appropriately so. I'm a centralist. I like strong and effective federal government. That's happened right through from federation. There's no suggestion that that's going to change at all in the future.

But similarly, and this is what we've seen for the last 20 years or so, I think we've seen state government squeezed from the bottom as well. This is as much from the states doing as it is from local government or anyone else's doing because it makes sense to deliver services as close to where people live as possible. Credit to the states for seeing that and encouraging it, although often with fairly Machiavellian financial motivations in mind. So I think the future's bright for local government. I think the future is less bright if you aspire to whatever the role of New South Wales or Victoria might have 50 years from now. It won't be much different to the role of a capital city lord mayor is today. But nonetheless, it will still be there, and the role of mayor in local government will be there but I think it will be bigger than what it is today.

*Brian Dollery:* A final question: Can we ask you what the future for Geoff Lake holds since you've come to the end of your term and you are a young man?

*Geoff Lake:* Well I've got a few hundred thousand billable hours that I owe my employer so I'm back to full time legal work which I'm looking forward to because it's been a very distracting two years that I've been at ALGA. My employer's been very good to see some value in that and allow me that ability to be part time in the

law and to fulfill a role in local government. But my interest in politics is unquenched by the 10 years that I've spent in local government. If an appropriate opportunity arose in the future I'd be keen to continue involvement somewhere at another level.

*Brian Dollery:* Thank you very much.

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