

2010 State Election Bulletin

However close the election, voters will demand a new approach to the ways government, planning and politics are done

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On 27 November the electorate will determine if we will indeed have seen the current empire's "last spew" after 20 years, or if we will finally experience a new government emerging from their inconspicuous pasts. After a decade of Green anticipation and Liberal decadence in opposition void of ideas and stance, will they finally seize the opportunity and rise to the challenge?

Let's indulge for a moment and reflect on one possible interpretation of Victoria's recent past. The following is adapted from DBC Pierre's poem on decadence (from *Lights out in Wonderland*)

*When sewers burst, their mire to spew,
Our roads to foul swells must succumb;
Flying kiddies will gather without ado;
For a scamper and splash in the scum;
Now society cracks under similar laws,
Gushing wit, truth and reason like pee;
Yet as the bog settles across our floors;
Neither scampers nor splashes you see;
This want of passion disgraces you;
To attend! Let's woo this reckless decay,
And romp through an empire's last spew.*

During the impending State Election campaign, already replete with negativity and malice, there will be an ever-growing risk to the major parties that the wider policy and governance implications of what voters are actually saying will be lost, to paraphrase Bill Clinton.

Regardless of who wins the election, communities and local governments demand a lot more respect. Consistent feedback from our members, now backed up by research the VLGA has been conducting in Carlton, Narre Warren, Ballarat and Morwell on community involvement in planning, presents a clear message.

The results add pressure to the view that governments have to change the way we work. Voters want to be listened to and heard on decisions affecting them. Allowing for differing perspectives among regional and metropolitan residents, the responses strongly suggest that the community wants more involvement in planning decisions, and has sufficient confidence in their local governments' capacity to make competent planning decisions.

Our research also highlights that voters are prepared to accept that federal and state governments and industry are more concerned with driving big picture economic, social and environmental changes, and this is to be expected. But voters are fed up with the lack of attention paid to the local impacts of these changes.

While voters are confused and feel powerless, they are angry at being ignored and wish to be adequately consulted. This perception is an understandable response from communities to a state government that has repeatedly justified its decisions by claiming that local perspectives are not in the interest of the greater good. Their premise is that local communities are driven by self-interest, and largely influenced by subjective and selfish NIMBYs.

The challenge of subjectivity weighs heavily on all sides of politics, and the real problem is not the lack of an objective frame of reference on the residents' part, but an unwillingness to even negotiate a common frame of reference by the state government and the development industry. I believe that it is incumbent on all levels of government to overcome this dilemma and commence a new, more open and respectful, dialogue.

It can only be hoped that closer electoral results will indeed bring change in the way governments work. How the next state government responds to the new political reality that voters no longer believe our system of decision-making and government is working for them will be telling. Simply tinkering with our out-dated and clunky 'pyramid' of government decision-making by paying lip service to community views and local needs simply won't do any longer for an increasingly sophisticated electorate.

Local governments are uniquely placed to advocate for and drive the sort of change that voters are wanting. Like the local communities we represent, we often have to deal with the consequences of big picture policy decisions taken by other levels of government, without the resources to do so.

There are risks in challenging long-held ways that governments have worked. Finding a new approach to decision-making won't be without its hiccups.

Nevertheless, politicians will ignore voter pressure for change at their electoral peril. Local governments can work with the next state government to find ways to build community participation in decisions affecting them, but only if the next state government accepts the electoral signals being sent.

There needs to be a new process. Based on our community research and member feedback, there is a case for a local governance community summit.

Never before in Victoria's history has there been a broad summit or inquiry on local communities, change and government responses.

It's time to take stock, to reflect and to have an open public debate about how local liveability is affected, and how local governments and communities can be involved in change. In the end, the role of local governments is to inform, to enable and to empower the public to participate.

I firmly believe that we in local government at the community level must defend the fundamental

democratic principle of subsidiarity, the principle that powers and responsibilities should be left with the lowest level of government practicable, i.e. those decision makers closest to the community.

Such a devolved system means there is greater local input into decision-making, and that policies can be customised to meet local services and suit local preferences. The proposed *Communities, Governments and Change Summit* will help to formalise what the community gets intuitively, and provide a new structure that can turn local intuition into

overarching, collaborative dialogue.

I believe we are more likely to see firm and widely-supported proposals to change the ways governments work, and an increase in community participation in key decisions affecting them, if we follow this new process.

As James Surowiecki (*Wisdom of Crowds*) reminds us:
"Good democracy relies on some version of the collective wisdom – refracted through votes – and can be an excellent decision making system. If properly embraced, collective wisdom at the local level can make democracy's chances of adopting good policies high."

As VLGA President I therefore call on all major parties to commit prior to November 27 to convene a *Communities, Governments and Change Summit* to be held in the first year of the next term.

Following the Summit, we would like the next Parliament to conduct a public inquiry on

- **the roles and responsibilities of all levels of government**
- **how local impacts of change can be better planned for**
- **regulatory burdens facing local governments (as we lobbied the Essential Services Commission to support), and**
- **barriers and opportunities to better involve and consult local communities in planning and other important issues that have a large affect on them.**