

New Ways of Seeing Local Leadership Lessons from the Aussies

"The biggest threats to Australian communities aren't the droughts, wildfires and floods we're currently experiencing. It's the negativity, cynicism and resistance to change we find in our communities." Peter Kenyon, community and economic development expert – keynote address at "By the People, for the People" - the Australian National Conference on Community Planning and Development earlier this week in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

No matter where you go in the world these days you will find communities that, on the surface, appear entirely different. Scratch a little deeper, and you'll find similar issues. Over the last month I have been doing work in Québec, Oregon, New Zealand and Australia, learning to appreciate cricket on TV (I did go through withdrawal from my much beloved Canucks, Suns, Patriots, Lions and X-Men), cope with \$.50 a minute Internet charges (ouch!) or no connection at all (double ouch!), and learned to love the rough-and-tumble world of Australian politics and the accompanying "nothing is sacred, take no prisoners" satire of Aussie humour the antics leading up to this Saturday's Australian National election makes our politicians, ads and Rick Mercer look very polite and gentle in comparison).

Fortunately, I've spent some time in the state of Victoria in southeastern Australia, a state with five million people, renowned worldwide for its innovation in leadership for both local and state governments. In the mid-1990s, the state government made an unpopular move at the time, reducing the more than 200 small local councils to 79 regional councils. Each council would have no more than seven elected members. The Mayor would be elected from amongst these seven councilors by the council members for one year intervals. Therefore, the ability to build consensus and foster respect amongst peers becomes the essential ingredient for being elected mayor. This would be equivalent of amalgamation being forced upon Nelson, Castlegar and Trail, with the mayor being selected from amongst these communities.

While most of this flies in the face of allowing for community choice, it has allowed for better regional cooperation, essential in today's political, social, economic and environmental reality. It has also led to full rosters of candidates at election time, higher standards for government staff, and better compensation for both elected officials and staff (higher quality, lower turnover).

Recently, Council elections have been set for the last weekend of November every fourth year, alternating with the fixed date provincial election. Therefore, you know every two years you will have an election, one local and one statewide. Voting is also mandatory in Australia.

Each council must create a five to 10 year community plan. To ensure that councils are listening to the needs of their constituent communities, the state government undertakes yearly satisfaction surveys in each of the 79 Council areas. This has had the effect of getting councils to take bottom-up community consultation very seriously. In fact, the Golden Plains Council, a rural Council in a drought-stricken part of the state who have been masters of an effective bottom-up "build it from the ground" approach, score the highest satisfaction ratings in the whole state. They've accomplished 50 of 53 priorities in the last year. They have also managed to inspire other councils to do it better.

Their approach, one of facilitative leadership where local government is a key player in "facilitating" rather than "directing" the community, is also advocated by Professor Robin Humbleton, a Brit who has recently written a book on the future of local government. He paints two future scenarios for communities: one of them a disaster scenario of a divided, unequal crime-ridden city with consumers living isolated lives in separate fortified enclaves and the other, a vibrant city with active, engaged citizens living in a thriving, healthy community with a vital social and cultural scene.

How do we avoid the first scenario? Command and control is dead believes Humbleton. Only governments who shift their thinking from “power over” to “power to” will thrive in this new world. Government does not equal governance. Despite having strained resources to maintain existing services (responsibility for “rates, roads and rubbish” in the Australian context), local councils must expand their traditional thinking and their roles to help their communities articulate plans and visions on economic, social, cultural and environmental matters. These plans, however, are owned by the community (e.g. the sum of the parts of those people who reside in the area), and not by the legal corporations (e.g. City of ...). The role of local governments is to assist in facilitating the process, giving voice to the citizens to articulate a vision, developing partnerships to make it happen, and reaching out to make sure those who do not have a voice are represented in this. Leadership today is “shaping emotions and behaviour to achieve common goals” believes Humbleton.

In this model, the implications for all of us are immense. Every citizen has a responsibility to play a leadership role. “Local government can no longer be a spectator sport – like an Australian rules football match where 30,000 people who need the exercise turn out to watch 36 people who do not”, says Kenyon.

The Australians, for all negativity stated in the opening quote, seem to be moving ahead quite well on this front.

They are doing the tough community consultation and engagement that leads to good planning, adopting this new view of leadership, are on the forefront of using indicators to determine readiness, responsiveness and results in matters like business and community vitality (this is where my work with CIEL comes in) and they seem to have used their crises as real chances to improve and make real change. Most importantly, state and federal governments have been responsive and supportive of helping fund the processes, the planning required, and some of the new community needs. Both levels of senior government have recognized the significant contributions of communities, especially in rural and regional Australia.

“We are the leaders we have been waiting for.” Hopi (Native American) Elder