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The Great Community Debate: Local Government is the best level of Government to reform and assist Communities

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 31 May, 2011

Hosted by

The Hon Joan Kirner AM

Former Premier of Victoria and Victorian Communities Ambassador

For:

Cr Stephen Mayne

Manningham City Councillor, Crikey founder and shareholder activist

Cr Samantha Dunn

President, Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA)

Against:

Luke Ryan

Writer and Comic

Angela Savage

**Executive Officer, Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres
Formerly employed by VCOSS and Australian Red Cross**

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Joan Kirner:

Thank you all for coming back for this Great Debate. The title, as you already know, is *Local Government is not the best level of Government to reform and assist Communities*. The actual title is *The Local Government is the best level of Government to reform and assist Communities*. But as this is a community org. conference I expect some live debate.

I'd like to introduce the panellists and thank them for coming with their pretty busy schedules. Presenting the case 'for' is Councillor Stephen Mayne, Manningham City Councillor and Crikey founder and shareholder activist. I used to hate him but now he's on my invite list, which probably he thinks is a sign of considerable torture.

Joining him is Councillor Samantha Dunn from the Shire of Yarra Ranges. She's President of the Victorian Local Governance Association; the main thing stopping her from being Mayor of that council is that's she's progressive and a woman.

The case against will be led by Luke Ryan, who I've already chastised for limiting his web page to younger people. However, he did a brilliant job at the Comedy Festival, I'm told, with his performance and I think it's just fantastic, Luke, that we have young people like you and my eldest grandson who are communicating with us in a way that challenges, just as Stephen did in his slightly younger days, challenges and encourages people to have their own opinions and have a broader information base.

And then, not to show any bias of course, the second speaker presenting the case 'against' is Angela Savage, Executive Officer of the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, but before that in VCOSS and Australian Red Cross.

Angela truly is one of the most extraordinary young women I've met, not because she tweets all the time which drives me bats, but because in fact she's a true leader on behalf of community. That, of course, is not bias that I'm for this case, that's just statement of fact because I made it.

The decision makers, as it should be at Our Community conferences, are yourselves. So after we've had the addresses and the questions it will be over to you to decide. One year I decided

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I was really losing it and I was really just having a problem with my memory because I forgot to ask you guys to vote. I just decided it.

That was a lapse which I would have loved to have had a few times in my life, just decided it. But for fear that might get written up by the *Herald Sun* I did not say that.

So now it's over to the debaters.

Samantha Dunn:

Before I kick off I'm going to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people, the traditional custodians of this land, and pay deep respect to elders past and present. I do that very genuinely and it's very heartfelt, and it is every time that I say it.

I'm speaking here today for the Affirmative: Local government is the best level of government to reform and assist communities.

Now, the Victorian Local Governance Association is unique in Australia. We're a peak body that has local government, community organisations and individual members making up our membership.

Our local government members represent over 86% of Victoria's population. It is that unique mix that lets us understand what communities want, what they're passionate about and how they want to be engaged in their destiny.

The VLGA advocates for social change and assists local government by strengthening their capacity to engage with their communities and vice versa: communities to engage with their local governments.

In our view, local governments are uniquely placed to advocate for and drive the sort of change that communities want. Strong, viable, vibrant local government working in close association with engaged communities are at the core of local action to deliver the improvements to liveability and community infrastructure.

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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, often without the resources to do so. This debate gives us an opportunity to put the spotlight on the critical role that local governments play in the interface with their local communities and how they assist reform at the local level and beyond.

Consistent feedback from our members, backed up by research that we've undertaken across the state on community involvement in planning, presents a really clear message to us: it's time for residents and local communities to have their voices heard. Councils and the VLGA want to see policies and commitments that support the involvement of residents and councils in decision making.

It's time for a dividend to local communities from all this population growth. We want to see more funding for infrastructure provided to our community to ensure that we can manage the extra or the existing population pressures.

Councils are prepared to work with the State Government to realise a new and inclusive approach to planning, an approach that puts residents at the heart of the decision-making process.

And councils are prepared to stand up to state government and developers to put the interests of residents first.

The results of the research add weight to the views that communities want to be listened to and heard on decisions affecting them, allowing for different perspectives from regional and metropolitan residents. The responses strongly suggest that the community wants more involvement in planning decisions and has confidence in their local government's capacity to make competent decisions.

The community's expectation of improved cooperation and integration of state and local governments' responses to common local challenges is a reasonable one.

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Our research also highlights that communities are prepared to accept that Federal and State Governments are concerned with driving the big picture changes – economic, social and environmental changes – and this is to be expected.

And communities are fed up with the lack of attention paid to the local impacts of these changes and therefore they support their local council's activities in these very important policy areas.

Underpinning this is a growing community concern that change and growth is happening all around us yet councils and communities are not being adequately involved in the debates and decisions that affect us.

Effective and efficient local representation and decision making is largely a function of what is generally termed subsidiarity, the principle that powers and responsibilities should be left with the lowest level of government practicable, those decision makers closest to the community, and that we know who those decision makers are.

Such a devolved system means greater local input into decision making and policies that can be customised to meet local services and suit local needs and preferences. It builds local community capacity.

As a councillor I have seen how devolved decision making does actually work. And it suggests to me that we might serve the community much better if more tasks were delegated to the local level.

Local expertise, identity and sense of place are indispensable. In this debate I argue strongly that local government provides this element in a way that no other tier of government can.

How many tiers of government know their community as well as local government?
Councillors: we live and breathe our local communities.

We often forget or refuse to accept, because the idea can be uncomfortable and add a layer of complexity, that local communities are the ultimate experts because they understand their neighbourhood better than anybody else. They understand the parking and the traffic flows.

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They understand the impact on amenity. They understand the parks, the local environment. They get it.

Not involving local communities greatly reduces the capacity for innovation and creative solutions. Valuing genuine consultation is part of the democratic process. Involving the community and drawing on its collective mind will result in much better outcomes.

And consider this. It is local government, the third tier of government, that has consultation policies, has a council plan, has an annual budget, has a community aspirational statement. And community has the opportunity to input into all of these documents and strategic policies on an annual basis.

There are no other tiers of government that interact with community in such a defined way as local government. Community has the opportunity to influence all of those decisions. That opportunity is inclusive, accessible, balanced, culturally appropriate, timely, informative, focused, open and clear.

Local government has an inherent belief in community to have your say.

We stand up for residents when engaging with the Federal or State Government. We don't believe residents should bear the brunt of long-term decisions that haven't been made as a result of their input.

Council is there to make sure that the community's voice is heard.

So in this debate I venture that local government is the best level of government to enable reform at the local level. And I put it to you that we need to do more to enhance our approach.

Now, as I'm the VLGA President and we are an advocacy body, I will just say this as well: as per our call prior to the state election, I'm asking the Victorian Government to convene a communities governance and change summit and to conduct a public enquiry on the roles and responsibilities of all levels of government, how local impacts of change can be better planned

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for and opportunities to better involve and consult local communities in planning and other important issues that have an enormous effect on them.

Of course local government is the best level of government to reform and assist communities.

Joan Kirner:

Well done Samantha. Subsidiarity: hands up who knows what it is? That's not bad. It's more than I thought it would be. It is a term we tend to use about levels of government and decision making being at the particular level that suits best.

The Victorian Governance Association, I think, along with Stephen Mayne, was one of the main groups that actually demanded that we bring democracy back to our community in a previous life, last decade.

Now I'd like to reintroduce Luke Ryan who's a Melbourne-based writer and comedian. I'm dying to know what *Luke's Got Cancer* was about because it doesn't explain it in my briefing note.

But the thing that really stung me in the briefing note I got on him was that he does not vote in council elections. Are you old enough?

Please welcome Luke.

Luke Ryan:

Well, I should probably start off by saying that *Luke's Got Cancer* was in fact a comedy show about the fact that I've had cancer twice, which while true, was mainly put in to try and get the sympathy vote because I was a bit scared about going up against Stephen Mayne.

Ladies and Gentleman, community leaders, community enthusiasts, community activists and unfortunate members of local government, I say hello.

I am here representing the hated antagonist of today's debate, a team which has to argue for the seemingly impossible idea that local government isn't in fact the best tool to reform and

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assist community, to argue that local government is in fact at best an irrelevance, a hindrance, a glorified dispenser of parking fines.

Because surely this is an impossibility. After all, community and local are all by synonyms. How could you possibly go about uncoupling these beautifully linked concepts?

Well gird your loins, folks, because this is going to be an argument roller coaster the likes of which hasn't been seen since *Q&A* spent an entire episode talking about pornography.

I am the first speaker of the opposition. I'll be stringing together veiled pot-shots, exaggerated rhetoric and mid-range jokes disguised as a cohesive argument about the delocalisation of community and the unaccountability of local government.

Our second speaker, the learned Angela Savage, will be putting me to shame and crafting an argument of such force and cogency that we'll probably all need a stiff drink and a lie down in its immediate aftermath.

She'll be arguing that the entire premise of the debate is in fact flawed. Communities aren't in need of reform and they certainly aren't profiting from the assistance of local government. Be warned Affirmative: Savage by name, Savage by nature.

But now to the pot-shots. I must admit when I was asked to take part in the debate my first reaction was, "Me? But I don't know the first thing about local councils." This was quickly followed by the realisation that right there was pretty much the entirety of my argument. For some reason that got you on side.

I'm a guy reasonably interested in what's going on around me. Yet in my 26 years on this earth, the closest contact I've had with my local council was trying to convince them to let me off a \$160 parking fine. I failed. That was, it must be said, not the most promising foundation for a long and healthy friendship.

But it underlines a broader truth, that to our generation and increasingly to the ones above us, going to local councils for assistance is pretty much the equivalent of talking to your mother

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about your sexual health issues. You don't want to be there, they don't want you to be there, and in the end you're just going to be told to call someone else.

Now, as you may have noticed, I am a young person. You may even, although I would plead with you not to, call me 'Gen. Y'. We are characterised as the selfish generation, usually by people who I presume were born into this world as fully formed adults in their mid to late fifties.

They assume we are individualistic, without community, that we don't care. What tripe. I have friends that run Amnesty International fundraisers just for kicks, friends that spend their Saturdays teaching Sudanese refugee children how to read, friends that are building online services to allow not-for-profits to create and maintain attractive and effective membership databases. And do you know how many of them started their work due to the active influence of their local council? None.

Because these days we have a new community and it's called the internet. Indeed I can probably say that the regulatory mechanisms are of significantly more relevance to my day-to-day existence than the labyrinthine machinations of most council meetings.

But now we find ourselves mired in a situation where our communities are beholden to local governments. And I would argue that this is a model of service provision that no longer suits the realities of the modern age.

Local councils have existed in largely unchanged shape since the first local council was created in Adelaide in 1850, which by Adelaide time pretty much predates colonisation. Don't worry, that will be the only cheap Adelaide jibe in this speech. Onto Perth next.

But local councils were created at a time when our geographic horizons were actually the determinant of our day-to-day existence. Of course, community was best articulated through these bodies. But that's no longer true. In fact, it's barely even relevant.

Yet still we have these excessively powerful bodies, dictating the range of communities permissible within its bounds. And they have the grant money to prove it. Because you can't

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say no to the funding they distribute. You just say yes through clenched teeth and wonder how it came to this.

Because here we have a body made up of people with almost no interest in your particular success or failure, who you have to keep returning on to because of your financial dependency. That, my friends, is pretty much a textbook definition of an abusive relationship. Heightened rhetoric people, here it comes!

They've created a system where the person who wins isn't necessarily the person who was neediest, or the person with the most essential idea, but rather the person who can most adequately negotiate and/or find the time to fill out the copious paperwork required to lodge a claim with most councils.

And, really, why are local councils in the business of providing money for a few people who don't even live in the local area to workshop a dance piece within their territory, something which has in fact happened to friends of mine. There have got to be more targeted mechanisms we can turn to.

Of course, local councils can claim to be important parts of the fabric of society, as Samantha just did, because they're elected bodies, they represent the local community. And how can you possibly find better arbiters of community sentiment than democratic elections.

To which I would say local government elections are where the bold dream of democracy goes to die, where that dream so wonderfully articulated by the Athenians of an educated populous, making an educated decision on the issues presented to them is sacrificed at an altar built of apathy with a knife carved from the finest ignorance.

Hell, if we can't even elect competent inspiring individuals to the highest offices of this nation then what hope do we have to elect a mayor, let alone a full 10-person council?

In South Australia, WA and Tasmania, voting is optional. That is why I have very rarely voted in council elections. If they can crack 30% turnout it's considered a bumper year.

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But I think I'm almost more terrified by the idea of forcing people to vote for their local council because that means that 70% of the population is being forced to vote for a set of people they have zero interest in or knowledge of, and that means they're voting for the guy with the funniest name or the most embarrassing comb-over.

These are not conditions that I find conducive to the production of the passion, drive and activity that I like to imagine when I think about the word 'community', nor ones that I particularly want to trust with community's further reform.

But do you know what? Things are changing. The internet is making possible things completely unimaginable not five to 10 years ago, things like crowd funding, where individual projects by people or groups who are unwilling or unable to go through regular funding schemes can call upon the generosity of people online to provide innumerable micro-donations towards realising their dreams.

Last year *New Matilda*, the commentary and analysis website, raised \$175,000 through just such an arrangement. It is the fastest growing area of philanthropy in Australia. And it's not that difficult to envision a world where a slightly more organised, broadly representative level of government provides access to such mechanisms on a broad scale, where the people who contribute money toward a community operation are people who are actually interested in the outcomes proffered by that group, where non-mainstream groups have a greater chance of realising their goals because of the ability to reach out to a broader segment of their community, where local governments can retreat to a more suitable degree of practical service provision.

It's just a single example of this shift in technology but to me the ideas it represents are particularly compelling.

In closing, then, I would ask you, is the lasting contribution from Australia's rich history of local government involvement a leading role in community engagement, as communities disperse and suburbs become increasingly ill defined? I'd say no.

I'd say that the most lasting contribution local councils have made to the landscape of Australia is probably, when you get down to it, roundabouts – endless streams of roundabouts

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built as they tried to hash through the last of their government money, and an apt metaphor for the circular, static and not particularly forward-thinking institutions that are our 560 local council bodies.

But I know all of this is laced with hyperbole. I have nothing against local councils and indeed I think they're great, especially as technocratic institutions, dedicated to the picking up of rubbish, the replacement of street signs and replying to enraged and/or insane constituents.

But as facilitators and drivers of community engagement I do dare say their time has passed. Communities are no longer so strictly wedded to geography in the digital age and this is only going to become more true as we move into the future.

I mean, look around this room at the grand array of community groups we have here represented. How many come as representatives of communities that are tied solely to a specific locale?

Joan Kirner:

Councillor Ryan, your time has expired.

Now, I'm willing to take a small bet with people here that Councillor Ryan will appear in public life as an elected representative before he's 40.

Now, I'd like to introduce someone who, as they say in the classics, needs no introduction. Councillor Stephen Mayne is a councillor with the City of Manningham, a journalist, a shareholder activist and well known troublemaker. I did not write that.

In fact, I find myself looking forward to hearing Stephen – that's a worry about my age I think – inject not only opinion but information into the many debates I hear on ABC etc.

He's famous for his website jeffed.com. Certainly I enjoyed that. He's also famous in the Liberal Party for running against his former boss for the seat of Higgins. So death wishes are on his agenda.

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He's most famous for Crikey, which we all still enjoy and he still thinks about I'm quite sure and contributes to because that was and is a trailblazing news service.

To further the debate for the Affirmative, please welcome Stephen Mayne.

Stephen Mayne:

I almost got Jeffed after last year's debate, sledging my own council, not speaking positively. So I'm much happier today to be on the side of talking positively about local government because I do actually passionately believe in the wonderful role that local government does play.

Now, firstly, are there any pale, male and stale old local government engineers in the house? They're all gone. Community services has taken over council. At Manningham we have a wonderful CEO, ex-community services, social work degree, Lydia Wilson. She does a great job. And this is an increasing phenomenon across councils across Australia.

Have a look at Noelene Duff in Whitehorse, also comes out of a social work background. Kathy Alexander in Melbourne has a health background, a big services background. Andi Diamond, the CEO of the City of Yarra, started out as a child protection worker.

And even the blokes pop up. Adrian Robb in Bayside is a bloke doing a great job as CEO who started out in social work and has a social work degree.

So the engineers are out and the community service directors are in.

At Manningham, the majority of our staff works in the community services division. There are more than 300 of them. It is our most important division and we as a council accept that.

Have a look at some of the policy innovations over the years. Think about who got into home and community care. That goes back to a lot of female councillors in the 1970s, in the Whitlam era, who said councils are more than just engineers and town clerks and roads, rates and rubbish – we're getting into community services.

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In 1985 the Federal Government formally recognised and took over funding of HACC as a very important community service because of the great innovation of a group of female councillors in Victoria back in the 1970s.

We've got a great story to tell in local government. Think about the civic hubs, the hubs of community services that are being built. In Manningham we're halfway through building a \$38 million civic hub project in Doncaster Hill which would never have happened if it wasn't for our community services department.

And what's going into this civic hub? You've got the library, you've got the arts facility, you've got Doncare, our local charity, our biggest service provider, you've got the YMCA, you've got all the services, such as family services, childcare, kindergarten, maternal and child health, all going into the one hub with a unique management model where they all work together, meet regularly, swap resources, and the community will come in and utilise this, an innovation funded in part with support from the Feds and the State because they've seen the innovation of the proposal and coming out of our community services department. That's where the big drive for it came.

Other councils such as Dandenong are also evaluating tenders right now for a very similar \$58 million project.

At Manningham we have a residential care facility, the Manningham Centre Association. A lot of councils are getting out of aged care. We're voting tonight at Council to give them another four-year contract because they've done such a great job running residential care and running HACC and rehabilitation and respite and home maintenance and twinning the residential care with all the at-home services.

Whereas you go to the Feds or elsewhere, it's just church and state. Residential care over here, at-home services over there. The Manningham Centre Association is a community not-for-profit association, run by a volunteer board, using the energy and the ideas of the community, supported by Council, a really, really good service provider.

Look at Doncare in Manningham; again we're not in the business at Council of providing family counselling or emergency intervention. We've got a wonderful not-for-profit, we have a

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couple of councillors on the board, it's a not-for-profit, 40% funded by its op shops. A really good model providing a wonderful service.

This is about councils activating the talent and energy and volunteerism in the community to provide good services, not just big bureaucracies and pen-pushers and bureaucrats within the council themselves.

Think also about community grants. At councils we have great flexibility. You don't just fill in endless forms. The State and Federal Government will only fund you if you've got some universal service that they can do right across the country. But we give out many, many dozens of grants each year to local groups.

We've got a little group called Real which provides basketball programs for kids with disabilities, working in with the Bulleen Boomers

We've got a women's friendship group which tried to get funding from the State Government, couldn't get it, and they've now got 300 coming to a monthly lunch and they're having weekly exercise classes as well, courtesy of a small seed grant coming out of the local government, listening to the community, having a program for more than a million dollars a year of grants and actually rewarding the innovative proposals that come forward.

Think about Bendigo Bank as well. State and Federal Government got out of banking; the majors were providing the biggest and most expensive banking service in the world, and with a lot of seed funding from councils the Bendigo Bank community model got up.

We gave \$10,000 each time for the studies into our different three community branches in Manningham and now you've got a model where grants have been paid out by the community banks. They've got 270 across the country, a unique model in the world of harnessing community innovation, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker all on the board.

Sixty-seven thousand people have put money in to buy shares in community branches across the country and local governments have supported them all the way, seed funding, things like that to ensure that these wonderful proposals can get up.

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Then think about consultation. No-one does consultation as well as local government. Nothing moves in Manningham without our community engagement movement. We've got eight people who work in it. The engineers cannot go near the community before they have talked to our community engagement unit and absolutely got the consultation process right.

If you've got a major development in Manningham, you come along to our strategic design taskforce first; we've got community members involved in that, architects, experts.

If you're a resident who's concerned about a proposal, we have a submitters meeting. We had one last night. Before the council meeting we get the residents in, we make them sit across the table from the developer, we have the bureaucrats, the planning officers, the councillors sit there and we have it out for half an hour.

Compare that to the State Government where those poor people in Footscray were told by the media their houses were going to be demolished. These guys at federal and state level do not know how to do consultation.

Compare that to local government. I argue that we are excellent when it comes to consultation. And there's no-one else that is as open and transparent as local government. We have every Cabinet meeting in public. Tonight, come to Manningham. Three hours of public debate. You can all come and attend. You can all ask questions.

When was the last time you could go to State Cabinet? Joan, you wouldn't let them in or ask any questions.

Joan Kirner:

I didn't have to. They let it out.

Stephen Mayne:

Well, you had leakers everywhere. But we're incredibly transparent. Ratepayers can ask questions. We've got the audio of the council meetings up online. It's just a very, very transparent model of government.

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Every Cabinet submission from the bureaucrats is a public document. You can all read it, you can all see it and it's a culture of transparency.

At Manningham, we've just off our own bat said, "We want a new multicultural centre built in Manningham." And we supported our Iranian, our Chinese and our Indian community to put together a trust, those three communities. We said we want this. We recognise we've got the biggest Iranian community in Victoria and the second biggest Chinese community. We recognise that unlike the Greeks and the Italians back in the sixties and seventies, where it was easy and land was cheaper to buy their own centres. We've done a study. We've paid \$60,000 to do the study. With support from the State Government, we've passed a unanimous resolution that we want a new unique multicultural centre for these three communities built in Manningham and we're lobbying Federal and State for the funding now.

That is a policy innovation that has come out of Manningham City Council and has been working with three particular community groups to get a unique model.

Think about the Community Chef, as well, down there in Altona. Twenty-one councils are all in there as shareholders and we're making \$1.5 million meals a year for Meals on Wheels. So not every council is out there being boring, doing their own inefficient kitchens. We've actually got that scale model going in Altona, a new \$25 million facility opened about 18 months ago, providing efficient and excellent services.

The CEO of Melville City Council in Perth at the big LGMA conference in Cairns last week made a very passionate and, I thought, good argument about the fact that we undersell ourselves. So what he does is when he sends out the rate notices he lists the more than 200-plus services that local government provides to the residents and ratepayers of Melville.

We are so unknown for the vast scale of our operations. We don't have much debt, we have fully funded super, we're incredibly transparent, we are an innovative level of government which should be supported.

Don't complain about your rates. If you lived for 500 years in Manningham you still would not have paid enough rates to get to the value of your house. That's how low the rates are.

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Think about the innovation that flows, the bang you get for your buck, the creativity and harnessing of community strength.

We are your partners. If you vote against us today you're siding with the tabloid TV, with the Andrew Bolts of the world, the shock-jocks who sledge councils.

We are your friends. We are your supporters. Please vote for us.

Joan Kirner:

Thanks Stephen. He was going really well there, right to the Chair's heart, by mentioning the western suburbs and the Altona program, which is an example of local governments at their best meeting a community need and thinking innovatively. So I have to get that plug in.

But Stephen, why did you mention the R word? Rates. Because you and I both know people want things, they want lots of things. But as for paying for them through rates or taxes, somebody else should do that. And in many ways some people who have got higher incomes should do more of that.

But it is always challenging when you mention the R word. That's not 'ranting' of course. That is 'rates'.

The next speaker is Angela Savage and I've already given her a pretty big plug. But what some of you who don't read crime novels probably don't know about her is that she is a published author and that's her dream of what she'd really like to do.

Her first full-length novel, *Behind the Night Bazaar* – you can imagine where that's set, in Thailand – did win a 2004 Victorian Premier's Literary Award. Her second novel, *The Half Child*, came out in September 2010 and I'm sure she's got one on the computer now.

Alongside that writing career she's also worked as a Director of Sexual Health and Family Planning in the Australian International Program, mostly in the South Pacific and then with VCOSS as a policy analyst.

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So you don't get someone with a broader CV than that I don't think. And she is now working in that wonderful sector, the neighbourhood house sector. I'll let her express her opinions about that.

Angela, welcome to the stage.

Angela Savage:

Thanks very much, Joan. I need to open with a disclaimer that the opinions expressed in the debate are not necessarily those of the ANHLC and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

As Luke forewarned, I'd like to begin my case against today's debate topic, that local government is the best level of government to reform and assist communities, by rejecting the notion that communities need reform.

Sure, there are things I'd like to change about my community. I'd like to see AFL games returned to suburban ovals. I'd like to see drivers happy about sharing the road with cyclists and pedestrians, or even with each other.

I'd like to see people get as excited about equal pay as they are about MasterChef. I'd like to see them as outraged about the treatment of asylum seekers as they were about the hat Princess Beatrice wore to the royal wedding.

I'd like housing to be affordable, solar power to be mandatory and acknowledging the traditional owners of the land to come as naturally as breathing.

But reform the community? I don't think so. In fact at this very same event last year an audience of, well you, found that communities were in control or was it under control. I can't remember. Whatever the case, the findings of the great debate last year were not that communities needed reform.

But reform is just the sort of thing governments say communities need because they think they know better than us.

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It's like the way they talk about community capacity building – as if governments have more capacity than communities. I'd like to see governments at any level do what we do on the meagre budgets that we have at our disposal.

Or placemaking, another great government nonsense. As if places don't already exist.

And community consultation, we've heard a lot about that. Community consultation wouldn't be necessary if governments were listening to communities in the first place.

But community consultation is now taking place in such epidemic proportions it's producing chronic rates of consultation fatigue in communities across the country.

And community engagement, which is only necessary because people are so alienated by all the community consultation that they just don't want to know about it.

Responsible gambling, another great oxymoron used by governments when they talk about communities. And other little example I found on a local government website, "An invitation to forums to support community resilience." Now I don't know about you but I've always found a good forum does wonders for my resilience.

Ladies and gentlemen, I reject the notion communities need reform at the hands of any level of government. I am prepared, however, to consider the topic of whether local government is the best level of government to assist communities.

Then again I still have a problem because this assumes that there is a difference in the different levels of government when so many of those in local government are really the same people as those in State and Federal Governments, only at an earlier stage in their careers.

Besides, what's local government, really, without State Government funding? The rates base, the dreaded rates base, is one thing but when it comes down to it local governments depends on State Government grants which are determined by policies higher up the political food chain. Local governments do not live by rates alone.

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Still, even if we concede that there is a difference in the different levels of government, one thing unites them all. They're political organisations. No matter how well they aspire to assist communities, no matter how they stack the decks of staffing in community development, no matter how good their processes, there is always the political element to be taken into account.

But don't take my word for it. I'm by no means an expert on local government. In fact, conscious of my relevant inexperience in this area in preparation for this debate I spoke to a number of colleagues with experience on both sides of the fence, people who work in neighbourhood houses who used to work for or serve in local government and people in local government who used to work for neighbourhood houses.

Some common themes emerged from my exhaustive research, the first of which is the unreliability or perhaps unpredictability of local government when it comes to assisting communities.

A number of colleagues both in and outside of local government told similar stories about going through the correct processes and ticking all the boxes, producing an evidence base for community needs, defining governance arrangements for projects, identifying partners, having the backing of independent feasibility studies, only to have the process derailed at the last minute by someone else in local government responding to a different stakeholder interest.

Or, as one of my colleagues put it, you can be all ready to go and then some invisible wanker says no.

And it's not as if my colleague, in this case a local government worker, could have the satisfaction of confronting that invisible wanker as protocol required her manager to speak with his manager. Layers of bureaucracy and protocol mean momentum for innovation is lost.

The same thing happened to colleagues in the community sector who had worked with key people in relevant government departments at local level to build support for a community facility aimed at families and children's services. Despite having ticked all the boxes, their application was sidelined at the last minute in favour of a bid to build a racecourse development.

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The problem seemed to boil down to different interpretations within local government of what constitutes a community hub and to the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing. Apparently, when the right hand did brief the left, the left suggested there was room on the betting concourse for a childcare facility which is better than leaving the kids in the car park.

Still, people working in the community sector, specifically in the neighbourhood house sector, have been known to migrate across to local government. To be fair I asked what motivated the move. Perhaps they thought they would be better placed to reform and assist local communities in government than they were in the community sector.

But apparently not. The overwhelming reason people make the transition from the community sector to local government is, well in the midst of a pay equity claim that has found there is a gender bias in community sector salaries, you can probably guess the main reason. Money. Better pay. And that car paid for by Council which as one ex-community sector colleague told me makes her feel guilty and grouse at the same time.

Many people do aspire to use their position in local government to assist communities. The problem, they say, is that all the work they do is internal, trying to change the way local government thinks about communities.

“Local government has no concept in any way, shape or form of what it means to work for a community organisation,” says one source. “Local government provides a buffer from community,” says another. “There’s always a political element,” says a third. “The squeaky wheels get attended to rather than what’s best for the community.”

By the end of this debate preparation process I came away convinced that it’s not communities that need reform and assistance, it’s local government that needs reform and assistance.

Now, the primary institution for reform in Victoria is of course the correctional system and we all know how well that works. So rather than subject councillors and local government bureaucrats to community based orders, I’d like to propose a program of reform based on

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their own framework, the very same framework I outlined at the beginning of my presentation.

So instead of community capacity building, I propose a local government capacity building program. That's where we get the left hand talking to the right hand and the community teaching local government about collaborative practice.

And instead of community consultation we'll have local government consultation, where communities allow local government representatives to have a say in decision making, but only in proportion to the other community stakeholders in the process.

And we'll have a program of local government engagement, where councillors and bureaucrats leave their offices and spend time out in communities, not for photo opportunities but on reception desks in neighbourhood houses, at committees of management meetings, as volunteer tutors and childcare workers, in homework clubs and emergency relief services.

There's even a responsible gambling for local government initiative – true – in which risk management plays second fiddle to supporting community innovation.

Finally, we'll have forums to support local government resilience so that councillors and staff alike can stand up to political pressure when it stands in the way of assisting communities to meet genuine needs.

Is local government the best level of government to reform and assist communities? Clearly not. But given half a chance communities may well be in a position to reform and assist local government.

Thank you.

Joan Kirner:

Well done, Angela. I am a little intrigued by the use of the word 'political' in this conference over the last one and a half days, as though government or local government is political and

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decisions that local governments make are political but what the community does is not political.

There is a debate around that. That's the best political speech I've heard for ages Angela.

So let's not be so snotty-nosed about politics. It is about power. And if you guys aren't interested in exercising power, i.e. being part of politics, that is the shifting of power and the influence of power, then what the hell are you doing here?

So hopefully having evened up the balance we'll proceed to the rebuttals. First we have the rebuttal for the Affirmative, who is Samantha.

Samantha Dunn:

Thank you, Joan, for that incredibly unbiased assessment. We certainly welcome your comments for the Affirmative.

Firstly, I would certainly like to tackle some of the issues that Luke has raised. I actually think that Luke has some serious baggage that really goes back to his \$160 parking fine, that he's never really quite got over the fact that he couldn't appeal that parking fine.

However, Luke, there is great opportunities for you to do something about that, and I'll get to that.

Now I don't know, Luke and Angela, if you've ever revelled in the fact that you can walk into a library and you can access the Wi-Fi for free, and you can get on the internet and you can play a bit of Wii.

I don't know if you're amazed at the fact that new parents in municipalities can access maternal child health services.

I don't know if you wonder that the roads are sealed in a way that your car can traverse them easily. The footpaths are made so you can walk down the street. The garbage is collected on a weekly basis.

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Meals on Wheels are delivered to community. Parks and gardens are maintained so you can go and kick a ball around, fly a kite or just look up at the sky or perhaps do a bit of Tweeting or Facebooking at the same time.

I don't know if you've ever engaged in a community project and marvelled at how the council has supported the community in its aspiration to do what it sees important for its local area.

I don't know if you've ever gone to a football oval and been amazed at the turf and the way it's been mown and the way the ball rolls across the field.

I don't know if you've ever been amazed when you go to local restaurants that the food doesn't kill you.

I don't know if you've ever held an event in a local community hall that is still standing and won't collapse on everybody because the council has made sure that won't happen.

I don't know if you've got young children and you go to long daycare service and you get the best quality community-based long care available because that's what the local council is offering.

I don't know if you do any of those things but what I do know is most people do do those things. Those things are done because council is there doing it on your behalf.

Luke, I'd invite you to join local government because you can effect change. How many areas of government are there where you can say, "I want to change the policy. I want to get involved. I want to effect change." This is the tier of government you can do it. That's what makes local government a great level to assist communities and reform.

I haven't even got onto Angela yet! I'm going to be kinder to Angela because she's going to give me some tips later on how to save money at the Shire of Yarra Ranges. So I'll be a lot nicer to Angela.

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I would say, Angela, I wholeheartedly agree, local government does need capacity building and we are certainly happy to engage with community to see that come to pass. That is in fact what the VLGA is all about, building that capacity.

However, what we do see is that reform is needed. Communities do need a greater say. The evidence is clear, communities want change. Call it reform, call it change, communities are crying out for a say in the shape of their neighbourhood.

Lastly, Angela, I would just like to call Councillor Mayne because Angela do you really realise what we've done for you?

Stephen Mayne:

Angela, we've got five community houses and learning centres in Manningham, Council-owned buildings, each paying \$200 a year in rent. We're about to spend \$6 million in Bulleen doubling the space of the Bulleen and Templestowe Community House. We don't tell you how to run it, Angela. You have a completely voluntary board. You are doubling your programs courtesy of our multi-million dollar investment.

We built you a new hub in Wonga Park five years ago. We built you the new learning centre at East Doncaster next to the Pines three years ago. They've got a wonderful VCAL program there.

Joan Kirner:

He's about to declare his interest in running for State Parliament.

Thank you very much, Stephen and Samantha. Leaving aside the total bias on all our parts on local government, it was a fantastic description of the work of local government and much work is done.

And now to sum up for the Negative is the negative Luke Ryan.

Luke Ryan:

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I'm a lot more optimistic in real life I promise you.

The theme from the Affirmative today seems to have very much revolved around the idea of, "Oh woe is us. Why don't we get the credit we deserve?"

The thing is, as much as I really was going to town on them in my speech, there was still this undercurrent towards the end. I think it's great what local councils do. They are amazing technocratic institutions. They are very good at doing the things that Samantha outlined, the footpaths, the parks, the libraries, these are wonderful initiatives and they just do so much to make our day-to-day existence great.

But they are, unfortunately, conflating two separate ideas which come from a slightly more antiquated model of events, where community and local government are exactly the same thing. Our local area was our community. Currently, in the digital age, this is less of an important thing, our communities are very much multi-layered, all over the place, we have multiple communities quite likely in fact. It's not just local government that is the sole responsible person for creating our community experience.

Stephen was very compelling in terms of the processes that he was talking about, the many things that they supported in their Manningham Council. I'm sure given the current status quo it is a very impressive agenda.

But at no point did he really address the fact that this array of events vindicated the status quo. I think that that is perhaps something that we need to look at because again this is very much a static environment of local council that we've been working with so many years.

And I think both Angela and me, through our speeches, were very much trying to think about the ways in which we might be able to devolve that away from local councils in terms of building communities and constructing communities and doing amazing things with communities and letting communities do the things themselves because we are getting to a point in our technological evolution and our cultural evolution where perhaps these things are now possible.

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I might just finish up with the last few sentences of the speech that I was going to do when I got cut off because as you may or may not have noticed I'm a lot more eloquent when I have printed remarks in front of me.

Well, I think we can, we can right now. If we look around this room, if we think about the grand array of community groups we have here, all of us doing amazing things, all of us here because we are passionate about communities and the capacity of communities to do important things for the people that are involved in them.

But how many of us here are tied just to a specific locale? How many of us are purely responsible to the Manningham Council perhaps?

The Marrickville Council recently got done – Stephen Mayne wrote quite an informative piece in Crikey about it – for pretty extensive corruption. So I was a bit worried about the fact that given 560 local councils exist in Australia that we might not necessarily have enough oversight to look into all of their activities.

If you look at this room itself is a community of communities, our relationship to the good people of the Moonee Valley Councils is probably tangential at best.

So I think with technology and evolution on our side we should probably just leave the reform and assistance for communities to the people who know them best, namely to the communities themselves. The communities are the bedrock of our existence as human beings and I say the more we can turn them and their activities into human, socially dynamic endeavours probably the better.

Thank you very much.

Joan Kirner:

Thank you Luke. And so we've got time for a few questions and then the vote. So are there any questions of this fantastic panel.

Angela Savage:

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Joan may I just respond to Stephen's veiled threat there on the end of the table?

Joan Kirner:

I would have thought it was Marrickville that was the veiled threat. But go on Angela.

Angela Savage:

I'd just like to say that neighbourhood houses are proud to be part of community development in their own communities. We know that there is an overlap of shared interest between council's ambitions around community development and neighbourhood houses.

So of course why wouldn't councils support one of the most dynamic grassroots organisations in their own boundaries?

Thank you very much.

Joan Kirner:

I wanted to just say this has been a fun debate, it's been a fantastic contribution by the people there but it's also a very serious debate. From where I sit as Community Ambassador it's when the community and whatever form of government represents the community work in partnership that you get the right decisions.

Emphasis on consultation is the wrong emphasis. Emphasis on shared decision making is the way we'll get true change. And that's what this conference is about.

Now we have the vote. Those who vote in favour of the Affirmative please put your hands up. Those who are in favour of the side of the Negative?

I think the Ayes have it. Thank you.

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