

Transcript

Station – ABC Midwest and Wheatbelt

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Compere: Glenn Barndon

Interview with Ian Dixon

Glenn: Well Ian, you come from South Australia – what's your background in Local Government in South Australia?

Ian: Well Glenn I was involved in the Local Government voluntary reform process back in the mid 1990's, and I actually was involved in facilitating that process and in being a member of the Local Government Boundary Reform Board at that time.

Glenn: What was the driving force to make changes in South Australia?

Ian: Well at the time in the mid 90's South Australia had been grappling with the whole issue of reform in Local Government for some 20 or 30 years prior, and had been struggling with just what process to put in place. At the time of course, we had Jeff Kennett in Victoria across the border going through a forced amalgamation process so that was a pretty strong driver and the government of the day decided that they would embark on reform but that it should be a voluntary reform process.

Glenn: So once they decided that reform should take place, how long did the process take?

Ian: Essentially it took about 12 to 18 months, we were asked to go and facilitate this process, and to roughly, if we could aim to halve the number of councils in 12 to 18 months, that would be a good outcome. We ended up achieving a result of 118 Councils down to 69 Councils in a little over 12 months.

Glenn: You mentioned it was voluntary - it wasn't forced, unlike other states such as Queensland and Victoria?

Ian: That's correct, I mean it was a truly voluntary process, there were some ways that the Board could actually initiate its own proposals, but that really didn't happen, there were only a couple of minor events later in the process. Essentially what we tried to do was really put the challenge out there for Local Government and give them the opportunity to create their own future, to create their own Local Government areas, and really establish a new format for the future.

Glenn: Well over a decade after the reforms, how is it being accepted now in South Australia?

Ian: Well I think it was accepted fairly well not too far after the amalgamation process, some Councils have performed better than others, and by that I mean settled down a little bit more, but generally speaking amalgamation isn't a major issue at this stage, we've got a new structure in place, it's operating and even though I'm

not directly involved now I think many people would say that overall it's been an overall success.... I can't really comment on the details of specific Councils but certainly it's...Local Government has moved ahead.

Glenn: Well what, as a body, what do you see as the positives that come out of amalgamations?

Ian: Well at the time we had 118 Councils that I mentioned spread across the State, some were very small, the Chief Executives had high risks with legislation etc, some were struggling financially, and it enabled the Councils to come together and really create a more sustainable base for operating into the future.

Glenn: Are there any negatives for restructure?

Ian: Look, going through any organisational changes, whether it's in Local Government or whether you're in business organisations, people are involved – it's all about people, and obviously there are emotions involved, there are some people that might stay there, there are some positions that are lost and it can be a very difficult time for people, but overall I think when the dust settles, generally those issues are put into the past and people move on.

Glenn: So in general you'd say, in South Australia that Local Government is a meaner, more vibrant organisation than it was before?

Ian: From an external point of view, where I sit at the moment, I'd certainly say that. You'd have to ask other people in Local Government their views, but I certainly see that's the case and when I was operating in other government positions in the late 90's and now in my own private business, I certainly believe it was an excellent process that worked well and it did deliver some overall benefits to Council areas throughout the state.

Glenn: Does it need to be an amalgamation between groups rather than takeovers of big, powerful Councils over smaller ones?

Ian: Well look in South Australia the government decided to take the voluntary approach but their preference was for 'whole of Council' amalgamations, so we really didn't have the options for lots of those different configurations, so it's probably not appropriate for me to comment on that. I mean, I know other states have tried a whole lot of varying combinations, and I think you've really got to look at.. there's no magic solution, there's no one size that fits all, it's really a matter of designing a structure, a combination, an arrangement that works locally for the communities and for the people in that area.

Glenn: Was there any concern in South Australia that communities lost some identity by losing their local shire; they felt like they had lost a part of what they belonged to?

Ian: No doubt there were at times, I mean there were a whole range of emotions, I think the issue of representation and identity was a very serious one, there were lots of issues about the name of new Councils etc, there were also people feeling and being fearful of larger Councils being harder to access, so I guess we encouraged people, not matter what size organisation, Councils need to develop

appropriate ways of engaging with their communities, whether you're large or small, and it was a very good educating process for Councils going through our voluntary reform process as to how to do that effectively.

Glenn: This week you've been in Perth talking to Local Government Associations and Authorities, what sort of feedback have you been getting from them, what's your sense of where we're at here in Western Australia?

Ian: Well I guess first of all I should say I was asked by the West Australian Local Government Association to come across and really share some experiences from that period back in the 90' and how we went about it, some of the lessons we learned; and I presented at a forum explaining some of that. Certainly I'm not here to give advice, in terms of how Western Australia should go about it, that's the last thing I'd like to do. It was really sharing some insights and it's up to the people here to work out what they can take away from it, from our experiences, and learn from and how that might be incorporated into your situation over here.

Glenn: Will you continue to contribute to the discussion that's happening?

Ian: Ah, well look at this stage I've only been asked to come across for this one event, certainly I'm available if people wanted to come back and seek some further advice or sounding board you know into the future but I think there's obviously a process set up here in Western Australia, there are people involved, the State Government and WALGA are working together to try and encourage Councils to move down a particular process, um, so I wish them luck and there are a lot of people from around Australia that are certainly here or available to give advice and support as well.

Glenn: So the experience in the mid 90's of reducing the Councils from 118 to 69 in South Australia, in your opinion, was a good one.

Ian: Yes it is, and I think the process we used at that time was right for that time: setting up an independent board, facilitating a process and letting Councils determine their own future.....there are a number of similar elements, I understand that the Western Australian organisations here have drawn on our experiences very heavily as they have of experiences in other states, so I think that will bode well for the future of the reform process here.

Glenn: Well Ian, we appreciate your insight this morning, thanks for taking the time out.

Ian: Thanks very much Glenn, pleased to assist.