

# It is the Local that Learns

— *some thoughts on community governance*

by vivian Hutchinson

vivian Hutchinson is a trustee of The Jobs Research Trust and the editor of *The Jobs Letter*. He is a long-time writer and activist on employment issues, and provider of social services in Taranaki.

This paper is based on a speech to the *Community Governance Forum*, held at the Christchurch Convention Centre, 2-3 June 1999. The forum was attended by mayors and local government leaders from throughout New Zealand.

1.

I'm here to support the growth of "community governance" as a legitimate and important function of local government. Beyond the traditional roads, rates and rubbish agenda of local bodies, I believe the calling of leadership at this time is also the necessary task of community-building.

Community-building is the soul work of governance. It is about creating support and connection amidst a local and global landscape which is increasingly insecure and fragmented. As we "take our communities into the new millennium" —the theme of this forum — the leadership task of ensuring connection and participation, from all members of our community, will become an important face of the local governance role.

A couple of weeks ago, retiring Treasurer Bill Birch delivered his final Budget to Parliament. At the beginning of his speech, he talked about how, when he was a child, he used to talk to his neighbours. Today, Bill now observes his grandchildren talking to people on the other side of the world using the internet. His message in the Budget was one of new opportunities in front of a new generation.

The question that came to me, at the time, was that I wondered whether his grandchildren still speak to the people next-door? I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't.

It seems to me that the huge growth of a globalised communications technology has not been matched with an equal growth in the human skills of community-building. Political leaders may wax lyrically about the extended families and closely-knit neighbourhoods of our own or our parent's youth ... yet the sad reality is that our present landscape holds less hope of establishing this important sense of connection in the lives of our children and grandchildren. Amidst our internet websites and Sony playstations ... we seem less and less able to look at each other and say: "we".

Community-building is soul work because it is here that we begin to acknowledge the truth of our *inter-dependence* with one another. People are deeply woven. Biologically, the human being remains dependent on its parents — and later in life, on its children — for much longer than many other creatures. Because of this, the human family does not operate under "market" principles — and your own family doesn't either. We have fundamental needs and responsibilities that we share between each other and across generations.

But we've been sadly lacking in a governance that understands the wisdom of this in both our local and national affairs. Many of the themes of our political management in the last ten years have been about celebrating and promoting opportunities for *independence* ... while lambasting and denigrating the one-in-seven New Zealanders

who are economically *dependent* on “state handouts”. The truth of our woven lives ... is conspicuously missing.

I see, in the call for “community governance”, an opportunity for us to look again at our deeper relationships with one another — relationships that go beyond the oppositional thinking of *dependence* and *independence*. Community governance is an opportunity for us to reclaim the “we” in our lives.

2.

**T**hese are not just fragmented times ... it goes deeper than that. The structures that hold together our community life — described in this forum as our “social capital” or our “civic society” — are currently under severe stress.

I acknowledge the comments made here by Dunedin Mayor Sukhi Turner when she compared the social state of our country today with the New Zealand she knew over 20 years ago. It was not a comparison to be proud of.

Wairoa Mayor Derek Fox has also spoken of his challenges in leading a community consumed by the chronic long-term unemployment on our East Coast. We know his story is repeated in many of the streets in our own towns and cities.

These stories bring home a picture of stress within the communities which you seek to govern better. It’s not a pretty picture. I can tell you that, amongst my colleagues in social services, there are many stories of severe under-resourcing, under-caring, burn-out and a gradual feeling of collapse.

Last year, I was one of the people who walked on the Hikoi of Hope from Cape Reinga to Parliament Grounds in Wellington. I want to thank the mayors in this room who opened up their councils and civic chambers to the Hikoi as it traveled through your regions. Many of you walked with the Hikoi or sent along letters of support. Some of you joined the Hikoi by offering food and hospitality.

I was not one of the organisers of the Hikoi, but I was there to support the deep concerns that the churches carry about the levels of unemployment and poverty in this country. The churches put millions of hours of voluntary labour and funding support into our national social services. They have certainly earned their right to have a voice on the subject.

Who would have thought 20 years ago that New Zealand’s largest religious denomination would be walking the lengths of these islands to protest against poverty? Who would have imagined 10 years ago that a former governor-general would be standing on our Parliament Grounds leading a chant of “enough is enough”?

With the Hikoi, the churches are basically saying that the collapse of civic society here in New Zealand has gone too far. Their message deserves a full response from those who seek to govern in the name of “community”.

3.

**W**hen I looked at the discussion document on “community government” — written as part of the preparation for this seminar by Christchurch City Manager Mike Richardson, and others — my initial feeling was one of cynicism. My thoughts were that perhaps all this was simply an appropriation of the word “community” by people who

are, frankly, much higher up on the food chain than most of the community groups I know of.

As I read further, I began to reflect that many of the criticisms that Mike Richardson was making about the relationship between national government and local government sounded very familiar to me. He was describing much the same themes I hear when talking with local groups about their relationships to district and city councils. These groups have shared similar complaints about not being heard, respected, and not feeling as though their calls for “partnership” are being embraced with any sense of integrity. This made me curious ... and I read on.

When I had finished reading the discussion paper, however, I felt applauding of it. I began to see it as a sincere call for the soul work of governance.

Mike’s work as the City Manager of a major local authority — the administration of roads, rates and rubbish — makes no real sense today unless it is also in the context of community-building. As a manager, he needs much more than the limited capacity to ask is he *doing things right* ... he also needs the capacity to ask is he *doing the right things*.

To ask that second question requires a whole change in the matrix of relationships surrounding the task of governance.

This takes me back to Professor Michael Clarke’s speech yesterday morning when he advocated adding several new and specific roles to the job description of local authorities — the “community governance” roles, which I would describe as simply *doing the right things* in these times of complexity and change.

Professor Clarke talked about the strategic leadership of local councils that can hold and communicate a “bigger picture”; the need to encourage and express a shared framework of values and objectives; the enabling and encouraging of public discourse and debate; and the valuing and protecting of the networks of voluntary associations and organisations that make up civil society.

Clarke also spoke eloquently about the need for councils and governments to become “learning creatures”. He observes that our governance needs to learn from what is going on around it ... and he believes that this is a difficult thing to achieve on a national scale.

This is an important point for me to underscore. We in the community have always known that *it is the local that learns*. Community groups have not just been out there delivering much-needed social services in difficult circumstances. They have been a learning edge amidst a society in change. And the insights and wisdom gained from being at that edge have not been heard by our current frameworks of governance.

To me, the first step in changing the relationships surrounding our governance structures involves changing the ways we *listen* to one another. Local government consultant Phil McDermott also spoke about this when he described the differences between *surveying* a community and *listening* to a community. He described the different results you get when you change this perspective.

If councils and local authorities listened to their communities differently, then you would hear some very important messages about the changes needed at this time. If this forum wants to change the structural relationships between local and national government ... then I also suspect you will need to start by changing the ways you listen to one another.

4.

The word *governance* comes from its Greek roots meaning “to steer”. Governance is essentially about steering our community, its resources and its hopes.

Many of the reforms of our Public Service in the last decade have been about separating the task of governance from the job of providing services. This has also been described as “separating policy from delivery”.

This attitude was popularised in the 1992 best-selling book “*Reinventing Government*” by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler ... a book which I am told has been an influential part of the Clinton — and later, Blair— reforms of the public sector.

Osborne and Gaebler tell us that the role of government is to steer the boat, and not to row it. Their view is that delivering services is rowing, and “... government is not very good at rowing.”

Much of what Osborne and Gaebler write is good common sense. But the New Zealand experience is that these notions of the “separation of policy and delivery” have also become something of a dogma in our public life.

The New Zealand public has found that the people steering their boat have put themselves at a distance, and have therefore been unable to learn from our increasingly complex and changing world.

Actually, these people have not even been *in* the boat. They have stood on the shore, consumed by the “targeting” ceremonies and “accountability” rituals that go with “purchasing outcomes”.

It is the local that learns. There is a whole flood of information that comes from being on the spot, and being a real part of the fabric of a community in change. You can only learn this if you are also *in* the boat. And it is just common sense to say that our governance has to be closer to the life of the people that are living, walking and breathing the life of that community.

5.

One of the things we have learned at the local level is this: our major social problems — jobs, housing, health, education — all exist in an environment where no-one is really “in-charge”.

It is almost as though the big social issues that we wish to address have become *so* complex, with *so* many details within them, and you’ve got to know *so* much about everything and have effective relationships with *so* many people ... that we are kidding ourselves if any one individual or agency thinks that they are at the helm of any authentic solution.

Take, for instance, our social welfare situation. The re-structuring and re-branding of many of our government services, like Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ), have not delivered the dynamism, certainty and effectiveness that our politicians were looking for. Every week, our papers and the TV are full of more stories illustrating how people are falling through the holes in our revamped welfare system.

To me, this is not cause for despair or resignation. It is simply a call for us to learn from what we are seeing. When you are looking from the ground up you can see that it is obvious that a large department like WINZ is not going to be able to get your local details right.

When you are looking from the ground up you can see that there are a whole range of groups — public, private and community — which are sincerely trying to have an impact on our major public problems. The call for our governance at this time is to create the environment where these different elements *work together* more effectively.

The leadership here is about knowing how to share the control of the choices before us. This is not a leadership based on compulsion and command. This is a leadership that understands the community-building values of co-ordination, collaboration and co-operation. It is a leadership that is capable of learning the craft of *sharing power* amongst diverse groups at the local level.

6.

One of the key drivers of community-building has to be ensuring the opportunity of a livelihood for all the people in our community. This is a fundamental challenge to our governance structures ... and a challenge that we're failing at.

As mayors, most of you are living in communities that have got as many as one-in-nine working-age people out-of-work. There are a quarter of a million people wanting a job here in this land of plenty. We can split hairs about whether we call it “outputs” or “outcomes” ... but we also know that in our hearts that these unemployment statistics are simply appalling.

I'm not blaming you as mayors for this ... but we have to acknowledge that this is happening on your watch. And it is one of the most critical issues in need of local leadership today.

Warren Snow is also here at this forum, and I know he has been talking to many of you about his vision for a zero-waste sustainable New Zealand, and the role that councils and local bodies can play in achieving this objective. It's been great to hear many of you saying that you intend to respond to this challenge.

While this is a great step forward, the greatest waste that is going around you is not just of plastic, or tin-cans or paper and glass. It is the waste of people — the waste of one-in-nine working-age citizens who do not have access to full participation in the communities you govern.

It is perfectly feasible for us to also have a zero unemployment strategy in this country. It simply lacks the political will ... and the leadership that can inspire national, local and community groups to work together in delivering the details.

One of the things I most admired about the contribution of the former Christchurch Mayor Vicki Buck was the leadership she took while participating in the Employment Taskforce, which reported to the Prime Minister back in 1994.

Vicki Buck was one of the people pushing for that Taskforce to have the clear goal of ensuring that not one person in New Zealand would be out of work or training for longer than six months. The Taskforce saw this as a very achievable goal, and made a whole raft of recommendations on how to achieve it by the year 2000.

We are only months away from that Taskforce's deadline ... yet nowhere near achieving its objectives. Despite the creation of WINZ — one of the biggest public service shake-ups in modern times — we are nowhere nearer ensuring better equity, opportunity, participation and livelihood for the substantial numbers of fellow New Zealanders who are “at the bottom of the heap”.

I am left asking: what would it have been like if, six years ago, more mayors from around the country had joined with Vicki Buck in her call for better results on jobs?

I ask this today because I believe that mayors and local government will be important drivers of our employment strategies beyond the year 2000.

Why? Because we already know that it is the local that learns ... it is the local that understands the truth of inter-dependence ... and it is the local that can be much more adaptive and creative as it meets the challenges of our uncertain future.

We've tried to drive our jobs strategies from Wellington for far too long and it hasn't delivered the results. The leadership on this issue has to be local.

7.

**I**n my capacity as editor of *The Jobs Letter*, I am often asked: Where are the jobs going to come from?

I think people expect me to talk about some new sectors that are opening up in our economy ... or new business opportunities appearing on the horizon. I can and do enjoy sharing stories like that, as we research and scan local and international trends and publish them in *The Jobs Letter*.

But, these days, my answers to that question are changing. I no longer believe that new business opportunities will be the only drivers of future employment.

The jobs of the future will also come from us *valuing different things*. And this is not an act of economics or business development as we traditionally know it. These jobs will come from the acts of community and cultural leadership that have the capacity to make choices for a common good.

This is why I see mayors and local bodies in the front line of our future employment strategies ... because you are the people with the "commission" to express this different sense of what we value.

The great paradox is this: at a time of high unemployment, we are surrounded by insurmountable opportunities of good work that needs to be done. But it is work that needs to be valued.

The job-rich areas of the future will emerge in two main sectors: The first sector contains *the jobs that come from knowing we need to look after one another better*. The second sector contains *the jobs that know we need to look after the earth better*. These sectors are not driven simply by market desire. They are driven by a community and cultural leadership that values our inter-dependence.

Both these sectors are very rich in terms of job potential ... and we would all be much better off if the work was done. The great irony is that the skills to do these jobs are not dependent on high technology ... they require the caring and high-touch skills that are already held in abundance by unemployed New Zealanders.

8.

**B**ut we can make a big mistake in addressing our employment problems if we just focus all our attention on the poor and the unemployed. One of the main features of the changing future of work is the huge growth of *over-work* amongst those people fortunate to have jobs or to be self-employed.

In fact, I believe I could solve a third of our local unemployment problem if I could simply convince enough of my friends and colleagues that they are working too hard! This probably also applies to most of the people in this room.

Again, this illustrates the truth of our inter-connection with one another. I know that my friend who is working very long hours, spending his weekends back at work, and isn't spending enough real time with his kids ... is deeply inter-connected with my other friend who can't take his kids to our swimming pool because he can't afford the petrol for the car because he's a single parent surviving on a benefit.

These problems with the *distribution of work* are systemic ... and will need to be solved together.

9.

**T**he growth of both unemployment and over-work are all part of a deep change concerning *the future of work and income* in the western world. The impact of globalisation and new technologies on the nature and ability to earn a livelihood has really only just begun.

All this will certainly influence the shape of your capacity to govern. You will not be able to grow a vision of "community governance" based on a view of the employment patterns in the world as it exists today. The whole matrix of how we gain a livelihood is changing beneath us. It is already having an effect on the ways our cities function — our energy uses, our transport patterns and even where and when and how people flush the toilets. It is obviously affecting the capacity of your people to pay their rates.

If your councils are indeed "learning creatures", then they need to get up with the play. I believe that each local authority will soon need to resource a policy and education unit on how the future of work and income will be changing the shape of our local communities.

I would certainly like to see a greater collaboration between mayors throughout New Zealand in addressing employment issues, and working for the zero-waste of your people. I would like to see a "Mayors for Jobs" network created that can operate in three main areas :

Firstly, to speak up and help put the "jobs" issue back on the national agenda.

Secondly, to share "best practice" with one another on what can be effectively done at the local level.

And thirdly, to create national and local forums where we can really start to explore the challenges and opportunities arising from the changing future of work and income.

10.

**I** have no doubt that the face of local government will look very different in the year 2020 and beyond ... and gatherings such as this will be an important part of how we all help shape that future.

I support this message about the growth of community governance as a legitimate and important function of local government. I do believe that local government needs to "walk the talk" right now in terms of the different leadership roles it can take —

particularly in the way that it listens to people, and how it can bring groups together to better address our major public problems.

If community governance makes us more capable of learning from one another, becoming adaptable and releasing the fullest creativity of all people in our communities ... then perhaps we will have earned the right to steer ourselves and our neighbours into a new millennium.

*vivian Hutchinson*

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## NOTES

- This paper is based on a speech given by vivian Hutchinson to the *Community Government Forum* held at the Christchurch Convention Centre on 2/3 June 1999. It is also available on the internet at [www.jobsletter.org.nz/vivian/comgov99.htm](http://www.jobsletter.org.nz/vivian/comgov99.htm)
- Special thanks to Garry and Pam Moore.
- The forum “Taking our Communities into the New Millennium: the Development of Community Government”, was convened by the Canterbury mayors and council chief executives to discuss the how local government leaders could initiate important changes in the way our communities govern themselves. The paper “*Taking the Canterbury Communities into the New Millennium — the Role of Local Government*” was written by Mike Richardson, Christchurch City Manager, with the assistance of other Canterbury District Chief Executives. For copies of this paper, contact Jude Pani at the Christchurch City Council email [jude.pani@ccc.govt.nz](mailto:jude.pani@ccc.govt.nz)
- Professor Michael Clarke is a professor at the School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham, and also the University Pro-Vice Chancellor. In 1998, in collaboration with John Stewart, he published “*Community Governance, Community Leadership and the New Local Government*”, extracts of which were used in the pre-forum discussion paper and workshops.
- “Doing things right ... or doing the right things” was one of the insights of rural enterprise consultant Agnes Gannon, who toured New Zealand in the early 1990s. (Thanks to Danny Gresham for this reference).
- “*Reinventing Government — How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*” by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (published by Penguin 1993)
- vivian Hutchinson has been one of the pioneers in community-based action for jobs in New Zealand, especially in establishing programmes for the support and education of unemployed people. He was a founder of the Taranaki Work Trust, and its associated projects in the Starting Point Employment Resource Centre, Skills of Enterprise Business Courses, and the Enterprise Centre. He has been involved in establishing many practical training programmes for unemployed people, and also local employment and trading networks such as Green Dollars.
- The Jobs Research Trust was established in 1994 to “develop and distribute information that will help our communities create more jobs and reduce unemployment and poverty in New Zealand.” Contact: P.O.Box 428, New Plymouth, Taranaki, NZ phone 06-753-4434 email [jobs.research@jobsletter.org.nz](mailto:jobs.research@jobsletter.org.nz) or visit the internet website at [www.jobsletter.org.nz](http://www.jobsletter.org.nz)
- For current “Statistics That Matter” on the levels of employment and unemployment in New Zealand, also visit the website at [www.jobsletter.org.nz/stt/stathome.htm](http://www.jobsletter.org.nz/stt/stathome.htm)
- vivian Hutchinson has also written “*Co-operation, Collaboration and Co-ordination — the challenges of working together on unemployment and poverty*” (1999) available on the internet at [www.jobsletter.org.nz/vivian/ccc99.htm](http://www.jobsletter.org.nz/vivian/ccc99.htm)