



## **Presentation by Ambassador Matthew Neuhaus CLGF Conference 2013, Uganda**

### ***Democratising Local Government: the Commonwealth Influence***

Honoured to speak as Australian Government representative at this conference. thanks to Carl Wright, Ugandan hosts and organisers for honour, conscious Australia Chair in Office.

I am not however Australia's Ambassador to Uganda.

I would have been pleased to be - my wife was born here, I spent some of my Childhood and early career here and as ComSec Political Director helped organise the 2007 CHOGM here.

So I always feel very much at home here in Winston Churchill's "Pearl of Africa"

I am actually Australia's Ambassador to Zimbabwe, and also High Commissioner to Zambia and Malawi. That is still a very relevant background for this conference.

The former Secretary General Don McKinnon was fond of repeating the saying "all politics is local" which I, and I expect you, agree with. Recently in a discussion with US icon Andrew Young he added "but economics is global".

I think this captures what I want to focus on here. Your politics is local, but the consequences for development can be global. it is an important part of our inter.connected world.

I grew up here on is continent in the 1960s and 1970s when the focus was on strong centralised single party states. While some leaders were well intentioned - I think of President Nyerere of Tanzania - and some not so - I won't mention names from Uganda's past - the consequences were the same. Poor democracy and poor development.

And I would contrast this with Australia where I returned for my university education. There we had a vigorous multiparty democracy underpinned by strong local government and a free economy, making us one of the richest countries in the world. Services were delivered at e local level by Town Councillors everyone knew, and they could be held accountable as you saw them all the time in the street, at church, at the football.

You will see this thinking reflected in the closing address from our Prime Minister Julia Gillard. in fact a further important step is being taken this year with a referendum to be held in September at the time of our national election to give financial recognition of local government in our Constitution and allow the Federal Government to provide funds directly to local government.

I actually thought a lot about this on my first posting to Kenya and Uganda in 1984-85. You remember those days and the chaos. When I went to my next posting in Papua New Guinea an academic named Tony Regan who had been asked by the late Minister Wapakabulo who had



lectured with him in exile in PNG to come and help with a Constitution which would focus on decentralisation based on the PNG experience.

We all agreed this could help and so I found some AusAid money for them. The result is your constitution and the progress we see. I quote Vincent Ssekono, former Permanent Secretary of Local Government from the excellent magazine in our pack "Decentralisation is a much better policy than the highly centralised system of governance". Amen to that. and we all heard the President emphasise his ongoing commitment to this approach last night.

This thinking very much influenced me when I was doing Mr Banerji's job before at ComSec and worked closely with Carl Wright and the CLGF. The CLGF has the power to bring together best practice from across the Commonwealth bringing together countries as diverse as Australia, PNG and Uganda.

During my time at the Commonwealth Secretariat the CLGF produced the Aberdeen Principles which were strongly endorsed by Commonwealth leaders. Since my time there, and indeed only this year, the Commonwealth has agreed a Commonwealth Charter which crystallises its commitment to democracy and development. The importance of local government is well recognised in the Charter. I quote from Article 1 "Parliaments and representative local governments and other forms of local governance are essential elements in the exercise of democratic governance".

And the influence of the CLGF goes beyond the Commonwealth into other organisations like SADC in my area and countries like Zimbabwe which may have left the Commonwealth but still share similar governance structures.

Zimbabwe as everyone knows has its democracy challenges. But one of the strengths for Zimbabwe which is now governed by an uneasy power sharing government - perhaps a bit like the UK or Australia! - has been its local government, especially in the urban areas where many are managed by the former opposition MDC.

The example I like to give is Bulawayo in the south of the country. Once a hub of industry in more recent years it became marginalised and impoverished. It has been striking though since 2008 how the town council has worked hard to improve the city - you see it in the roads, the water and sanitation, health and education.

I know because Australia has had a major partnership with them and UNICEF, Germany and World Vision in water and sanitation. I know because I have got my feet dirty in the sewage of Bulawayo inspecting these projects - that's what local government does - the down and dirty stuff we all need, not the rarified negotiations of international relations.

And do you know who the other key partner is in this activity - Durban City Council - using its expertise to help a fellow city in Southern Africa.

So I use this example to demonstrate that donors like Australia are not focused on central governments alone.

We like democracy at the local level and we see it as a partner for development.



We like it because it is easier to see on the ground the development money taken from the taxes of our own rate payers actually been received and turned into services for the poor who need it rather than disappearing in figures in national budgets.

We like the sustainability created by ratepayers being prepared to pay for services because they actually receive the services they need.

And whenever I bring national MPs from Australia, as I have to Bulawayo and Lusaka, what they like to visit are these projects and meet the ratepayers and Councillors.

Because at the end of the day all politics is local and development, like democracy, has to begin at the local level.