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Imagine the Future – the Vancouver Story (A World Perspective of Local Government)

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
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*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to
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Attendees, honoured guests, and organisers of the Communities in Control Conference – thank you for inviting me to Australia. To the traditional owners of the land, thank you; and I also bring greetings from our First Nations.

I've been in Australia for two and a half days, and I can't tell you how similar the City of Melbourne and the City of Vancouver are.

Your Deputy Premier asked this morning how you treat strangers; well, when we got in from the airport we were taking a little walk around your downtown when we spotted a dad with a couple of kids adorned with flags and hats and scarves.

We'd been told on the way in from the airport what a great Victorian tradition football games were, but we'd never been to one. So we went over and asked "Is there a game on?" And then we asked "Can we follow you?" And the father not only told us where to go but put us on the tram and steered us to the Telstra Dome. So I now know who the Hawks and the Bulldogs are.

Given the kind of conference this is, I should probably try to gain a little legitimacy from telling you that like you, I had my start in the NGO movement.

In my early years I never in my wildest dreams ever thought I'd be working for the government, and I spent most of my early adult life working for and advocating for not-for-profits. I came to local government quite by accident (a story I won't go into here) and my first job in local government, by way of background, was as Director of the Equal Employment Opportunities Program.

And given the kind of conference this is, I want to present Vancouver's story in a way that actually brings the community to you.

Let me give you some background.

Vancouver is very self-contained. We have a population of about sixty thousand, with a population in the greater Vancouver regional district of about two million, smaller in size only than Montreal and Toronto among Canada's cities.

Just so you can see how similar Vancouver is to Melbourne, here's a little brag clip about Vancouver – a tourist promotion.

Our main industries are accommodation, food, education, health, finance, and retail. We have about 130 km of walkways, greenways and bike paths, so that lots of the area is accessible to pedestrians. We preserve heritage buildings, just as you do. Our transport system, I have to say, is not as sophisticated or as developed as yours.

The City of Vancouver has a very strong statement on values that is shared not only by City employees but by citizens generally.

We are committed to putting people first. Our mission is to create a great city of communities which cares about people, its environment, and its opportunities to live, work and prosper, and we enact that mission statement through a very strong value-based leadership.

I'm going to describe our downtown now. Our planning choices over the last thirty years have really focussed on liveability and community, and through our physical planning we are making our downtown living, vibrant and urban. It's still a place where our natural setting remains a fundamental defining element of our city's character.

We have met the challenge of our city's suburbanisation and the loss of downtown industry by using these things as opportunities to remake the downtown landscape and to showcase our downtown pedestrian-oriented shopping.

We make strategic places to build on what we call the city's Living First strategy. We don't have a single freeway leading to our downtown. People have said no, so we have focussed on creating a city that would facilitate pedestrians and cyclists and children before the automobile.

Another part of the Living First strategy is to focus on creating complete communities. What makes all the density work is that people have all the amenities that they would have in a suburban neighbourhood, or more.

We built communities that have parks, community centres, libraries, day care centres, all the amenities you need to create a complete community. Interestingly, we've implemented measures that require developers to pay for public amenities.

For example, every housing development that takes place in our city must give twenty percent of it to the community as non-market housing. Twenty-five percent of our housing is designed for families. In addition, childcare centres must be built in, along with parks, laneways and walkways, all paid for as community amenity contributions by the developer.

It has brought people back to live in the downtown, which has made local business boom, made streets safer, and is on the way to making us a twenty-four hour city.

Our downtown population growth is up a remarkable 100% over the past ten years alone. With the population shopping, eating, and enjoying themselves in the city, of course it's been a real boon to the retail sector. You may be interested in this fun statistic; although we've had a 100% increased growth in the population downtown, there are fewer cars coming in to the downtown on a daily basis.

More people are moving about downtown on bikes or as pedestrians. We've completed about a hundred kilometres of bike paths and greenways throughout our city. We've worked around our existing neighbourhoods so that people can live, work and play in their own community.

We've had to focus on building capacity and revitalising communities as well, and as a result the Economic Intelligence Unit and the William H. Mercer Institute have both rated Vancouver the most liveable city in the world over the last decade -- and I know that Melbourne is our closest rival.

The city of Vancouver also recognises the crucial importance of social, economic, environmental and cultural sustainability. We believe that these different areas do not oppose, but rather complement, one another, and our commitment to sustainability drives innovation, forges partnerships, necessitates co-operation and promotes responsibility.

[Movie]

There are a number of things that the city of Vancouver has been doing already to try and bring sustainability into its operations and to make meaningful changes in the way the city works. Probably

one of the most important things the city has done over the past few years has been to focus on green building design, using that to improve the way all our buildings work.

“This sustainable feature is the green roof. We’re on top of the administration building at National Yard, and it’s a drought-tolerant planting so there’s no irrigation here. Its purpose is to cut down on stormwater runoff.”

The city has moved in this direction because of its primary commitment and its ultimate responsibility to the people of Vancouver. It is truly a city that is built by people, about people, and for people. Making people our priority means that we focus attention on the community, and we prioritise operations around the values of inclusiveness, community engagement, responsiveness and innovation.

The city of Vancouver is a highly diverse city. In 2001, 36% of the residents in the lower mainland were visible minorities, and by 2017 the number has risen to 53%, creating a visible majority. We also enjoy a strong lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender community.

We believe that this diversity is a valuable asset that contributes to the economic and social development of the community. We therefore strive to be inclusive in all that we do and to promote the values of equality and social justice.

Our values of inclusiveness, respect, innovation and responsiveness mean that community innovation is a top priority. We undertook a public involvement review initiative where we asked our citizens about initiatives that would help them participate in our city. A couple of the things we did that I think you’ll find interesting was to create online community web pages that provide community profiles for each of V’s 23 neighbourhoods, including their history, their heritage, their planning, local services, census information, and community contacts.

We have an online community calendar used by both staff and community groups to list upcoming events city-wide or by neighbourhood.

We have a newcomer’s guide to Vancouver available in English, Chinese, Punjabi, Spanish, and Vietnamese. We have created advisory committees made up of citizens on a wide range of issues

including disability, peace and justice, first nation, planning, and seniors.

We hold special public meetings on the most controversial of issues. We also hold referenda on issues that require direct input, such as whether or not we should host the Olympics, or have electoral reform.

We do this to ensure that we understand the pulse of our city, and I'd like to show you how we encourage our voters to come forward. *“Skateboarding. Club hours. Smoking regulations. Community Centres. Rules about these issues were passed by Vancouver City Council over the past three years. Who makes the rules for the next three years? You have the power to influence local government, and the issues that affect your life. It's your choice. It's your city. Vote November 16th. A message from the City of V.”*

Mayor Larry Campbell would tell you that urban growth and revitalisation has brought many challenges with it. Crime and safety, transportation, economic development, and sustainability are some of the examples. Many big cities face similar problems.

The City of Vancouver is working to address the challenges posed by urbanisation through building capacity and finding new ways to do things. We recognise that meeting these challenges can not be done by the municipal government alone. We must work with the community so we can all move forward towards common goals for the betterment of the community as a whole.

A few minutes ago you heard Jo talk about the neighbourhood integrated service teams. An early introduction to the problems of being on the City staff came when I was confronted by a very angry group of citizens who arrived in the middle of the council chambers protesting against a problem house in their neighbourhood.

They had counted 157 visits to the house by the police department and 47 visits by fire engines, building inspectors came and went on a weekly basis, and there were also frequent visits from our environmental health department.

The landlord was advised to close the building and board it up. Every department had done its work within the scope of its regulations, but there was no sharing of that information across departments, and each department had little or no idea what the others were doing.

So a cross-departmental staff team was brought together with the community, and it was encouraged to generate solutions co-operatively. A demolition notice was issued, and the problems in the neighbourhood quickly disappeared.

This made us realise that local government had to become more efficient and more effective in solving local issues, and as a result we followed through and created sixteen teams across the city working with neighbourhoods and communities to problem-solve.

Let me show you [referring to Powerpoint presentation] ...

“This pool hall behind me, Eighty-eight Billiards, was a plague in this community for thirty years. Fencing, drug dealing, gangsters and wannabes, murders – it was a disaster. So we galvanised to community through the community police office and the neighbourhood integrated services team that called them in. Within one month we’d shut down this pool hall because we worked in partnership together.”

This was designed to respond to neighbourhood issues efficiently, but some neighbourhoods are more challenging than others. One of our persistent challenges has been a Vancouver neighbourhood about six blocks across called the Downtown East Side.

It’s a diverse community which is seriously challenged, yet surprisingly its cohesion and its passion is very strong. It used to be a vibrant commercial entertainment district, but the neighbourhood now faces a very dire and complex situation.

It has most of V’s rooming houses. It has about sixteen thousand residents, many of whom are injecting drug users (rates of overdose deaths from both heroin and methamphetamines are very high). It’s been through a rapid economic decline. It has a high proportion of the city’s disadvantaged residents, including those who are mentally ill (senior levels of government closed all opportunities for housing the mentally ill, and many of them moved into this community).

It's the place where most of our homeless people find themselves (many homeless people are attracted to Vancouver because it has a great climate), and it's relatively low income (in fact, it's the poorest neighbourhood in Canada). There is sexual exploitation of youth, first nations, and women.

A diverse population with many environmental conflicts. It took a huge amount of government dollars from the Federal and Provincial governments each year, and what we were doing just didn't work any longer. Solutions had to be found.

As conventional measures were not working, the complex situation in the Downtown East Side required the city to be not simply responsive but innovative.

One example was the Four Pillars Drug Strategy adopted by the Council in 2001. We needed a public health and public order response. The Four Pillars -- Prevention, Treatment, Enforcement, and Harm Reduction. – offered a comprehensive approach.

The strategy treats addiction as a health issue rather than a criminal matter. Momentum for the change came from the community, from the municipal government, and from health leadership.

Public discourse was key to generating success for the work. *There were already a tremendous number of services in the community, but the difficulty was that none of them were talking to each other. The City had given up, the police weren't able to do anything, and the streets were full of dealers and people who were addicted. We couldn't do it by ourselves, and we needed the help of the provincial and federal governments, so the Vancouver Agreement was formed.*

Let me outline what it took to build community capacity in this hostile environment. This is an example of a co-operative development between the city and the Downtown East Side community.

About five years ago the situation in this community was very tense. Two opposing groups confronted each other and the city of V. The Community Alliance was made up of local residents, merchants, community leaders and politicians. They opposed the

city's drug policy and its health programs in the area. They collected petitions against the City and held demonstrations.

The second group was made up of residents and community activists with different concerns and different views. The two groups had many clashes, and didn't care at all about one another's concerns. Let me show you some of the demonstrations.

The Downtown East Side community development project is really a case study where the staff of the Downtown East Side project revitalised ancient projects, implemented a multi-faceted strategy to handle the conflicts. They used proactive media strategies and public education to help people in the community gain a better understanding of the issues, and after a while people were able to look at the problems from different perspectives.

Some of the members changed their views about the city's proposals, and started to encourage the community to participate in the problem-solving process. At the same time the project staff were working with the community to develop a long-term vision, and assisted them in looking for resources to implement various projects that included community arts and cultural festivals, improvement of the public realm, and community safety.

These projects brought people together as partners to achieve a common goal. As a result, they helped to make the community more cohesive and helped the people involved with a sense of achievement.

Over time, these collaborative projects brought a significant improvement in the community's attitude towards the City. An unprecedented level of trust has developed. The community alliance dissolved itself after three years. The major community organisation in Chinatown changed their policy from opposing the drug policy to endorsing it.

The Vancouver Chinatown revitalisation committee, a community coalition, organised a fundraising dinner to celebrate the Carnegie Library's one hundredth anniversary and to raise money for an arts endowment fund to celebrate the work that had been achieved.

Seven hundred people from the community came. It was a celebration that brought people together. People learned many,

many things from this. We learned that people in the community are an important part of the solution. Governments have to release control. Community development and capacity building can be seen as steps to the goal of achieving a stronger community and improving the quality of life.

It can also be seen as a tool to improve communication, build leadership, and build trust and support.

Long-term investments require ongoing support to nurture positive developments. A common vision and continuous commitment are prerequisites. Project staff played mixed and dynamic roles -- representational, bridging, brokering, trust building, administrative and resource informational and educational roles.

It took passionate, caring local government officials and a passionate, caring community to come together to develop a base. I'd have to say that in the early days Vancouver took quite a bruising, but I think we were prepared to take the risks given that the principle of valuing community was of fundamental importance the way we went along.

Let me show you another way Vancouver reacted during that time. The Vancouver agreement is another example of our working towards positive change for the Downtown East Side. It built upon the work we had begun (with the four Pillars and the National Crime Prevention Project, which laid the foundation for the Vancouver agreement).

This urban redevelopment really brings together the governments of Canada, British Columbia and Vancouver with the goal of creating a safer, healthier, more sustainable community for all of Vancouver, starting with Downtown East Side.

It actually formalises the co-ordination of government actions and works to address local issues – poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, safety and economic revitalisation.

One of the things we found was that all levels of government were pouring money and more money into the Downtown East Side, and that matters were only getting worse – until we were able to engage the community and formalise our relationship and how we would respond to each other.

It's never going to be a completely common vision. There are always going to be elements that aren't there for certain groups and certain people. For the majority of people, though, we're doing a good job.

Our experience with the City's liveability strategy, the Neighbourhood Integrated Service Teams (NIST), and the Four Pillars strategy under which we introduced safe injection sites, the North American Opiate Medication Initiative (NAOMI) heroin trials, and the Vancouver Agreement (which has just been renewed for another five years), has led us to one definite conclusion.

To empower communities, we need to develop capacity . Physical, economic, social and cultural sustainability depends on it. The health and wellbeing of all our communities depends on it.

Communities need to be valued and supported in the work they do, through policies and resources that can assist these organisations to grow, to prosper, and to build the community at large.

Capacity-building and healthy relations between the community and other levels of government have given us a leading edge, which is why we were successful in our bid to hold the 2010 Olympic Games.

Because of our experience with the Vancouver Agreement we were able to convince all the Olympic and Paralympic stakeholders to sign off in advance on a multi-party agreement that defined our roles and responsibilities, that outlined who was funding each item, and that laid out how the community was to be engaged.

Part of that led to the inclusivity statement, which lays down that no community member will be left homeless by the Games – indeed, that no member will be impacted negatively. How it actually works is that when money comes in as part of the Games sponsorship those major corporations that sponsor the Games also sponsor the enforcement of the Inclusivity Statement.

That's brought about other partnerships in job training, particularly in the Downtown East Side, so that every major sponsor of the Olympics is also sponsoring some social development.

In addition, we've built a program called Legacies Now, to ensure that as an NFP we were working with community groups all over British Columbia to leave monuments in every part of British Columbia.

Part of what we've done through the British Columbia community groups is to work with all of them to ensure that any sponsorship coming in built community capacity throughout the province, so there were benefits for our young people and for the entire community in the areas of volunteerism, arts and culture and sports, and community.

A key part of our planning is that no building went up just for the Olympics. Sustainability was a key component of our work.

Let me end with a few scenes of our civic life, and let me say again that it's been an enormous pleasure to be here. Good luck, and thank you. It's been a great conference, and working for community capacity is really what's going to save the planet and save democracy.

[Questions]