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Report to Environment Committee
from Councillor Terry McDavitt

RMLA Conference: 5-7 October 2000

Councillors Buchanan and myself, together with Dr Bradbury and Paula Bullock, represented the WRC at the annual Resource Management Law Association Conference, held at Aotea Centre Auckland, from 5-7 October 2000. The RMLA brings together RMA practitioners – lawyers and consultants, local and central government agencies, Environment Court and academics. It is an opportunity to interact with and learn firsthand from other RMA perspectives. However, two important perspectives are poorly represented – industry and community groups.

This Conference took the form of a series of presentations from the podium to the plenary with a limited time for questions. This format relies heavily on the skill of the presenters and the magnetism of the topics. In fact presenter skill was variable and session topics eclectic. The real strength of the Conference came from the sub-theme of “the role and relevance of vision” presented by keynote contributors Kevin Roberts (of Saatchi and Saatchi) and Ros Kelly (former Minister in Australian federal government, now environmental consultant to mining industry).

Personally my major interest was the session on integrated planning of landuse and transport. Led by Dr Robert Cervero, a noted US textbook writer on transport planning, and including Barry Mein of the ARC and Lindsay Gow of MfE. The ‘New Urbanist’ slant of the first two presenters sparked what could have been a major and illuminating debate between the goal-oriented and allegedly “social engineering” mindset of infrastructure planners and the response-oriented effects-based and scientific mindset of RMA professionals. This is a debate that has been hanging around in the wings ever since RMA and is yet to be addressed intelligently. We had just got to a pivotal question – is regional forward planning of infrastructure (the norm in US and Europe) acceptable, possible, desirable in New Zealand? – when time ran out on the session.

Two other interesting sessions suffered a similar fate, ie time ran out on them. Sir Paul Reeves and Buddy Mikaere insisted on an unquestionable spiritual core to Maori cultural values while Derek Fox outlined optimistic pragmatic responses to (Maori) rural poverty. In the ‘Wet’ session (Coastal issues) a developer, a scientist and a landscape architect presented contrasting truths.

The proposed linking theme of the Conference was “at the edge”. By and large sessions took you to the edge of important topics, but time and format constrained going any further. As an example, keynote contributors set the scene for some galvanising statement of political

(governmental?) leadership in environmental practice, but the non-appearance of key politicians and the insistence of their replacements on reading prepared speeches meant this opportunity was squandered.

The accommodation and travel arrangements undertaken by the Environment Division were superb, and the WRC delegation actively pursued the networking opportunities during breaks and evenings.

Other attendees may wish to elaborate but for me the abiding messages of the Conference were those delivered early by Kevin Roberts – his plea for inspirational vision and demonstrations of the strengths of a corporate (or is that “professional”?) approach to strategic planning were both entertaining and challenging. This theme was taken up, developed further and related specifically to the RMA and sustainability goals by Ros Kelly in an outstanding presentation. Reducing it to a summary as here (or reading the fuller written version) will not do it justice, for both strip away the communicative power of the original delivery. Indeed I would support any opportunity for a wider range of politicians and officers in our region to hear her firsthand. Still, because the messages are important, I’ll try, noting that this summary includes some of my own interpolations:

“Legislation/regulation is but one role of government, and in these days of pluralism and divided powers possibly a minor one; leadership as in stating and demonstrating a positive vision is much more important in delivering actual change. Laws only deliver interesting hearings and court cases. It is committed culture that delivers real change, and achieving that requires leadership and vision. New Zealand has “the best environmental legislation in the world” but what has it achieved in environmental practice? Where is the leadership and vision? (Note: Ros Kelly was not as directly critical as this).

Environmental malpractice is bad business practice – it erodes reputation and endangers future bottom lines. The “triple bottom line” approach is a start but only a start towards sustainable practice. Sustainability is about prosperity and equity as much as it is about environmental responsibility – else it is not sustainable. These days leading corporates (Australian examples given) are in fact “ahead of the game” in environmental practice because it pays them to be. Where is New Zealand corporate (and community) culture in this respect?

There are tested tools available through which to achieve such cultural shifts – eg, environmental performance reporting, social reporting ... (Australian examples). Legislation provides a necessary framework, but incentivisation and recognition are also important tools. Developing, measuring and communicating indicator performance is just as powerful a tool as any law because the logic is obvious even to Boards and CEOs... If corporates or individuals do begin on this path – eg “Owning up” – it is essential to incentivise them to go further and (within reason) not to simply wield a big stick and take your revenge – indeed if you do you guarantee that the whole cultural change process will stall, and that nobody else dares follow. Activist communities are more powerful than government of any form ...”

I suggest the WRC (more importantly, the Wellington regional community) could benefit considerably by studying and applying these messages.

Recommendation

That the report be received.

Cr Terry McDavitt