**ALGWA – VICTORIAN BRANCH.**

**9th STATE CONFERENCE**

**HELD AT CAMBERWELLCIVIC CENTRE,**

**29th – 30th MARCH 1974**

Extract of Proceedings by Cr. Helen Harris OAM, 2013.

Theme: *Is Local Government Necessary*?

Attendance: 130.

Motion tabled: That this Organisation write to the Minister for Local Government, asking him to introduce at least one year’s full-time training for municipal clerks and engineers.

The following resolutions were passed by the Executive, for ratifying at the next general meeting:

1. That building supervision fees be raised to realistic levels relating to operating and service costs.
2. That this Association strongly supports the concept of multi-use of community facilities, eg sporting club rooms, church halls, schools etc., when practical.
3. That the Municipal Association be requested to co-ordinate a list of available sources of financial assistance from the State and Federal Governments and non-government sources, (eg charitable trusts) to assist local councils, clubs and organisations.
4. That Local Government, while accepting the responsibility of initiating and administering social welfare programmes, believes these programmes must be funded by State and Federal Governments.
5. That we recommend to the Federal Government that legislation be implemented for per capita payments on a known and consistent basis, and that they be paid directly to municipal revenue by and through the State Government without conditions, and that a further needs grant be allocated.
6. That the Council of Adult Education or similar bodies, be asked to run seminars on Local Government for interested members of the public and or intending candidates.
7. The Association supports the concept that all Council meetings be open with the exception of discussions of a personal or legal nature.
8. That a fifteen minute period be allowed at each Council meeting for questions on notice from the gallery. The person concerned will be required to be there.
9. That compulsory voting be introduced in all Council Elections by all who are entitled to vote under the Local Government Act.
10. That this Organisation wrote to the Municipal Association, asking it to suggest to all Councils that agendas (other than sections to be handled in camera) be made available to the public three full days before Council meetings.
11. That this Organisation encourages the publication of Councillors’ names, addresses, telephone numbers and occupations for ratepayers’ guidance.

The mayor of Camberwell, Cr Dorothy Laver, welcomed delegates and introduced the State President, Cr Gracia Baylor. The President also welcomed delegates, mentioned the involvement of the Jaycees in the Conference, and advised that, among the items in a kit being given out, was a packet of aspirins. She hoped that the delegates wouldn’t have to use the whole packet over the weekend. She felt that the theme was ‘provocative and somewhat controversial as Local Government moves into an era of change’. As well as more women Councillors, the Association would also like to see more women involved in the administration side of Local Government; the only two qualified women Town Clerks were in the audience, ‘why not a woman engineer?’

Hon. Alan Hunt officially opened the Conference and declared that local government matters should never be determined on [political] party lines. He paid tribute to the Commonwealth government for raising issues in local government that had not been tackled in the past, and quoted the Premier who had stated that the true role of municipalities was to serve people not property. He concluded ‘there is not a Council which has not been enriched by the presence of a woman Councillor’.

Ms J. Wilmoth of the Dept of Urban and Regional Development, assured delegates that her department had no wish to usurp the State and local bodies which were dealing with problems in urban and regional matters, but rather was involved in works of major importance, and planning a national urban and regional development strategy, which would take a long-term view of the placement of people and economic activities. They were preparing an Australia wide information database on local government, the first time this had been done, and the data will be available to interested parties. They were also preparing a Local Government Information Booklet, which would list the ways local government could access available funds from the Commonwealth. For the first time the Grants Commission is being extended to local government, to provide direct financial assistance.

She pointed out that

What is available locally and within walking distance is of less importance than it used to be … but it must be remembered that for a very large number of people in our society, this mobility is limited, and this is particularly true for women … local authorities must be most responsible of all to the needs of women in the community. … It is the woman who is usually closest to the lack of essential services – schools, hospitals, parks and recreation opportunities. It is the woman in the community who notices and suffers from many of the things that a local planner could have remedied with some foresight. For example, the steps up to the railway station that have to be manipulated with a baby carriage. There is no one better able than a woman to comment on the frequency of public transport between peak hours. … she may be particularly disadvantaged if there are no employment opportunities available locally, especially if there is no part-time employment. … women are no longer content to remain in a passive role. Women are very active … in community action … only a short step to direct involvement in local politics. …women who are involved in local politics are truly ‘professional’ politicians.

Cr Ian Beaurepaire and Cr Peter Heercy both spoke on ‘Are rates necessary?’ The former gave the historical background to using a rating system, going back many hundreds of years, to both ancient Chinese civilization and the Roman period. Rates are to provide services, but increasingly they are insufficient, and government grants are used to supplement the income necessary to provide the required services. He compared the amount of money local government raised with Federation taxation, stating that the former was equal to 6% of the total taxation base, and saw no alternative to the use of rates as a funding source. The second speaker felt that local government should look beyond the traditional method of raising finance and spoke on the use of a poll tax or differential rates.

Richard Malone, secretary of the Carlton Association, spoke on ‘How do you communicate with your Council?’ The association was formed in 1969 by dissatisfied residents.

It is well known that the Melbourne City Council is dominated by a political gerrymander with ward boundaries based on the old property plural voting system which ensures that the central business district controls the Council. … property and business interests control our destiny and their paramount interest is commercial gain rather than the genuine interest of the residents. The laws of libel … forbid me giving specific examples but it is public knowledge that councillors have enriched themselves with prior information of important planning decisions. … The only way you will ever make an institution constantly sensitive to the needs of the electorate is the power of the ballot box …

He gave a history of the Association and its activities, including opposition to the Housing Commission’s slum clearance plans, the Commonwealth Games village plan and the alienation of land from Princes Park. He concluded that it was

a classic case history of a Council getting completely out of touch with the feelings of their electorate. If there was a democratic means of election and more councillors with some idea of the aspirations of the people they are supposed to care for, this disgraceful state of affairs would never have arisen in the City of Melbourne.

Mrs. Claire Atkins of the Hawthorn Association also spoke on the same issue. Communication was a two way business that depended on trust, tolerance and respect.

Councillors are not public servants, they are people who, generally for the purest of motives, have undertaken to manage and manipulate the municipality and its resources for its own good. They wrestle with the complexities of Local Government on a part-time, voluntary basis, dealing with all the problems to the best of their ability. Criticism from ratepayers who do not know the full facts of a situation, may well be resented. … On the other hand, if Councillors think that they suffer from vexatious criticism from people … it is perhaps their fault. Too many Council decisions are made with unnecessary secrecy. Why are so many Council decisions made behind closed doors? … At best this secrecy encourages apathy among ratepayers and prevents individuals and organisations within the community from volunteering useful specialist knowledge to Council. Why is it that Councillors do not like working in the public eye? Is it perhaps that they are amateurs without the confidence that a professional has in his own field? Councillors must all start as amateurs and most become very professional through hard work and experience, they have nothing to fear from exposure. A minority remain in office for years, determinedly ignorant and obstructive to all except their pet schemes, unable to distinguish between the Local Government Act and a bus ticket. The municipality would benefit from their exposure. They are fortunately a dying race. … Communication is a two way business and every avenue should be explored.

Delegates attended a tree planting ceremony in the Fordham Gardens, where a native tree was planted by the Association as an appreciation to the Council, for providing the facilities to hold the conference. A bronze plaque was mounted beneath the tree.

The Conference Dinner at Dennis House, Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn was attended by 175 guests. The guest speaker was Elizabeth Reid, adviser to the Prime Minister on Women’s Affairs. She spoke on ‘The role of women in public life’.

There is a wealth of contradictory clichés oft-repeated by politicians, researchers and bar-room sociologists, as to why women vote the way they do. Women, they say, are personality voters, that is they vote for the candidate with the sexy smile or the fatherly air. … Women, they say, vote as their men tell them to do. … Women, they say, are innately conservative voters. (She went on to elaborate on each of these claims.)

Women are the great politically unreached: rarely do they participate in political opinion, rarely are they appealed to by the political parties. … Political interest and understanding must begin at a very early age: too few girls in our society are actively interested in politics. … Daytime television could be an effective means of bringing political discussion into the lives of the women at home. Unfortunately, at present it is little more than an insult to the intelligence of the daytime viewer. …

Local government has an important role to play in this matter, both in itself and as a training ground for women to go on to other political positions. The fact that almost every Council decision vitally affects every woman in the community is a strong reason for them to participate in the decision making. … Women must begin to take on the responsibilities and duties involved in being full members of the community. …The requirement for local councils are intelligence, common sense and a willingness to take part in community affairs. Women have these attributes equally with men. Why then are there so few women in local government? Since 1920 when women first became eligible to participate in local government, there have only 715 women councillors and of these only 4 have gone on to be elected to state parliament and not a single one has been elected to the Federal parliament. More generally we must ask the question why women have been excluded from all levels of political power and office. … What particular difficulties do women face if they want to stand for election? There is of course, a widely accepted place for women in political life: behind, or if they are lucky, beside their husband politicians. Few women in our society are financially independent and a major stumbling block for women wanting to stand for office is obtaining the money necessary … There are many women more than capable of holding public office who are excluded just because they cannot afford it. Perhaps we women should establish a fund to help finance the campaigns of women standing for election.

The skills needed to gain pre-selection or to be elected are just those skills which society rarely gives to women. Candidates must be articulate, self-confident, decisive and able to take the initiative. Women, however, are often consciously or sub-consciously required to have a further attribute: they must be flawless, the perfect person. … The prejudice which a woman candidate encounters and needs to overcome are all-pervasive. …

She concluded her speech by urging women to stand for election. ‘If women were to enter politics, the structure of politics would change and the world of politics would be better for it. This is the present responsibility of women both as electors and as elected.’