



# Progressive partnership paramount in post-election period

*Local government plays a key role in reflecting and representing the democratic rights of New Zealand communities – local, personal, and usually far removed for its citizens from the big and distant world of central government and its bureaucracies*



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From experience, it is a rare central government that understands the key role that local government plays in the good governance of our society. My primary election wish list item is for a government that genuinely views local government as a 'partner', albeit recognising that the local partner will always be the junior in this relationship.

The key is for both 'partners' to respect one another in this relationship, to understand the needs and drivers of each other, and to have genuine dialogue on the myriad of opportunities that could be realised by active collaboration.

Based on a partnership of government, my second wish item is for a more strategic approach to the reform of local government. The current approach to local government reform, for which there is a good case for review, lacks a principle-based approach.

This is unlike the reforms of 1989, where there was a clear set of principles, and a good understanding of the outcomes to be achieved. Such an approach should address the need to retain and enhance local representation, but also review functional reform.

A review of functions should include those of central government

that could be undertaken by or alongside local government, and the key functions of transport, water and waste water and planning that should be agglomerated at a regional scale.

I have written before about the need for the transport and roading function of NZTA and local government to be aligned and potentially operated together at a regional level. Likewise, and to drive effectiveness and derive effective outcomes, there is an urgent need to reform the water and waste water industry along the lines of the vertically integrated and corporatised Watercare model in Auckland. Resource Management policy functions, as well as bylaws, should equally be undertaken on a regional basis. Their administration can be undertaken at a more local level.

Suitably armed with a set of guiding principles, the Local Government Commission should be asked to review the whole of local government in New Zealand. My wish list includes a comprehensive look at local government, rather than a piecemeal approach.

There is a conversation being had around funding lines for local government. This is useful, but could be enhanced by an analysis of

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what central government activities, such as levies for fire, earthquakes and emergency services, could be managed through local government financial processes.

A review of local government funding should be aligned with governance structures that should come out of functional reform. A Watercare model, funded through user pays would greatly reduce the annual debate around rating increases, as well as deliver efficiencies and enhanced environmental outcomes. An 'integrated' NZTA/local government approach to transport would create an opportunity for shifting the roading burden from rates onto other funding models.

A third wish is for local government to be more active in the commercial

and economic space. Local government has a very large property base, by way of example, that should be utilised to maximise its economic return. There are significant opportunities to work in partnership with the private sector, iwi, and with the Crown in this space. The opportunity, done well, is to greatly enhance the balance sheet of local government.

My fourth wish is for central and local government to actively partner relevant activities in the community development and social space. There are good models operating across New Zealand, including shared community safety programmes, but much more could be achieved.

My final wish for local government is for it to be more confident about itself. As stated, local government plays a critical role in our democracy, is more responsive to day-to-day concerns that impact on citizens than central government, and by and large provides good public services.

But it can do much better. It should be much more open to reform, to lead the agenda on such key issues, without waiting for the central government to take the 'stick' to its activities. Delivery of functions such as water and waste water services, by way of example, should be governed by local government but it doesn't have to be delivered individually or by 'in house' operations.

So let's see what happens in September and beyond. Hopefully, we will see a genuine partnership between the two levels of government, both committed and unafraid to reviewing and reforming the functions that could, and should, be delivered either at a regionalised level, or delivered together.

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