



City's lost chance

Keith FAGG



Former Mayor of Geelong

UNDER the tangelo-toned, panelled ceiling of our Library's dome and following the powerful tones of Norm Stanley's didgeridoo, the future structure of local government in Geelong's was cast.

We will return to a council-elected mayor and be divided into four new super wards.

By the State Government accepting the Geelong Citizen's Jury's substantive recommendations, our local government structure is once again aligned with all other councils in Victoria except for the City of Melbourne.

There is much to like about the New Democracy Foundation's deliberative democracy approach in engaging citizen juries to consider weighty community issues.

According to the foundation's Ian Walker, jurors were selected after an expression of interest period and then chosen by a "random stratified process" to align with the demographics of our community.

"Was this result always preordained?" remains the \$64 question of some sceptics of the approach. However, from my engagement with jury members during the session when I was asked to present my experience and views, they seemed highly engaged and genuinely open to all possibilities.

The opportunities the directly elected mayor model could deliver for Victoria's second city were, in reality, never given a chance due in large measure to an inadequate

structure, as hindsight has proven.

Minister Natalie Hutchins said she wanted to "get the model right" — a widely shared aspiration — but recognised there was "no silver bullet" that would solve this tricky conundrum. True.

Lifting her hand high, the minister said there is a "major mismatch" in people's expectations of a mayor and — lowering her hand to the floor — what they can actually do. So true.

She argued that by taking the recommendation process "away from bureaucrats and consultants", the result could theoretically have more credibility and demonstrates "people power shining brightly". In reality, there is a need to listen to both.

The jury's major debate on the election of mayor — direct vote or council — apparently went for five hours, with the result swinging in the balance for most of that time.

Yet, notwithstanding the jury's recommendations, it was a tad disappointing that Ms Hutchins did not take the opportunity on the day to articulate the rationale for the Government's decision. The audience was largely captive and would have expressed support if she had promulgated the case.

Nor was there any rationale — in her words nor within the supporting booklet — about why four larger wards are better for Geelong than an undivided municipality. This in itself

is a very major change and deserved to be explained and justified.

A much greater disappointment was the Government's failure to bite the bullet on mandatory training for prospective council candidates before they are allowed to

stand. The stated excuses of funding restrictions and lack of time for required legislative changes simply do not wash.

For Greater Geelong, the cost would be minuscule in the context

of council's budget and the pay-back period short. Those seeking to govern an organisation of the scale and complexity of CoGG must have appropriate competencies and know the legislative and civic responsibilities they will be actually required to fulfil.

Many changes need to be made in the City of Greater Geelong Act to have the jury's recommendations passed by Parliament. Mandatory training could still among them.

Geelong's next council election — whenever it is held — could be a pilot for such training, enabling trialling before incorporated into a new Local Government Act.

I am sure such a requirement would save Ms Hutchins and her successors in the portfolio significant future grief. There is nothing to be lost but much potentially to be gained.

I feel for Minister Hutchins. Local Government in Victoria is, with few exceptions, in somewhat of a mess at the governance level. The issues raised and aspirations recommended through the Geelong jury process should give the Minister substantial ammunition in her welcome intention to overhaul and modernise the Local Government Act.