

2002 TAMS - IPWEA CONFERENCE ULVERSTONE. TASMANIA.

Keynote Address. Brian Duthie. – Friday November 8th. 2002.

Introduction:

Thank you for the introduction, and the invitation to address this Conference. I really count it as an honour to be invited, and a privilege to be back here in Ulverstone where I spent most of my working life, and also to be in this theatre complex because of my involvement in its development.

As has been said, I left Tasmania about four years ago to settle in the 'north island'. It is interesting that the theme of this conference highlights "people" because that was the primary reason for our re-settlement on the mainland. Our four children had left Tassie to further their respective careers, and thus our nine grandchildren are also 'mainlanders'. The older you get, the more important personal and family relationships become, and we valued the opportunity to cultivate and grow those relationships, particularly with our grandchildren, above the genuinely magnificent lifestyle that Tasmania offers. The decision was not easy, but I can truthfully say that we have not regretted the move - despite the often "rat-race" nature of life in the 'big smoke'.

We live at Narre Warren on the outer south east fringe of Melbourne, in the City of Casey. Casey is east of the City of Dandenong, on the Princes Highway. In terms of local activity and growth, our situation couldn't be more different from Ulverstone, or for that matter, from Tassie generally. The City of Casey has the highest population growth in Victoria, and the third highest in Australia. Over the past year, an average of eighty new homes were completed and occupied every week! Areas near us that were open grazing land when we moved three and a half years ago, are now (literally !) wall-to-wall houses. Private enterprise development, and public infrastructure works are prolific. The Narre Warren CBD, dominated by the Westfield Fountain Gate Shopping Centre, is the commercial hub of Casey. Westfield has spent around \$200m. trebling its size, and incorporating 10 Village Cinemas, over the past two years. A Myer Megamart and K-Mart Super Garden Centre are currently under construction. Bunnings Hardware and similar large retailers are established, along with a multitude of small shops selling everything under the sun. I estimate that the floor space, and variety of retail development within the area, and only a km. from our home, would exceed that of greater Launceston. At Berwick - a couple of km. to our east - work is about to commence on the Casey Community Hospital containing 230 beds. Over the hill behind our home is a new Primary School opened last year, alongside another sub-regional shopping centre also built last year. The Casey ARC (Aquatic Recreational Centre) was opened by the Council just over a year ago at a cost of \$18m. Road and traffic infrastructure by Federal, State and Local Government is under construction wherever you look. The \$185m. Hallam By-Pass, which links the Monash Freeway to the Princes Freeway at Berwick, is well advanced and due to open next year. And so it goes on and on. Of course, the fact that a state election is imminent, and electoral boundaries have recently been amended to accommodate the exploding population - making some seats unpredictable - helps greatly in the distribution of public projects funding!

I read in the local paper recently (we get three free community newspapers each week) that total rateable property values in Casey have risen by 40% in the past 2 years. My property hasn't quite made that figure but I'm more than happy with its appreciation!

But, as I said at the outset, the proximity and accessibility of family, and the value of people relationships, is the source of our real satisfaction and contentment.

It comes as a bit of a sobering shock, that local government engineering in Casey seems to flourish without any input from yours truly ! My input these days is purely of the “sidewalk” variety. I just watch with interest. I am impressed with the quality of subdivisional development. The new housing estates are well planned and designed, attractive, and fully developed parks and community facilities are incorporated. Blocks however are quite small and homes large, so a high proportion are double storey. The vast majority are project homes. In terms of public works on the wider scale, I guess one of the things that has interested me is the standard of temporary works that are undertaken. Throughout the course of the Hallam By-Pass construction, there have been many temporary roadworks necessary to keep the huge volumes of traffic flowing where existing roads cross and join the freeway route. Some are in use for only a week or so, while others may carry traffic for several months, but these pavements are built as though they were meant to be permanent. Even to the extent of kerbs and channels, and hot-mix or concrete footpaths in many places! Two-way flow (often multiple lanes) is always provided - no ‘lollipop’ signs or signalised tidal flows here!

But to conclude this part of my address, let me say that there is life after engineering! My day is vastly different from what it was four years ago, but it is certainly no less interesting and fulfilling. So to those of my colleagues who are about to retire - or should be retiring - as the ‘Nike’ ads say - just do it!

But to get to the topic:

People and projects - its an intriguing title ? I note that it is ‘projects’ rather than ‘programs’. Whether intentional or not, that difference, I believe, distinguishes the science (of engineering) from the arts. In academic language, the ‘hard’ disciplines from the ‘soft’.

Before I deal with that title however, I understand that there was an earlier proposal that the theme be “back to basics”. I’d like to dwell on that title for a few moments first.

What does ‘back to basics’ mean? Does it, or should it, mean “reversal of change”? I don’t think so, or at least I hope not. While all change is not necessarily for the better, it is a fallacy to believe that change can, or even should, be reversed. Success lies in adapting and accommodating change. Of course, initiating change, provided it is for the better, is even more personally successful.

Does ‘back to basics’ mean a ‘return to the past’?. Again I suggest not. I would hate to go back to 7 figure logarithms or slide rules, tee squares and set squares, Gestetner duplicating machines and the like! The past should be a springboard into the future, not an anchor to tradition. That is not to say that tradition is necessarily bad, it needs to be respected for what it is - a practice that was meaningful, important and profitable in its time - but traditions need to be evaluated in the context of today, in order to determine their relevance to the present time.

No, to get ‘back to basics’ is, I believe, to reflect on fundamental values and aims.

At the risk of being somewhat kindergarten, I plan to use an acrostic of the letters of the word basics - B-A-S-I-C S

B - stands for 'back yourself'. Operate with confidence and courage, promoting the unique aspects of public works engineering design and execution. Your profession and occupation embraces not only practical issues, but also economics, aesthetics, administration, management, environment, and so on, but it still has a uniqueness that lies in the translation of dreams into reality, (to go back to my earlier distinction - to create projects - tangibles, that support programs - abstracts). In essence it is raw materials into systems and structures that perform efficiently and effectively, in order that citizens can go about their lives safely and enjoyably. So 'back yourself' - be bold and confident in what you do.

A - attitude. I've said that your contribution is unique, but that shouldn't translate into an arrogant or self-centered attitude. Recognition of the role of other disciplines is critical in achieving engineering success and satisfaction - both from a professional and personal point of view. Be a team player, but exhibit and promote your particular skills in such a way that they become indispensable and integral to the outcome.

S - simplicity. The Dictionary defines "simple" in such words as unmixed, credulous, and unadorned. In days gone by (whether "good old days" or "bad old days" is a matter of conjecture) engineering was largely uncomplicated by such issues as 'the environment', politics, dwindling resources, the ascent of economists, rationalists, lobbyists and so on. Lamenting such changes, and fighting such intrusions, will not lead to success or satisfaction in public works engineering or supervision. In any consideration of getting back to basics, we would do well to reflect on what is unmixed, unadorned and credulous about engineering *per se* and focus on that. In essence it is ingenuity in making things work.
--and that leads me into the next letter --

I - innovation. If you have been to the "Rotolactor" dairy near Smithton you will have seen the large sign erected by its proprietor - the founder of Lactos cheeses - Milan Vynalech:- It reads "*The loser says -we've always done it this way, the winner says - there must be a better way*" Innovation however can involve risk, perhaps more so in today's litigious climate than at any other time in history. It can be a very scary concept. But engineers and their colleagues have always been at the forefront of creativity and innovation in community infrastructure and operations. I do not profess to be an student of the history of liability litigation, but my observations of anecdotal material that has passed my way, seems to indicate that when engineers and their colleagues get into strife in liability cases, it is usually because they have been negligent in applying basic principles of engineering science, and in recognising their duty of care, than because they have tried something new or different - something innovative. Our training majors on evaluation of options using rational and logical processes, and if we apply these skills diligently to innovative ideas, we should not be frightened of them. Aim for perfection and excellence, but be aware that there is potential in every one of us to make mistakes. The old saying, "*If you have never made a mistake, you have never made anything*" is perhaps a bit trite but nevertheless probably true. I am attracted however, to a more profound and thought provoking quote (I'm sorry I don't know the author's name) "*every experiment has its value, and if it fails, that value is multiplied*" So be professionally innovative, cautious but not timid.

CS - common sense. A phrase that is tossed around freely but the thing itself is perhaps not very common! Unfortunately, concepts such as political correctness, anomalies in the legal system, well meaning anti-discrimination laws, and so on, sometimes mitigate against the application of common sense in the societal context. In engineering and its associated fields, however, common sense should not present a problem. It is defined in my Dictionary as plain wisdom, ordinary reason, uncomplicated rationality. Wisdom - the proper application of knowledge, reason - the proper justification of knowledge, and rationality - the proper application of logic, are fundamental aspects of engineering.

So, to summarise, getting back to basics involves boldness - backing yourself - having the courage of your convictions, adopting an attitude of positive contribution, being competitive without being conceited, utilising simple - i.e. credulous, unadorned - processes and proposals, being innovative - discarding timidity but observing high levels of duty of care, and applying common sense which has to do with genuine standards, values and principles.

Moving on to the advertised agenda of this Conference, 'People and Projects', I am impressed with the range of topics to be covered. You have presentations on issues of tourism, public health, asset management, road safety, personell, recreation, utilities, management, amenity - and tomorrow - environmental advances in the arena of power generation. The people presenting are male and female, and embrace a wide range of age and experience. The people who are or will be affected by these projects include visitors, residents, drivers, employees, householders, sports persons, children, and taxpayers. Thus the program very aptly fits the published theme - people and projects. For the remaining few minutes of my time slot, I want to metamorphose the title - people and projects - and think about the sort of issues and relationships conjured up by those transformations.

Firstly, 'people and projects' could be metamorphosed as "**humanity and habitat**" (I use the words in their broadest possible form.) Such an expression brings to the forefront the issues of safety, security and amenity. Several papers address those issues, and rightly so because local government has a fundamental role in the well being of the community. In this title format, emphasis is placed on the people you serve, and the way in which you enhance their quality of life. Never forget that public works are for the public. Take pride in what you do, but do not produce your work to be monuments to your cleverness.

Then again, the theme could be re-phrased as "**software and hardware**". People are the system, the drivers, - they operate the society, but without 'hardware' - the projects that you design and build - western society, as we know it could not function, and would degenerate into isolation, poverty and despair. This translation conjures up issues of communication, compatibility and technology. It thus focuses on the way we do things as distinct from the outcome or purpose for doing what we do. If we don't communicate effectively 'in-house', or to the public 'out-there', we will struggle to produce the requisite goods, and to receive appropriate recognition. Compatibility requires that we match projects to the requirements and resources of the community. That is where issues such as environment, economics, priorities, etc, are important.

As for technology, the pace is furious, the developments are mind-boggling, and the potential seems to be unlimited. But it is only a tool, and we do well to recognise this, and not allow it to submerge human intellect and intuition. The outputs of technology are simply information and facts that require diagnosis and evaluation, and not necessarily solutions in themselves.

People and projects could also be expressed in terms of “**ambition and achievements**”. Ambition is a human trait, while achievements in this context are invariably expressed in physical infrastructure or tangible operating systems. Here the title emphasis shifts to career issues and excellence. If you don’t consistently produce the goods, your chances of advancement are seriously diminished, if not scuttled completely. But achieving your ambitions does not depend entirely on technical ability. People skills are also very important. I feel that the common saying “climbing to the top” has the connotation of using others as stepping-stones or as rungs on a ladder. I prefer the concept of “leading from the front” which suggests treating others on an even plane. It also embodies the principle of taking others with you, and this involves gaining their confidence and respect. - if you don’t, you will likely find yourself out on your own while everyone else is behind someone else! In my view, it is a fallacy to believe that keeping knowledge, information or authority to yourself will somehow give you an advantage. The late Bob Gane - former long serving Council Clerk here at Ulverstone - was never afraid to train his staff to be capable of taking over his job, and his record of success, and the success of those he mentored, speaks for itself.

There are probably endless variations on the theme, but I’ll finish with just one more. People and projects could be transposed as “**politics and performance**”. This transposition highlights issues such as tactics and goals. Engineers and their colleagues are generally more at ease dealing with the nuts and bolts of activity, than with political agendas. In local government, it is easy to become cynical and disillusioned about council decisions that go against our plans and proposals, but if you can’t come to grips with these realities, then the public service is not the place for you. When I concluded my 40 years in local government, I estimated that I had served under around 100 different councillors. Thinking back over those numbers, I believe that I could count on the fingers of one hand, those elected members who were not sincere in their desire to serve the community to the very best of their ability. True, mixed up in all that, have been various sub-agendas, but recognition of where they are coming from, and respect for their opinion, will, in my experience, usually result in acceptable outcomes in the longer term. Be prepared to modify your proposals - but never your standards. It is better to live to fight another day, than to shoot yourself in the foot by displaying petulance and pique if your dream is rejected. Be careful that you do not win a battle at the expense of losing the war! Learn to distinguish the wood from the trees. Goals may not always be achieved at the first try. The road to success has many turns, but if the destination is worthwhile, it is also worth the journey. Detours can be surprisingly beneficial and enlightening. Sometimes they result in approaching the target from an entirely different direction.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to hearing the presentations to follow as this conference progresses, and to renew old relationships and make new ones.

An A4 summary sheet of this address is available for collection this morning. The full text is on disc for the Conference proceedings in due course.

Brian Duthie