



PRIME MINISTER

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVLERY

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF FREMANTLE TOWN HALL
16 NOVEMBER - PERTH

It's not often a Prime Minister gets the opportunity to open a building which is 99 years old. The Fremantle Town Hall was already a fairly venerable building when I was a boy in these parts - and I could never have guessed I would be involved in this official ceremony in 1986. So Mr Mayor, it was a great honour you did me when you extended your Council's invitation to be here today to open, or to be more precise, to reopen this marvellous building.

Fremantle Town Hall has seen this city grow from a small coastal port - less important, in fact, than the then bustling port of Albany - to its present status as the acknowledged western sea gateway to our great nation.

It is perhaps a commentary on the "Wild West" nature of Fremantle almost a century ago that the original opening of the Town Hall was attended by rather more drama than we want to see here today. In fact, someone shot one of the Councillors, a man by the name of Snook. The good Mr Snook may have spoken for too long, and I will bear that message well in mind today.

Earlier today I was involved in a ceremony to mark the commencement of the People's Day Program. The concept of People's Day is an inspiring one - a day of caring as a community.

It would be hard to think of a better example of community caring than the restoration of this Town Hall to its grace and beauty of a hundred years ago. We fully acknowledge the vision of the Fremantle Council in initiating and planning the project, and I can say with some pride that the Commonwealth Government contributed \$3.2 million to ensuring its completion. But in the final analysis the success of the restoration depended on the skill, experience, and dedication of individual craftsmen and workers. I understand that all sorts of problems were encountered as efforts were made to make the restoration as authentic as possible. What we see today is virtually the same sights, colours, and textures that greeted our forebears on that day in June 1887 when the populace of Fremantle turned up in their thousands to admire their new Town Hall.

And it is pleasant to note that the expectations of the people of Fremantle in regard to the quality of local government dispensed from their Town Hall were not disappointed. Fremantle has maintained, from its earliest days, an enviable standard of public service at the local government level - a standard still being met today.

For far too long, too little recognition has been given to the important role that local government plays in the administration and welfare of this country. Such cursory regard is hard to understand when one realises that local government, of the three spheres of Government, has the most immediate and obvious impact on the daily lives of many, perhaps most, Australians. Local government plays a key role in providing essential facilities and services at the grass roots level of Australian society. But for decades, local government could with justification have been called the poor relation of the public sector in Australia. When we were elected in 1983, we resolved to do our best to correct this situation.

Our first action was to establish the first Ministry for Local Government in 1983.

Since then we have expanded and developed the Commonwealth Office of Local Government. In contrast to its condition before 1983, it now has the resources and expertise to effectively advise the government on local government matters and to fight the local government cause within the Commonwealth bureaucracy.

We have backed our words of support for local government with funds. In the year just completed, 1985/86, the government provided over \$1 billion to local government - a level of 50% higher than in the last year of the Fraser Government.

And for this year we have taken steps to ensure that the key part of local government's funding from the Commonwealth - the Untied General Purpose Assistance Grants - is maintained in real terms. As a result, local government has been placed in a more advantageous position than the States, as was also the case in 1985/86.

In these times of economic difficulty and constraint, the new general purpose funding arrangements for local government represent a significant vote of confidence by my government in local government. The City of Fremantle will receive \$948,000 this year under these arrangements - an increase of 9.39% over last year's figure.

An important feature of the new financial assistance arrangements for local government is the way in which co-operation between the three spheres of government is fostered.

Under the new arrangements provision is made for all three spheres - local government, the states and the Commonwealth - to be involved in drawing up the principles that will determine the distribution of funds between councils in each state.

Another significant factor in encouraging greater co-operation between governments has been the introduction of the local government development program.

Under this program we have spent over \$11m since 1983 funding some 430 projects directly involving 327 councils, in all the States and the Northern Territory. These projects have concerned all aspects of local government activity, including the development of skills in management, planning, environmental improvement and service delivery.

The results of these projects are now becoming available and action is underway to disseminate the experience gained throughout the local government community. Priority will be given to this task in the year ahead.

Because of our recognition of the essential role played by local government we have taken other steps to strengthen and improve local government's position.

In last year's budget we introduced new arrangements to permit the deductibility for income tax purposes of expenses incurred in local government elections. This was a reform long overdue and brought the local government situation into line with that applying to State and Commonwealth elections.

We have taken steps to ensure that local government is represented at key national economic forums. The Australian Council of Local Government Associations is represented, for instance, on the Economic Planning Advisory Council and makes a valuable contribution to its work.

We have encouraged and assisted local government in its rightful claim to be included in the Australian constitution, supporting your representatives at the Constitutional Convention in Brisbane last year and ensuring that local government is adequately represented on the Constitutional Commission we established recently.

I am hopeful that firm recommendations will now come from the Constitutional Commission, enabling us to proceed to changes in the Constitution which will give local government proper recognition. There is no doubt in my mind that such recognition is long overdue.

We remain committed to supporting local government as the key area of the public sector in providing many essential community services. Its direct contact with the local community places it in a unique position to meet these vital tasks.

But I must not forget the reason for my invitation to be here today. Let me express the wish that the second century of local government in Fremantle will be at least as successful as the first. With that wish, I have pleasure in again declaring the Fremantle Town Hall open.
