

Notes from a Shaky Island

I am unashamedly a film buff and use movie quotes in my daily life wherever I can, much to the annoyance and bewilderment, sometimes, of those around me. So please bear with me as I recount my recent experiences during a manager exchange trip to New Zealand.

Have fun guessing which movies the quotes are from. Oh, and for those of you who don't know me, I'm an Australian who was born and raised in Yorkshire.

It was my first time travelling to the 'Shaky Islands', and there I was, not really knowing what to expect, from a cultural and work experience point of view, as the plane landed in Dunedin. I knew everyone drove on the same side of the road and spoke English (albeit swapping a few vowels here and there), so that seemed like a good start. My exchange partner, Susan Jones, is the HR Manager at Gore District Council in what they call the 'deep south' of the South Island. Susan visited me in Noosa in August but didn't really give me much insight as to what to expect. A couple of Kiwi friends and acquaintances I had spoken to prior to my trip only smiled wryly and looked sheepishly away (pun intended) when I told them where I was going.

Susan and I headed out of the airport into a blistering 5 degree day - this after leaving the Sunshine Coast where it was a glorious 32 degrees. We travelled through the countryside on our way to Gore and I looked at the vistas flying past me trying to take it in. My first impressions were of the grazing land, the sheep, (*Zulu's Sir, there's thousands of them*), lots of signs for gun clubs and the remarkable similarity with the UK and particularly Yorkshire! I could have been travelling through the country roads of Wensleydale (*I'll have a cracker with that cheese, thank you Gromit*).

Then Gore – a quiet rural town with, at its entrance, a huge fibre glass brown trout and a digital sign telling us the temperature had dropped even further. It seemed a place poised at a crossroad in contemplation of its future.

The Mayor and CEO confirmed my first impressions (after only mentioning the All Blacks recent victory a couple of times). They shared concerns about de-population, declining agricultural industries, the need to diversify, the need to increase tourism, the need to attract families to live in the district, the struggle to attract and retain staff, and the reducing funding from the central government due to a focus on the more metropolitan North Island and

Auckland in particular. (*Get busy living, or get busy dying*). The other thing I picked up, though, was resilience and the will to succeed. These are tough people.

Down to Invercargill for the next part of the trip. Another thing Kiwis are good at is welcoming you with a smile and great hospitality, and this was no different with Cameron McIntosh from the City Council (interestingly I don't think he mentioned the rugby once) as he showed me around some of the projects that were on the go in the town. We also went down to Bluff, which is as far south as you can get before hitting Antarctica (*I am going outside, I may be some time*). As we looked out to Stewart Island and the natural beauty all around us, which is a great tourism drawcard for the area, I once again saw signs of decline in the town below us and immense challenges for that Council too. Psst, did I say natural beauty? Don't turn around there's an aluminium smelter behind you.

What's that in the distance? *Is it a bird, is it a plane? No it's ...* a Town Crier. The start of the Gore Council Meeting commenced with a citizenship ceremony, where the Mayor and Town Crier welcomed six new people to the New Zealand community. I always enjoy these events, having been through one myself in Australia. The main differences I noticed with the Council Meeting though, were the inclusion of a personally delivered report from two representatives of the Youth Council, an ability to say 'Aye' on remarkably vague motions (which Susan had to interpret and document) and a late start – 7.45 pm, but finished by 10.30pm. Phew, it's been a long first day.

I found that one thing that the councils of the Southland do well, is collaborate and share resources. Gore, Southland and Invercargill district councils plus Environment Southland (the regional council) share services for regional strategy development, emergency management, health and safety, building control administration and waste recycling, and are exploring further opportunities such as finance. While digging for further information on one of these shared service arrangements I came across another Yorkshireman abroad, Angus McKay (yes, it was confusing him having a Scottish name) who heads up the Emergency Management shared service.

I told Angus that I was heading to Te Anau at the weekend and then up to Milford Sound. 'Mmmm...', Angus mused and then tells me that a rock fall at the Sound could trigger a 50 metre localised Tsunami, and that the Alpine fault running through there goes off like clockwork every 280 years and that we are currently sitting on 279 years!! (*The earth will literally crack*). Don't you just love people who live their lives anticipating the next disaster?

Susan's husband, Peter, is also a Councillor for Environment Southland, which provided me with yet another political viewpoint. The South Island is facing some big issues around the transition many farmers are making from sheep to dairy farming, and the negative impacts that this type of farming can have on the environment, in particular water quality. Another tricky environmental issue that they are having to deal with (and was on the agenda at the Gore Council Meeting) was air pollution from domestic coal burning fires. The debate at the moment is around the timing of their phase-out and how to resolve cost issues for poorer and disadvantaged families in changing over.

Te Anau, a small town on the outskirts of the Fiordland National Park, is Susan and Peter's weekend bolt hole. The country around there is awesome, with snow-capped peaks, huge vistas, enormous forbidding mountains - the power of nature at work. It was a stark contrast to the featureless farmland I had seen so far. A trip to Milford Sound (*deep into the tunnels under the Misty Mountain*) topped off the weekend with an amazing cruise along the Sound, surrounded by mountain peaks rising from the water to a height of nearly two kilometres. A rare sighting of a number of Fiordland Crested penguins (the world's rarest according to the guide) provided a lasting memory. The best thing was no Tsunamis or earthquakes – sorry Angus.

Oh well, back to work The theme of the Society of Local Government Managers (SOLGM) NZ Summit in Palmerstone North was "Leading for Tomorrow". I was struck by the international presence at the Summit. Two of us from Australia, two from the US including the current President of the ICMA, who also presented a couple of times, and another colleague from Canada. International guest speakers from Coventry City Council in the UK and Melbourne also provided great further global context.

My big takes from the Summit included 'Glocal' thinking - global trends applied in the local context, together with messages from the UK about dysfunctional innovation arising from huge policy shifts and financial reallocation. Another theme was systems leadership (CEO's letting go about decision making) developing out of the need for a different way of doing things. Other issues included the push for structural realignment in the US to meet changing community needs; the baby boomer time-bomb which is about to explode; and whilst there is a digital revolution happening, the need to ensure that it is used to engage, connect and support our communities – not be new toys for our tech-heads to play with without any thought about how they fit into overall strategy.

With this in mind, and then listening to what the conference speakers and delegates were saying, I came to the conclusion that Australian and NZ local government could be in danger of being too complacent. Why do I say this? Well, if you have apparent immunity from global recession (because of China), apparent immunity from financial shock (because of an existing high base of self-generated revenue) and the lack of fear of structural change (because we've been there, done that, haven't we?), then the changes that are rapidly occurring in the rest of the world will fall upon us like a sword, while we are looking the other way. I think we'd be better placed if we made an effort to better understand and embrace the global change occurring in government, in order to keep ourselves relevant (*Winter is coming*). The old ways of doing things will not continue to work for us.