

From IULA to UCLG - My Odyssey



CENTENARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL MUNICIPAL MOVEMENT
CENTENAIRE DU MOUVEMENT MUNICIPAL INTERNATIONAL
CENTENARIO DEL MOVIMIENTO MUNICIPAL INTERNACIONAL

By Jeremy Smith, Former Secretary General of IULA

I've never really had a career plan (except that I seem to do things for around 6 years), and going into local government was never part of that non-existent plan. It happened by chance in 1983 when I wrote articles attacking a decision by England's highest court to overturn a decision by the then Greater London Council to reduce public transport fares in the city. This seemed to me perverse and contrary to transport policy, and I ended up being taken on by the GLC as policy lawyer. This coincided with a huge political battle with Mrs Thatcher who decided to abolish the GLC, leaving London with no city-wide government. (A big mistake, as experience was to show). We had some wonderful legal battles, most of which we won, but she got her political way.

Soon after, I was honoured to be selected as Chief Executive of the London Borough of Camden, one of 32 boroughs in the capital responsible for most local services, and the next 6 years were the toughest of my working life, as we had to cut budgets savagely year after year, and totally reform the way the council was organised and delivered services. The CE is the head of administration, the interface between the elected politicians and the staff.

Time for personal renewal – and along came an advertisement in 1995 for the post of Director of the Local Government International Bureau, as successor to the highly competent Paul Bongers. I have always been an internationalist, involved in international human rights, and in my youth a dedicated hitch-hiker overland to India and across North America. The LGIB was the European and international arm of UK local government, and so I entered the world of international local government for the first time.

It was a great time to start. In the Spring of 1996, the UN's "City Summit" took place in Istanbul and adopted the Habitat Agenda for human settlements. At the same time, the World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities was held in Istanbul, and its final declaration called on the international associations of local government to co-ordinate themselves tightly, and then to unite. Great on paper, harder in reality to implement. Greater unity was essential if the voice of cities and local governments was to be stronger – but how?

My first experience of IULA was a World executive Committee (WEXCOM) in Santiago de Chile, hosted by IULA's President and Mayor of Santiago, Jaime Ravinet. It was an interesting time in Chile's post-Pinochet political life, and included a brief visit to the President of the Republic. But IULA seemed to me to lack focus and strategy. The Secretary General was Drew Horgan, a lovely and committed man who had many strengths, but not hard-edged management.

This was confirmed when I realised that colleagues in Metropolis and FMCU (whom I have grown to love and admire!) had effectively stitched up IULA in the proposals for the future WACLAC (World Associations of Cities and Local Authorities Co-ordination), which gave IULA – the oldest and broadest association – a weighting equal to that of continental associations. I got involved and we held some wonderfully stormy officer-level meetings in which I was a difficult dissenter. It was

clear to me that WACLAC could not – and should not – be seen as the answer to the problem of fragmentation.

Next stop, Mauritius, for IULA's 1997 Congress – its first ever "African" Congress. Norbert Burger, the Mayor of Cologne, Germany, was elected as successor to Jaime Ravinet. In his acceptance speech, IULA's new President shocked part of his audience by pledging to work towards unity with the FMCU-UTO (the other major generalist association). But at this point, IULA hit a financial crisis and the association's leadership felt it was time for a change of direction. I was asked by Norbert Burger from 1998 to take on the role of Interim Manager (effectively acting SG) for the next period. I met with Michel Bescond and FMCU officers, and Norbert Burger met with Daby Diagne, the new President of FMCU, and we opened negotiations in a formal way for the first time. My first meeting in my new IULA role was the IULA WEXCOM in Helsinki, when Selahattin Yildirim of IULA-EMME introduced us to the quiet and polite mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Alas, I have lost the pretty picture book of Istanbul he presented to me!

The moment I started with IULA, another issue came up – the membership of China's cities. A Capital Cities Forum had been established in embryonic form, and the offer of the City of Taipei to host the first conference had been agreed. I have nothing but admiration for Taipei, who have always played a positive role in IULA, but I can see a political problem when it jumps at me. It was in the interests of IULA and of world local government, in my view, to bring the Chinese cities into our organisation. We could not afford to be side-tracked into a dispute over the definition of capital cities. So I instructed our team member who went to Taipei to block any final declaration which could raise this issue. The City and its Mayor were not happy, and I felt bad about this. But it was necessary. In the Asia Pacific region, Peter Woods had done a great deal to prepare the ground in China for their future involvement.

In 1999, we held a great IULA Congress in Barcelona, back to back with the Metropolis congress. The city were great hosts, and I enjoyed working with Margarita Obiols and her team, with the strong backing of Mayor Joan Clos. I feel the Declaration we adopted there still sums up most the key points about the role of cities and local governments in today's world.

Also in Barcelona on this occasion, the IULA WEXCOM, after a long and tense debate, admitted the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries to membership. Another important meeting there (organised by CEMR) saw the Palestinian and Israeli associations co-sign a short cooperation memorandum, moderated by CEMR's President Giscard d'Estaing.

There followed 6 long years of negotiations with FMCU, to prepare for the coming of United Cities and Local Governments. I feel that the birth of UCLG was something of a miracle. Everyone could see the logic of unification – we had two smallish international associations with inadequate resources to play the global role that was needed, or to exercise the level of influence required. IULA and FMCU in part complemented each other geographically, and in part competed with each other.

But culturally and linguistically, the two associations were far apart, and it has been a long road to bring these two traditions together. History and geopolitics were also important – prior to the end of the Cold War, broadly speaking FMCU was a bit more to the left, IULA a bit more to the right. But after 1989, none of this seemed relevant any more. More important perhaps was IULA's concentration on national associations of local government, compared to FMCU's base in individual towns and cities. This made the issue of unification more complex.

In 1999, Jacques Jobin became Secretary General of IULA, and Max Ng'andwe of Zambia the President. Jacques was absolutely committed to the cause of local government and has a great track record – but it soon became clear that he (and the President) were ill at ease with the proposed merger. This led to some extraordinarily difficult WEXCOM meetings, with big arguments and divisions over big and small issue to do with unification. The unifying factor was the dislike of

WACLAC, and IULA's decision to withdraw from it was only deferred in order to keep the negotiations with FMCU on the road (WACLAC was seen as positive by FMCU and Metropolis). In a vague way, all IULA members were in principle in favour of unification. It just happened that for some members, no possible ways to achieve it were acceptable!

The culmination of the debates came in Merida, Mexico in 2000 – a truly memorable WEXCOM. We were even given the welcome surprise of an unannounced visit and address by the President of the Republic, Ernesto Zedillo! But it was in Merida that the future of UCLG (still unnamed) hung by the slenderest of threads. A resolution was proposed by the admirable Don Borut (Executive Director of the National League of Cities, USA) to put an end to the negotiations. It was clearly supported by the President and Secretary General. I was the opposer of his motion. I made the strongest speech I was capable of in favour of continuing the unification process. The vote took place the next day, with tales of telephone conversations to delegates in the middle of the night from far off places, lobbying this way or that. And when the vote came, Don's motion was voted down – by just one vote.

Despite the narrowness of the vote, and the underlying but divergent passions expressed in debate IULA's membership honoured the decision with discipline and tenacity – and from that moment the ultimate goal was not really questioned, though tying down the details took years more, with endless negotiating meetings on statutes, representation, voting, finances, policies, future seat, first Congress...

In 2001, the supposed Unity Congress was held in Rio, but the actual steps forward there were modest. In Rio, IULA elected Alan Lloyd (Wales, UK) as next President with, in effect, a mandate to complete the unification process. Jacques Jobin resigned, given his personal disagreement with the political direction, and so I was asked once again to take on the role of acting Secretary General (I should add that at all stages I still had my full-time job with the LGIB, and later with CEMR, so the work for IULA was a nice unpaid add-on!)

One by one, we ticked off the issues that need resolving, in a series of Joint Executive Sessions in different cities. The seat – Barcelona was chosen by secret ballot over Geneva . The first Congress – Paris was chosen. The Statutes – these two were finally agreed after terrible problems defining the respective voting rights of associations as against individual cities... and after debating the size of the governing bodies which many IULA members thought were too large to be effective. The hardest issue related to finances, since it was necessary to avoid the risk of old losses falling on the new organisation (thanks here to Jim Knight, IULA's budget boss). And finally, but essential, there were the staffing issues – transfers of existing staff, election of the next Secretary General.

In the event, Elisabeth Gateau was finishing her term of office as Secretary General of CEMR, and was chosen after a wide search for candidates as UCLG's first. Being Secretary General of an international local government is no easy task, and Elisabeth's huge experience and political understanding were great assets in the start-up years. The Paris Congress, with over 3000 attending, was a huge success – I felt a mixture of pride and a little sadness since it meant the end of an era for me. I have the satisfaction of knowing that the existence of UCLG is to a fair degree due to the role I played over the 8 long and intensive years from Istanbul to Paris.

I must give thanks to a few key people along the road to founding UCLG. Especially to Norbert Burger, who sadly died last year, whose tales of life as a boy in bombed-out Germany illustrated for me why working for peace must remain a paramount task. To Alan Lloyd, the last President of IULA, a grass-roots internationalist, with some 50 years as elected councillor, and to Mercedes Bresso, the last President of FMCU. They together made sure, as Presidents, that tough issues were resolved. To Michel Bescond, the SG of FMCU at the start of the process, and a good negotiating partner, and later Paolo Morello. On the IULA side, far too many to mention by

name...but thanks in particular to the staff team, and to Heikki Telakivi who was always ready to help.

A few other points to mention. We helped to build a positive partnership with UN Habitat, though the goal of obtaining international agreement to a World Charter of Local Self-Government was ultimately blocked. In 2001, I was in Nairobi for the Governing Council meeting, and spoke on behalf of local authorities, in favour of a Charter or similar text, seeking (I thought) to allay fears from national governments. A moment later, I was subject to a verbal attack in response by the US representative of President Bush's government! I took this as an honour. I was put on the drafting committee; the same gentleman challenged my right to speak, but I was also a member of the UK delegation so allowed to take an active part!

After great trouble keeping the representatives from Egypt, China, Iran and the USA on board, we finally agreed a text on taking forward 'dialogue' on strengthening local authorities and decentralisation, which in 2007 led finally to the adoption of the (under-used) UN Guidelines on Decentralisation and Strengthening of Local Authorities.

In May 2002 I became Secretary General of CEMR, under the Presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and then Michael Häupl, Mayor of Vienna. Until the end of 2004, I was still also acting SG of IULA, including preparation of Paris, and responsible for the formal winding-up of IULA. We also formed the new European section of UCLG, which itself was complex, given the importance of the French contribution to UCLG, but also given the internal French politico-organisational sensitivities – one had to walk on institutional egg-shells without damaging them.

I finally finished all my formal mandates at the start of 2010, when I left CEMR after nearly 8 years – and after 15 years since I first became Interim Manager of IULA. They were great years, often exasperating, but always with the bigger goal of ensuring that the international community and our member states understand the essential role of cities and local governments in today's world. I was therefore happy to have been asked to help in 2010 to draft UCLG's Manifesto for the City of 2030; and glad too to see that this is referred to, if only in a footnote, in the UN-sponsored Report of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (May 2013).

I am therefore specially privileged to have been part of the leadership of the International Union of Local Authorities, the last direct successor of founding father and long-term inspirer of IULA, Emile Vinck. I am confident he would have shared our vision of creating UCLG as amore united voice for local government. He was never afraid to form, re-form, find a new seat, or whatever it took – with the sole goal of getting local governments organised to learn from each other across frontiers, and to have a positive impact on international decision-making. I wish UCLG well in preparing for the next 100 years.