By Jeremy Smith, Former Secretary General of IULA

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. 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, 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.

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. 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.

The culmination of the debates came in Merida, Mexico in 2000 – a truly memorable WEXCOM. 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. And when the vote came, Don’s motion was voted down – by just one vote.

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. 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.

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. 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 am confident he would have shared our vision of creating UCLG as a more united voice for local government. I wish UCLG well in preparing for the next 100 years.

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100 years

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