

YOUNG NELA LAUNCH

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by

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Good evening. Thank you for your invitation to help launch this new organisation, Young NELA. May I begin by quoting one of the great opening paragraphs of a book:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to Heaven, we were all going the other way."

It comes from *The Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens set in the time of the French Revolution, but is possibly equally descriptive of the crossroads we stand at today in terms of our lifestyle and the environment.

The difficulty is that this crossroads is in fact a very large intersection, which metaphorically will take several changes of lights to get across. It is beset by roundabouts with multiple confusing exits, which must be navigated.

It is unlikely that you have chosen to join Young NELA without a commitment to the good that you may do in your professional lives to protect, repair and improve that nebulous thing we term 'the environment'. Along the way there will be opportunities for socialising, networking and learning. But above all, I hope Young NELA offers you an opportunity to focus some of the great potential, which collectively you all possess, to make a contribution to our times and to the future of our environment.

How you do that will vary. Some of you will find yourselves working for large resource companies; others for community or government organisations. Some of you may appear before courts, tribunals or panels; some of you may find yourselves sitting on such bodies. Whatever path your career takes, an interest in and commitment to good planning and environmental outcomes will be a worthwhile goal to pursue.

I had no idea of where my actions might lead me when my latent interest in the environment led me to first become involved with planning in the 1970's. I had recently moved to Macedon and in no time I was contacted by the local community activist to lend my weight to an objection to a permit application for six units on a small block of land covered in gum trees and bisected by a drainage line. There was no sewerage then, only septic tanks. There was no way that effluent could be contained on the allotment

and this was a water catchment. I got involved because I didn't think it was a very good idea. Ultimately, we were able to persuade the council of this too and the permit was refused.

Attempts to prevent other such inappropriate developments and the wholesale subdivision of Macedon and Mt Macedon led me to stand for council. My election tipped the balance of numbers. At my first council meeting, we moved to abandon the previously adopted planning scheme, which would have precipitated the destruction of the local bush environment, which the community so valued, and voted to prepare a new planning scheme based on the principles of the newly adopted Statement of Planning Policy for the Macedon Ranges.

This was my introduction to planning and the environment. It led on to a term of 7.5 years on the council, concluding just prior to the Ash Wednesday bushfires. That led to my involvement with the Macedon Ranges Reconstruction Advisory Committee. I became a sessional panel member and a sessional member of the then Planning Appeals Board. As my children grew, my work became full-time, culminating in my role as Chief Panel Member of Planning Panels Victoria and now as a Deputy President of VCAT and Head of the Planning and Environment List.

Concerns for the environment have always motivated my decision-making, although my understanding of what 'the environment' encompasses has grown well beyond my initial concerns of simply caring for trees and being concerned about water quality in catchments, important though those things are. Rather, it is the intersection of our urban environment with the natural environment that has brought us to the crossroads I referred to before.

My early experiences in Macedon led me to the view that simply objecting to things was not as productive as finding positive solutions. I have always sought to find solutions through my various decision-making roles. I like to think I have made a contribution to improving environmental outcomes. Whilst there have been some landmark cases, it is the cumulative impact of many smaller decisions that ultimately make the biggest difference. This is why it is so important that all decision-making be imbued with sound principles.

Young NELA offers you opportunities to advance your practice and improve your professional skills. According to its mission statement, it also seeks to provide opportunities to participate in the development of environmental law and policy. Your willingness to influence the future in this way is very important. The cumulative application of passion and principle by people such as yourselves is essential if we are to navigate the crossroads.

As a nationwide network of young environmental practitioners and students I think Young NELA has a lot to offer you, its members, and you in turn have a lot to offer the future.