150 years ago this year Dunedin’s first mayor and Council were elected. Since then, there have been a total of 57 mayors. Seems a lot but those up until the 1st World War only served one year terms.

But first a little context and contrast between Dunedin around the 1860s and now. It took the settlers of 1848 on the Philip Laing and the John Wycliffe some 4 months to get from Britain to NZ.

What would they make of a modern Gigatown Dunedin? The whole concept of communication, in a heartbeat, and not just voice but full visual presence in real time - to the other side of the world they had spent 4 months sailing from. In those intervening 150 years, the world has gone from windpower, ink and paper and candlelight - to electricity, megapixels and jet travel.

Even in the 50 years to 1900, which is the period I intend to cover, so much changed.

The new settlement dating from 1848, at first appeared to be developing in a manageable, steady but slow fashion - until, that is, Gabriel Read, and others, discovered gold in 1861. That changed everything.

There was a sudden and rapid influx of people with the population of the province leaping from 12,000 to around 30,000.

In Dunedin itself, the city’s population doubled to 5,850 by the end of 1861, and three years later it had reached 15,790, making Dunedin New Zealand’s first city by growth of population in 1865.

No longer was it a town largely dominated by Scottish settlers – there were people from many parts of the world, Britain, Europe, the Americas and eventually China and the Levant. It was a whole new injection into Dunedin’s economic, social and cultural DNA that is reflected in the city to this day.

Here is a description of Dunedin in 1863 - in the wake of the gold rush and not long before it became a city. This was originally reported in the Southern Almanack.

Hundreds of allotments of land were eagerly bought up, leased or rented. Shops, stores, warehouses, dwellings, offices and public buildings were run up with ... marvellous rapidity .... The City now extends from North East valley to beyond the cemetery at the south end [facing the Oval] ... rents have gone up to fabulous rates [enriching men like Macandrew, John Sidey, WH Reynolds, EB Cargill and the Kirk] ... In every art of the city the accumulation of wealth, as evinced in the numerous magnificent and costly buildings, is observable. There are two theatres, large public gardens, two concert halls ... seven insurance offices ... three banks - the Bank of New Zealand and the Bank of New South Wales being two of the most costly and elegant buildings in the city. There are forty-two* hotels (actually nearer 80) and
restaurants; two Masonic and three Odd Fellow’s Lodges; there is a Garrick Club, debating society, chess club, jockey club, mechanics institute ... a chamber of commerce, three daily and three weekly newspapers. The gas is laid on in all the principal streets of the city, which are now curbed or paved, or laid down with asphalt .... There are four new jetties ...

Not bad for a city which only a handful of years earlier, was known as Musedin. But it was a city prepared to try new things, not least socially, and be adventurous and innovative. Most of NZ major commercial enterprises of the time started here. I imagine not all of the projects invested in, succeeded.

Nonetheless, the number of citizens was relatively small, and most people who had been there any time would have known most others. Still, it was a small pool to choose a Council and Mayor from, especially as women did not have the vote. And to further restrict the pool, bear in mind that Dunedin included just the area of land between the harbour and the town belt.

That was the case until 1904, when Caversham was included. Then over time the other parts of our city we now think of as inner city were added: South Dunedin, North East Valley, Roslyn, Maori Hill, Mornington and Bay Town.

From 1963 - West Harbour - then Peninsula County Council. 1989 brought the final amalgamations with Port Chalmers, Mosgiel, St. Kilda and Green Island Borough Councils, Silverpeaks County Council

By 1900, Dunedin City Council served 22,815 people, South Dunedin was next largest with 5,330 people, Caversham 4,764, Roslyn 4,100, Mornington 3,900, North East valley, 3,374, Maori Hill, 1,520 and St Kilda 1,198 - a grand total of 47,001 just before the new century clicked over.

Back in 1865, with some 16,000 people and more coming with every arriving ship, it’s not hard to see why some form of democratic representative body was demanded – if only to keep power in the hands of those who had been here longer than 5 minutes. Indeed as you might expect most, if not all of its members, would be chosen from the ranks – albeit thin – of the business class. However it was a self-made business rather than an hereditary class in many, if not most, cases. The Free Church Scots was imbued with an egalitarian and democratic spirit. They had, after all, broken ranks with the Presbytarian establishment because, among other things, it refused to let them choose their own ministers. However my observation is that there was a difference. The emerging elite of Dunedin society didn’t inherit their position. These were not aristocrats. Indeed, if my own father’s recollections of early 20th century Southland, for instance, hold true in other parts – any, even semi aristocratic, sons who found themselves in NZ at the time were as likely to be semi-impoverished remittance men – black sheep cast out from the fold. However Dunedin was a place where a man could work his way up to prosperity by dint of hard work, shrewd investment and, in the case of the gold rush – luck. Some of Dunedin’s early leaders for instance did very well as we have heard, from extensive and cheap land acquisitions that they later sold on to the over-heated demand generated by the gold rush population boom.

In addition, Dunedin proved to be a place of opportunity for tradesmen – men whose skills would have defined and actually limited their place in British society. However, in this much more egalitarian antipodean world, and with the burgeoning demand for their services, many of them quickly became employers and business owners in their own right. Can I refer you to Erik Olssen’s superb book “Working Lives c.1900” published only last year for a much wider exposition of that phenomenon that shaped our community than I can give here? The entre of those people shaped not just the commercial, but the governance framework of our city too.
Dunedin quickly became the dominant centre of the country. That was expressed in a number of ways – social as well as economic. We know about the William Larnachs, and Julius Vogels – titans of commerce. But in addition, for instance, the prime advocate against sweated labour in NZ in the 1880s was much loved Presbyterian minister and activist Rutherford Waddell. One of the main advocates, and indeed architects of women’s emancipation, was Robert Stout supported by his wife Anna Stout.

And indeed several of Dunedin’s mayors and prominent citizens held positions in national government – either in the legislature or in the executive. Robert Stout was both premier and Chief Justice at different times.

If we can just step back again to the 1850s ... After the Otago Provincial Council was constituted in 1853, Dunedin was run through a Board of Commissioners made up of six members of the Provincial Council and six elected members. A bit like what Nick Smith seems to be advocating for ECAN. Back to the future perhaps. The commission was replaced by the Dunedin Town Board in 1855 and it wasn’t until May 1862 that a reference to the City of Dunedin appeared in an Ordinance.

Eventually the Town Board was abolished, and Dunedin City Council formed, meeting for the first time in August 1865.

Before we take a look at the first mayors, let’s consider the staff they had to implement their decisions and policies.

They were also appointed to the new Council - some were transferred from the former Town Board. The DCC staff consisted of a Town Clerk, a City Surveyor, as assistant clerk, a sexton, two collectors and a messenger. A total of 7.

So let’s take a look at some of the mayors elected in our city in those early days.

Dunedin’s first Mayor, as is well known, William Mason, was elected on 22 July 1865. Mason was to become an influential figure in the city and not just through his involvement in politics. He was the Mason from the now well-known architecture firm mason and Wales and left the city with a lasting architectural legacy.

The next Mayor was John Hyde Harris who had trained as a lawyer. However, Harris was a man with other credentials. A former Superintendent of Otago, and a current member of the Legislative Council - the old upper house of Parliament. Not long after his election he was made Solicitor General so had to spend a lot of time away from Dunedin and he eventually resigned as Mayor before his term was up. Harris’s multiple roles is indicative of a small pool of talent, but also of Dunedin’s dominance at the time.

Harris was followed, in 1868 and 1869 by Thomas Birch - a publican who was remembered for the 'quiet and orderly manner' in which he conducted Council. Oh for such a reputation!!

Some Mayors had extended and multiple terms. Notable amongst them was Henry Fish who held office in 1870, 1871 and 1872, as well as in 1879 and in 1893 and 1894. Although the 1879 tenure was very brief.

Fish was a controversial figure, the London-born Fish had come to Dunedin via Australia with his father, setting up in business as house-painters.

He was combative in Council to say the least - both as a Councillor and during his periods as Mayor. He was later described as "completely insensitive to criticism or even ridicule, he had a high talent for making enemies by tactless speech and ruthless action". What does that put me in mind of?
Fish, was first elected at the age of just 32, known for switching political allegiances often and he was dogged by rumours of dubious morality and corruption.

When he was elected Mayor in 1879, his opponent, encumbent Mayor Henry Walter, (who served in 1875, 1878 and 1879) launched legal proceedings around the fact that Fish had a painting contract for the Town Hall and had never mentioned it during the campaign. The court declared Fish disqualified.

When Council met for the first time, a motion was put asking Mayor Walter to resign because he had not been elected by a majority of voters. A single objection to the motion meant Walter didn't have to put it, but Councillors had something of a last say, voting to set his salary at the princely sum of £1. Standing Orders were ever a two edged sword.

Although that was Walter's last term as Mayor. Interestingly, his name appears on the Municipal Chambers as the Mayor at the time of its opening, even though he was one of a group of Councillors who fought plans to build there. An early version of the stadium methinks.

Fish carried on in local body politics. He was a staunch supporter of the of the liquor industry. In the 1890s, at a time when women's suffrage was to the fore, Fish resisted extending the vote to women and went as far as organising two petitions against that. That’s because most, if not all suffragists, were also prohibitionists and these were extremely divisive issues in the community. However his credibility took a hit when it was discovered he had paid people to sign his petitions. Actually, it was worse than that. Apparently, many of the names on the petition were non-existent. Bribing people was bad enough but bribing non-existent people was worse! In 1892 women ratepayers helped tip the balance against him in the mayoral race - although he still managed to win the following two years.

John Barnes, Mayor in (1885) began business as a carter and contractor, ferrying goods to the goldfields, and contracting for public works. Elected to Town Board in 1863 & the new Town Council 1866, and ultimately mayor in 1885. That's despite his 'crudity of language, hot temper and lack of social graces'. His propensity, as an elected officeholder, to become actively involved in contracts led to a notable tragedy when two women were killed by rocks from a mishandled Dowling Street blasting operation being supervised by Barnes's son, who had replaced the established foreman. Nepotism and a conflict of interest at the same time.

Here's an interesting one and (note the young age like Fish at which he was mayor) Richard Henry Leary, (1877, 1886). Born London 1840; emigrated to Victoria, working in the timber trade, and a few years later to Dunedin, becoming partner in an auctioneering & accountancy firm, and later founding his own accountancy business. As mayor, his interest in accountancy led him to investigate the book-keeping of the gas department; the manager was sacked, but later reinstated; Leary resigned in protest and easily won re-election. So frauds within Council department are not new. In 1894 he went to London on behalf of the council to sort out the city’s loans, but caught pneumonia and died there 14.5.1895.

William Dawson was a larger than life character, (1887). Born in Aberdeen, he learned brewing under his father; trained in Burton-on-Trent before emigrating to Dunedin in 1873, arriving broke. Dawson at first worked for a Brewery, then left with two fellow employees to found Speight & Co, which became hugely successful as we know. He was an anti-Prohibition politician (hardly surprising) and active on several local bodies. Dawson became immensely rich, remembered for the opulence of his mansion (the ornamental gates later became the entrance to the Botanic Gardens) and for the style of his many mistresses. Clearly, if you had enough money you could ignore the strictures of the Kirk and even get elected. Dawson presided, virtually on his deathbed, over the union between Speights & NZ Breweries.
**Hugh Gourley, (1888, 1896),** born Ballnahinch, County Down, Ireland in 1825; emigrated to Victoria in 1852, spent 10 years on the diggings and as a saddler; moved to the Otago diggings in the early 1860s, then settled in Dunedin as a saddler. He branched out into the livery trade, ran a line of coaches to Port Chalmers, organised one of the first cab companies in Dunedin, and in 1874 took on funeral undertaking. St Kilda borough councillor and borough mayor for 13 successive years; elected to the DCC in 1885. Appointed to the Legislative Council in 1899. The lesson from that is that self made men from the trades even went on to national governance from an early time.

Woollen mill manager **John Roberts** had served the community in different roles, as a Member of Provincial Government and also on the Taieri County Council. He was largely responsible for the tremendous success of the 1889-90* Exhibition, and was elected Mayor unopposed on the back of that - even though he had not served on the Dunedin City Council. However his term was notable for codification of the by-laws and for his courage by calming a hostile crowd in 1890 during the seamen's strike. He was knighted in 1920.

Exhibitions were the big thing in those days obviously. That particular exhibition covered 13 acres (9 of which were buildings) with a frontage onto what is now Jervois Street. It extended all the way to Andersons Bay Road between Cumberland and Crawford Streets. It attracted more than 628,000 people in just under five months. That gives you an idea of the volume of visitors Dunedin attracted. I guess the 19th century version of cruise ship visitors.

What I observe here is that civic enterprises, promotion of events, and rationalisation of policy and laws have been the pre-occupation of mayors and Councils since the beginning.

Roberts was followed by publican **John Carroll.** Elected as Dunedin's first Catholic mayor, he nonetheless and surprisingly commanded the largest majority of any 19th century election. That was perhaps indicative of the number of Irish Catholics who had emigrated to Dunedin and the south of the South Island in particular, who would presumably have supported him.

A commentator in the local newspaper provided this description: *'What with his imposing presence, a stately walk, and that inherent taste for dignity which marks every Irishman in office, from the policeman upwards, somehow Mr Carroll looked a Mayor. And as he seldom lapsed into a public speech, a capital Mayor he made.'*

Carroll’s mayoralty was followed by that of lawyer **Charles Robert Chapman,** one of the earliest pupils of Otago Boys High School. He had been defeated for the mayoralty on a previous attempt in 1888, but won three years later, his election controversially following his father’s financing of a memorial in the Octagon to the Rev Thomas Burns, on which the name of the donor was even more prominent than the name of Burns himself.

However he achieved much more than that at no cost to the city or his father. It was Chapman’s initiative in writing personally to Andrew Carnegie in 1901 that led to the establishment of Dunedin’s first free public library.

Henry Fish was still a force, winning in 1893 and 1894 before being defeated by architect **Nathaniel Wales** (of Mason and Wales) in 1895. Fish had been an MP in the interim and a chairman of the Harbour Board.

Jumping ahead slightly to 1897, the election of **Edward Bowes Cargill** was seen as being largely due to the coming celebration of the 50 year jubilee of Otago's settlement. It was thought fitting that a son of Captain William Cargill should hold the position, even though he was not a councillor any more than John Roberts had been. He was the man responsible for Cargill's Castle. However he had been on pretty
much every board and organisation in the region and the mayoralty was presumably seen as the final accolade.

After he sold his firm to a London company in 1881, Mr. Cargill did not directly engage in business. However the following gives you an idea of the range of interests and activities some early Dunedin leaders were involved in. For over thirty-six years, Cargill held the positions of Consular Agent for Italy and Vice-Consul for the Netherlands, in Dunedin. He held interests in and was a director of the Dunedin Water and Gas Companies, the Otago and Southland Investment Company, the Colonial Bank the National Insurance Company; he was on the boards of the Mosgiel Woollen, New Zealand Refrigerating, Union Steam Ship, Westport Coal, and Trustees and Executors Companies, and several others. He was a member of the House of Representatives for Bruce, member of the Otago Provincial Council (in which he was twice Provincial Secretary, or Premier), member of the old Dunedin Town Board, of the Dunedin City Council, the school committee, the High School Board of Governors, the Otago University Council from its inception, and after the death of the Rev Dr Stuart, vice-chancellor of that body. He was an elder of Knox Presbyterian Church.

Cargill was elected Mayor of Dunedin in testimony of the community’s appreciation of the services rendered by him throughout a long career—and I guess as a mark of respect to the memory of his father, Captain William Cargill.

Cargill was replaced in 1898 by wood and coal merchant William Swan and he was followed in 1899 by joiner Robert Chisholm.

There endeth the 19th century.

Between 1865 and 1899, 24 different men from many different walks of life served as Mayor of Dunedin, including accountants, lawyers, businessmen and builders, a ferryman, a firewood merchant, a publican, a joiner, a saddler, a painter and paperhanger, a brewer, an undertaker and a woollen mill manager. A huge variety of backgrounds and many of them thrusting self-made entrepreneurs.

The catalogue of mayors I have mentioned, and their opportunities so different from their counterparts in Britain at the time, is indicative of doing things a new way in a young country – of enabling an egalitarian and liberal spirit further expressed, even culminating with the vote for women in 1893.

But not long after the turn of the century, there were gradual changes. For a start, it is much more difficult to find out details about many 20th century Dunedin mayors. Try Googling them by name. You get so many non-descript but empty references. What does seem clear, however, is that while many of Dunedin’s 20th century mayors achieved a great deal, the range of their professional backgrounds does seem to have narrowed. They were almost all European men like me. I know. Their photos are all lined up on the wall outside my office.

A conservative, risk-averse uniformity of spirit seemed to taken over and I am not referring just to the mayors. I wonder what provoked this long period of conservatism and uniformity after such a colourful beginning.

Because despite early egalitarianism and women’s emancipation in 1893, and Chinese emigration here from the 1860s, it took over 100 years for a woman to be elected Mayor of Dunedin and for the election of an ethnic Chinese.

I don’t mean to suggest that Mayors define their communities and they are certainly not responsible for all their city’s progress or otherwise. Quite the opposite. Rather they can be seen as indicators or expressions (among others) of the places they are elected to serve. They are their community’s representatives.
Well I suspect WW 1 and what led up to it internationally was the watershed. Certainly ultimately it depleted the ranks of those who might offer themselves for civic service. So many who might have gone on to civic leadership did not return from the war. In addition, our city’s population stagnated. Dunedin’s population in 2013 was 120,246. It is only a few thousand more now.

I have a sense that the whole ghastly WW 1 experience, where NZ, and the south of NZ in particular, sacrificed such a high proportion of its young men on the altar of European imperial barbarism, came to symbolize our loss of innocence as a country, and, more than that, induced a fatalistic conservatism. Perhaps it was also national, perhaps even international, but it seems palpable in the historic record.

Symbolic of that change I believe was the experience of another mayor of the very early 20th century. Joseph Braithwaite – a small-time bookseller who had done well. He was mayor in 1905. His mayoralty included the practical completion of the Dunedin tramway system. As with so many others of his predecessors, Braithwaite held a large number of community positions.

He was on the Ocean Beach Domain Board and the city's licensing committee, belonged to the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, was a member of the Anglican Synod from 1892, served on the City Mission committee and the committee of the Bible in State Schools League, and was vice-president of the Otago Football Association and chairman of the Empire Pictures Company.

So Braithwaite was very much in the mold of earlier mayors who had so many interests and served on so many organizations, and as I say he came from humble beginnings, even suffering the additional handicap of losing his mother at 4 on the sea voyage to Australia, and his father at 7 years old - only 3 years after arriving in NZ.

Despite all those interests and calls on his time, Braithwaite and his wife had between 16 and 22 children. Apparently a completely accurate number has not been recorded. I imagine Mrs Braithwaite did not have time (or possibly energy) to serve on many committees!

Notable among their offspring, and several of the others were indeed notable - was son John Braithwaite.

John was convicted and executed for mutiny, despite much testimony to the contrary, during World War I. He was the only NZ soldier executed for mutiny – the order was given by General Haig - and was finally posthumously pardoned by the New Zealand government in 2000.

I wonder how Joseph Braithwaite, bookseller, regarded his son’s execution. The execution of a young journalist who had voluntarily offered himself to the perils of enemy guns, only to be slaughtered by the elite of his father’s birth country. I wonder if Joseph pondered the contrast between the opportunities available to those of humble birth in the new New Zealand, which enabled him to become leader of his city, and the callous, indeed murderous expectations of the class ridden “home” country.

Joseph Braithwaite himself died at the early age of 65 in 1917. I wonder what of his hopes for a future and ambitions of his many children died in him before that. I wonder what other dreams in our young community withered and died during that horrendous blood-bath.

As we look to reinvigorate, even re-invent our city’s economy from the slow decline, it has undergone through a fair portion of the 20th century, I suggest that, rather than looking back just only a few decades, to the pedestrian progress that some admittedly great mayors and Councils nursed our city through under challenging but demoralizing times – I suggest that we cast our eyes back further to the innovative,
risk-taking businessmen and gutsy pioneering women that Dunedin fostered in the second half of the 19th century.

The businesses and type of work and activity that will sustain our future and the people who will address the challenges we have never encountered before – social, economic and environmental - will not be conservatively doing what we have done for the past 50 years. They will be creating a future built on guts, dreams, imagination, hard work and without much of a road map. Just as our 19th century forbears did.