I've come to the end of the most fulfilling decade of my working life...well so far anyway. And while there have certainly been challenges, I can't overstate the privilege it has been to hold this position and indeed how much I have learned from it and from numerous people around me to whom I owe most of the credit for what has been achieved.

This last term has been particularly satisfying as I and Council have been increasingly able to progress new meaningful projects and harness the community will to invest in both capital renewals and new initiatives.

That was not the case when I started in this role.

When I came into office as Mayor, I faced the daunting task of restoring faith and trust in Council following the bitter stadium debate that divided the community.

Then, within months, we had the fiscal challenge brought about by a sudden shortfall in DCHL dividends. I, among others, had warned about just that possibility, and it only confirmed the loss of trust felt by so many in the community.

So, Council had to pull any discretionary budget items out of future budgets. There was no possibility of anything approaching ‘vanity projects’.

Fortunately, things didn’t stop completely. Lan Yuan, our beautiful Chinese garden, had just been completed and the extensions to Toitu and the upgrade of the Town Hall complex were well underway. Had we curtailed those as well – though they were actually too far advanced to viably stop – the city would now be much the poorer in terms of facilities and attractions.

Nonetheless, we found ourselves faced with the conflicting goals of limiting rates rises AND reducing debt – simultaneously.

But what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger and the Dunedin City Council has ultimately emerged from the experience much the better for it. Both the Council owned company governance structure and the Council organisation itself have been overhauled comprehensively and are in much better shape than previously. That is underscored by the Council group holding a higher Standard and Poor’s credit rating than any of our major banks, and Council itself earning an A in the independently assessed CouncilMark Excellence programme. I’m proud of both of those.

And while the cupboard was nearly bare for several years in terms of Council’s ability to spend, we did achieve considerable fiscal gains. We kept rate rises well below what had been projected, for some five or six years (in the first year less than half of what was projected in fact) AND we paid down debt. So that now Council’s debt – including what’s remaining on the stadium – is lower than when I started as Mayor. We could not have done that had considerable efficiencies not been found within Council. But it’s more than simple efficiency. The improved culture, professionalism, effectiveness and pride within DCC is also something I am very proud of.
The credit for a most of that must go to the two CEOs appointed in my time – doctors Paul Orders and Sue Bidrose. They both faced monumental challenges and they both made an enormous difference. I can’t speak highly enough of their professionalism and public service ethic. It is no surprise that Dr Bidrose is widely regarded as among the best performing local government CEO’s in NZ. Thank you to both you, Dr Bidrose, and to Dr Orders.

During that time of austerity, we also developed our strategic framework. That was brought to fruition in partnership with our community and has proved a wonderful guiding foundation and vision for the Dunedin community’s ambitions going forward. I consider that framework one of Council’s major achievements during my time. That was an aspiration I signalled in my 2010 mayoral campaign.

I’m also proud of our achievements around the city’s built heritage, on the environmental front, in achieving UNESCO Creative City of Literature status and in the city’s productive international relations especially with our sister cities – Edinburgh and Shanghai. Our enhanced standing with cities significantly more influential than Dunedin, has hugely benefitted our creative sectors like film, design and computer gaming, and our tertiary and secondary education and medical research hubs.

I use the plural “we”, not the royal “we“. Because despite the promises of some aspiring mayoral candidates, there is almost nothing a mayor can achieve on his or her own. Without a good consensus around the Council table and without an effective executive, nothing can be achieved.

So a huge thankyou to Councillors. The last Long Term Plan particularly, is testament to active discussion and prioritising leading to a solid consensus – a consensus shared by the community.

And so a huge thank you to the community – and all those in the community who submitted, shared ideas, asked for consideration and made suggestions. My observation is that our Annual Plan hearings have become progressively more positive and collegial over the past few years. I’m pleased with that too.

In fact, I believe that a whole of city approach – whether that be partnering with community groups, the University, the Polytech, Chamber of Commerce, Community Trust, Otago Museum, Malcam Trust, United Way, Ngai Tahu – the list is a long one – has been critical to our success in so many areas and enterprises.

So, thank you sincerely to all the organisations agencies, institutions and businesses who have walked with Council. We have, I believe, achieved a lot together.

I’ve also learned so much over my 12 years on Council. And I want to acknowledge those who helped with that.

It would be fair to say I came onto Council ignorant and green. That’s green with a small “g”, Cr Laufiso. I stood with a disparate grouping who didn’t know each other, but who felt there needed to be fresh blood on Council, and we called ourselves Greater Dunedin. Two of those besides myself – Councillors Wilson and Staynes – were also successful in that election. The following two elections we set ourselves the task of encouraging other quality candidates. We had no shared platform – simply principles – which we agreed together. We were successful first with Richard Thomson and Jinty MacTavish and then in 2013, Cr Lord. I learned a tremendous amount from each of them in quite different ways. Thank you all. We made a significant difference for the better.

At the risk of appearing to pick favourites, I acknowledge Jinty MacTavish’s contribution. In my time the councillor who given the most in the best of ways. Simply outstanding.
The subject I learned most about from a standing start, and which has obviously captured global concern, was climate change. A number of people both around this table and further afield, opened my eyes and brought me up to speed on that. Thank you all.

During the course of my mayoralty the wide range of groups I have interacted with has led me to reflect deeply on Dunedin’s origins – the individuals, nationalities and cultures that contributed to this place and the values that motivated those early Dunedinites. I am proud that our traditions of manaakitanga, of industry, of compassion for underprivileged, of mercantile drive, women’s emancipation and so much more – I’m proud that they still inform and drive us today.

I appreciate the unsung contribution of the early Chinese to Dunedin. I have reforged bonds with the descendants of the Taranaki prisoners who built so much of this city’s foundations. And I have been privileged to build a warm relationship with manawhenua from our two local runaka – Puketeraki and Otakou – and indeed not forgetting Moeraki up the coast.

Those relationships and the collaboration we have achieved have brought me to realise how the long journey to Tino Rangatiratanga actually includes all New Zealanders, albeit with different roles. I greatly value the support and friendship nga runaka o Kai Tahu have afforded me. Nga mihi.

I acknowledge the solid unstinting support of Deputy Mayor Chris Staynes and his frequent sage advice. Chris was often a tempering influence when that was required and I think we all benefitted from that.

Thank you to all the councillors who stepped into my place when I was called on or preoccupied with LGNZ business.

And finally a huge thank you to Council staff for their various support, advice, guidance, information and in many cases just plain camaraderie and company. There are so many staff who have helped make my time here so enjoyable that I won’t single any out, except for my admin/support/PA staff. I can say that Dunedin is well served by an extremely able and dedicated Council staff.

Lastly the most important thank you to my wife, Joan. Joan has given unwavering support, especially when expressing outrage at some particularly vile letter to the editor, and stoic acceptance of the many long periods I was absent in mind if not in body as the role consumed my time and attention. And thank you Joan for your wisdom in saying, “enough”.

That’s it from me. I leave this role proud to have had the privilege, enormously grateful to all those who held hands with me on the journey, and quietly confident that my contribution has left this place – Otepoti-Dunedin - a little better for my being here.

Kia ora.

Dave Cull
Mayor of Dunedin