

Bill Hansell

Administrator of the Year Speech

March 14, 2002

I hardly know where to begin except to say thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for honoring what has been a wonderful opportunity of service, which is so important to all of you in this state, and particularly those of you in this room. You have honored me; you have honored Connie, our family, and the Utah City Managers who have done such a magnificent job over the years in being leaders in the profession. Their linkage to this Institution has obviously been something that has brought them great pride and they did all of you an enormous pride in September when they hosted our conference where three thousand people came from all over the world. Our colleagues and our friends from Utah, the people, the students here, the members of the church who were so kind to us in so many ways, you made our lives very special; and I wanted to say thank you for all of that and particularly to you folks here who are managers in this wonderful, wonderful state. It is an honor that I never anticipated – it is an honor where one of those things I will say to the students, you wish your mom was alive so you could call her and say, ‘How did they ever figure one Billy Hansel from Holbrook Street in downtown Philadelphia?’

This is the third significant event in our lives that has involved Utah. One, the conference in September just six months ago was obviously a major, major factor, the next to last conference I’ll be responsible for and the first conference in the eighty some year history of the association we’ve ever had in the state of Utah. It was a very significant moment. In 1974, Connie and I took our children across country and we attended a four-week program on organizational change and organizational development. It was held in Park City and we spent four weeks with our ten year old and our nine year old and, in many ways, we all grew up. Many of the things that I have learned about organizations, about people, I learned from a wonderful faculty who came from all over the country. I worked on what was called an action training and research project, which was conducted in the city of Park City. We interviewed folks who lived there, citizens who were part of that wonderful community. We learned a great deal. It was a seminal event and we went home thinking, “Wasn’t that beautiful, wasn’t that wonderful? And we’ll probably never be back in Utah again”. Then twenty-eight years later—twenty-seven years in September and twenty-eight years now-- we are back for events that are equally significant, equally meaningful in our lives. So, I really thank you for the opportunity to be with you.

Now, Bob has asked me to say a few things and it is hard to top all the awards and contributing my congratulations to all the students for their achievement, to the officers for the work they have done, for the beautiful choral work that was presented for us and it was a lovely, lovely evening. I have been to enough of events like this that I know there are students sitting

here in the back of the room, and they are sitting here thinking, “How did *they* pick that guy?” Did you ever notice there is always a ‘*they*’? You never know who does these things, but *they* picked this guy; and you are sitting there looking and thinking, he’s obviously overweight, he wears glasses and if those of you who have decent eyes you know I’ve got hearing aids. So you’re figuring two of the five senses are gone already. I heard somebody behind me say ‘Do you think he can taste his food?’

Well, I thought what I’d do tonight is tell you just a few quick things about me personally that you might need to know that would help put into context what I really want to share with you; some lessons that I’ve learned from an opportunity to work as a public administrator for the last forty-two years. So just three things that you need to know that I have thought about that I think are important in what made me *me*.

One is that I was born into a family that was comprised of and featured two things: One is devout faith-- as best evidenced by my mom who was a devout Catholic and who prayed as if everything depended on God, and who made sure that her three sons were raised in their faith; and my Dad, who was a skeptic, not much of a religious person and worked as if everything depended on him and made sure that his three sons also were committed to do the word that they were responsible for as well as they possibly could, to give it everything that they could. I am real proud of my Dad because when I turned sixteen- for the first years of my life he didn’t have much involvement with our faith and our religion- but he came to us one day and announced to the family that he was going to become a Catholic. He became a convert, and, Bob, I do not want to top your story, but I was my Father’s Godfather in baptism and stood for him in the sacrament of confirmation. I can’t quite say I was my own grandpa, but I can tell you that until my dad died in ’83 we sort of looked after each other in terms of our spiritual responsibilities and it was a wonderful relationship. He died as a person of faith, and a person who was as connected to God as he was to his work and family.

The second thing is that I was born half blind. I do have a visual disability. John Patterson can tell you better than anybody because he played golf with me, and for 18 holes I’d go “Where did it go? Where did it go?” John in the end said, “It was great playing golf with Stevie Wonder, I really enjoyed it!” Well, it does not have a lot of relevance except for two things. One is that because my parents were who they were they never said to me, “Bill don’t do that, you can’t do that because you can’t see.” So, I’d go out failing at baseballs I could barely see, whacking at tennis balls that I couldn’t see at all, and had to learn myself what I could do and couldn’t do, and learn that what you could do, you could do well and you could overcome that handicap and that disability and it’s been an important lesson in my life. It was also a factor in my own education. When I finished high school I hadn’t quite done well enough to get a scholarship, but I had some aid and then I found that the people of Pennsylvania, the citizens of Pennsylvania through their legislature, had adopted one of the best programs to aid people with

visual handicaps in the country. I was given a totally free scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, where I studied Accounting, Economics, Business, and ultimately decided what I really wanted to do was public service. Part of that decision was based off the feeling that I had to give back to the people who had given to me, to the people who had made my life different. I wasn't quite sure how I was going to do that when I began and I'll tell you how I reached the conclusion on City Management in just a moment.

The Third thing you need to know is I am just a very, very lucky guy. I was born into that family and given those values and given the support. I was given a Christian education through secondary school so I know what it is like to be in a faith based education and the fact that it brings values to your life that you can use for the rest of your life-- particularly in public service and public administration. I went to a great university, a university that challenged me and made me think. While it was a secular university, again because of my Mom primarily, I had to be very connected to the Newman Society, which was the society for Catholics students who didn't go to Catholic schools. That was a major part of my life all through my education. I also am particularly lucky because of a very, very wonderful woman, somehow in one of the miracles of life chose me 40 years ago. President Hinckley said and all of the managers who were there and those of you who were there said very clearly to us at the conference, 'Get married and stay married'. We've been together for forty years and Connie, I thank you for being my wife, my lover, my partner, and my best friend. Thank you very much. I'm a lucky guy because she produced two wonderful kids who were just absolutely great and they have given us, as I quoted in the program, three magnificent children and I will now spend the next hour and half telling you about Katie, William and Lauren and everything they have done in the last three years. I am a lucky guy because I chose a career in public management, in community management in local government and it has given me the opportunity to work with similarly dedicated and wonderful people like the people you are seeing here tonight.

So, let me tell you about the lessons that I've learned and share with you and hopefully they might help you as you move along in your career choices and in your lives and in public service. I categorize those lessons in five areas, five words: democracy, community, management, governance, and change.

I walked into the Philadelphia fire department in 1961, in early January to take a job as an administrative analyst, a management trainee. I was paid \$4,371 dollars a year. Now governor, does that sound like a civil service salary, four thousand three hundred and seventy one dollars a year? Connie made a lot more money; she made \$5,200 a year, so I really married her for her money and her moneymaking ability. At the same time, I entered the Fells Center of Government at the University of Pennsylvania. I really thought I was a kid who grew up in Philadelphia, I loved the city and I was going to serve my hometown, I was going to be in the government and move up as far as I could. My Dad had been a firefighter, a professional firefighter, and served

the public for most of his career. But, at Pen, I learned that there were these strange creatures running around called City Managers, that you could manage a community. As somebody said, you can be a big fish in a very little pond, but have an awful lot of fun and really serve the public where you live, where it was most meaningful to them. That resulted in 17 years of public management service in four Pennsylvania communities and 21 years as an association executive in an association to serve local government—The Pennsylvania League of Cities and ICMA. For four years, I will confess here tonight, I spent some time away from City Management. It is a lesson that I will share with all of you. It was actually a good thing to do. I opened the doors, hung out a shingle, and said that I was a consultant. Connie thought “Thank heavens, he’s finally lost his urge for City Management; maybe he’ll make some money”. We did all kinds of crazy things. I reorganized the University and served as acting Vice President; I ran a dinner theater and if that was audition tonight, you ladies are all hired to sing in the Music Man; I was involved as a neutral labor arbitrator; I looked at master plan for a regional amusement park, but most of the work was around and about local government. So, while I wasn’t a manager and I wasn’t in management, I was working on those issues for my colleagues. It was a wonderful time and I look back at it as a sabbatical. I feel that I really came back into local government as a much better manager and it was a great prelude to my public career as an association executive. So now let me go back to those five words: democracy, community, management, governance, and change; and let me talk about each of them for just a second.

You know, this business of democracy that we seem to take for granted, is really not very new in the history of humanity. It is still in many ways a noble experiment, this system that Winston Churchill called the worst way to organize a government except when you look at in comparison with all the other ways or organizing a government. It is still changing, and as I look back in 40 years in my career, it has changed enormously. When I first became a manager in 1963, in a tiny little town of Catasauqua Pennsylvania, 5,000 people in one square mile, I had five little police officers, eight little men on the public works crew, three little ladies in the office, and me. I thought I was king of the world! It was a marvelous thing, but what did we do about the democracy? It was important to have citizens informed, it sounds so naïve today. We gave them regular reports, we had open meetings, we issued accommodations, and made citizens of the month saying, “Please come to the city council meetings, please talk to us, please be involved because you are important to democracy”. Well, it began to change by even as early as the late 1960’s and through the 1970’s. We found that participatory democracy- citizens that just didn’t need to be informed, they needed to be involved. Hundreds if not thousands in large cities of citizens began to serve on authorities, boards and commissions. Suddenly I had to go to all those meetings and I had to understand what they were doing and I had to facilitate their interaction and their activities. Neighborhood organizations began to spring up. My heavens, the neighborhoods actually had ideas about what they wanted us to do and how we should spend their money. So it was a different kind of game. In the late 70’s, when I came back into government after my sabbatical, and through the 80’s and well into the 90’s I would call it a skeptical democracy. Vietnam and Watergate turned the American public into cynics about their local government. I had a reporter covering the local government say to me one day ‘Your job is

to manage the public business; my job is to report when you do it wrong.’ I probably made the most impolite comment to that woman that I’ve ever made to anyone in my life, and I said ‘Your job is report facts, when I do it right, when I do it wrong, you can do whatever opinions you want, but it is not just to report when government doesn’t work’, but that is how she saw her job. How did we respond to that? We didn’t have just open meetings, we created a transparent government. Everything had to be open, everything had to be seen, and everything was done in public. Starting in this business you could sit down with counselors and talk about an issue, council with the mayor about what he or she thought; but today and in that period of time and from that period on you can’t meet privately, you can’t do things in private, it is essential that you do the public’s business in before the public eye. It was a good thing as difficult as it was to live through. Today I think we have a citizen-empowered democracy. We have a democracy where all of you have studied and heard about oriented policing. I suggest that we have community oriented government. We survey our citizens regularly, asking them to evaluate what we are doing, asking them to give us directions. We involve them in a whole variety of ways. Initiative, referendum, recall, and term limits have significantly limited the effectiveness of representative democracy; in fact, if it is not a citizen empowered democracy it is a limited representative democracy that we are living in right now. It is much more difficult to deal with this democratic system of getting people involved, getting everyone into the act while still getting some action. What of the future? Well, there is no question that there is the capacity in our society, with the internet and with the communications technologies to move for the first time into direct democracy. Telephone book-sized ballots are in California in the last several elections. Books that you had to read that were that thick or thicker listing hundreds of ballot measures clearly forebodes a system that it not going to work very well and the assumption that every citizen can vote on that. But, it is going to be a different kind of democracy. What I have come to realize is that job of my colleagues here and their colleagues all over the world as city managers is that we are the engineers of democracy. Just like the original city managers were civil engineers when America was building and they were solving the problems of streets, water systems, road systems, sanitary sewage systems, and solid waste disposal, today we are the engineers to make the democratic system work and whatever change happens, professional managers working for and with their elective officials will make the system work. I’ve been privileged to work with and to be in the communities I’ve served one of those engineers of democracy.

The second concept that I’ll talk about briefly is community. Community is something that I think has been lost along the way as a value in American society. One of the popular books recently was *Bowling Alone*, where you don’t even join a bowling club- you just go bowling by yourself. The value of being in a community has always been what local government managers are also about. When I started again 40 years ago the physical community was the most important. The infrastructure, the roads, the trees, the housing, and the public works department that was essential. Planning and zoning were critical components—it was the physical community and if a manager could get the physical community break, you could do that job and people would be happy. Then we suddenly began to realize in the late 60’s and 70’s, you know

what? People live in this community. It is the human community that is important. Understanding the demographics of your community was understanding the destiny's of the community. We began to talk about and serve citizens that differed in age, in gender, in race, in ethnicity, in economic and educational status and level. We began to understand that if we understood that and could begin to help elected officials to serve those very constituencies, we would do our jobs better. We would make a better community and better contribution. Then suddenly in the late 1970's and through the 80's we realized it's the economy. It is an economic community. Many city managers heard from their mayors and their councils 'it is jobs stupid'. It was deals; it was trying to create economic opportunity whether it was by vertical or horizontal integration of businesses and industry. It was essential to understand the economy. Community development block grants. A council for urban economic development, a central business district, and industrial parks became new bywords and how you defined your community was that important factor. Throughout each of those understandings of different types of communities, two letters and two words that they represent that were frequently missing from conversation was the 't' word and the 'r' word. The 't' word is taxes. Oliver Wendell Holmes I think it was who said that taxes are the price you pay to live in a civilized society. We spend years and decades trying to figure out how we can lower taxes and they are seen as evil. In point of fact, they are the price that we pay to live in civilized communities. The 'r' word is redistribution. This church and this state do a better job in my judgement in really trying to level the playing field. Not to be socialistic or communistic, but to basically essentially say how can we help the poor, the uneducated, the elderly, those who are much in need in our society to live a reasonable quality of life and I think that is very essential. The words that motivated me in 1960 to go into public service and public administration were the words of John Kennedy when he was inaugurated in a famous speech, that most of you students have never read, and he said, "Ask not what your country can do you for, ask what you can do for your country", and substitute city of or state or region. I wonder if the answer today would be 'you've got to be kidding.' Then September 11th happened and all the tragedy and all of the horror and all of the pain and we suddenly rediscover that Americans are the most compassionate, caring, giving, forgiving people in the history of the world; and they rediscover that, yes, their government can do good things. So, I am at a point right now where I feel very good that there is going to be a better balance in community, a better balance in local government. Local government is valued by Americans today at the highest point that it has ever been in our history. It is people when asked where they get the most for their money, they say local government. They get their water, their roads, their sewers, their police, their fire protection, their health services and they are very, very supportive; but they don't idealize it and they are still skeptical about it.

For those of you who are thinking of a career in public management I would only give you one caution and it is based on a story about a city manager in this part of the country who called me several years ago. This city manager loved to run and every morning she would go up running through God's countryside and she would enjoy different parts of her community. One day she was running, and she was in a different area of the community, and she saw a little stone wall in front of her and she thought, 'I can leap over that.' So, she leapt in the air, not knowing that on the other side was a sheer eight-foot drop. As she was falling, she looked down and thought, "I am going to break a leg. I'm going to be crippled! This is horrible!" When she looked

further she saw a little rusty, dirty, dust-covered bottle and she thought, “Oh, I’m also going to cut myself”. Just before she landed, she twisted her body, and she just brushed up against the bottle, but she did hear – SNAP – and her leg broke. She sat there laying in agony, holding her leg thinking how she would get home, that she wasn’t even sure where she was and what she will do about her job and her career. Suddenly, there was a noise like a *WWHHOOO*, a wind. She looked up and there was a very old man. He looked at her and said, “I am the genie of the bottle and you have gotten me awake and I’ve got to give you a wish; but it can’t be a very hard wish because I am a very old genie, so pick something easy!” So, the young woman looked down, she looked at her leg, and she said, “Well, it’s very obvious I have fallen and broken my leg, will you please heal my leg?” Then the genie said, “Oh! I can’t do legs! Legs are very hard! It is impossible to do legs, I can’t do a leg. Pick something else!” So, she thought for a moment and said, “Well, I am a city manager. I would really love it if just for some period of time I would receive thank you letters from the citizens for the work I do; if the mayor would publicly praise me; and if the council would just give me a salary increase without making such a big fuss over it”. So, the genie rolled up his sleeves and said, “Well, I’ll have a go at the leg!” Your satisfaction comes from the public service, it comes from within, and it comes from building a community. That is another job that managers have. They are guardians of the values of community in a system and at a time when it is not valued as perhaps as much as it should be where so much is placed on the individual that the collective has become perhaps inconsequential. Managers have to guard those values and try to make certain that we make life better because people live in communities.

The third word is management, the third element. Now obviously we are managers. We manage human resources; we manage the resources of the community to get a job done. Of course today—and I know in your classes you’ve talked a lot about performance measurement, output measures, outcome measures, and what are those differences—well in performance counts, management matters. Management is what makes the difference in getting the job done, the translation between needs and policies and results and outcomes for citizens. When I studied a long time ago, 40 years ago at Pen, there was an acronym called PODSCRIB. If you could do the things that PODSCRIB stood for you could be a great city manager: planning, organizing, directing, staffing, coordinating, reporting and budgeting. Learn those things and dog gone it you were going to be good. You could manage any community for Catasauqua to Dallas, Texas. Well, it was only about eight months into this job that I thought that might represent about half of what you really have to do. I have translated that a few years ago into BRCSODP, which is the opposite of PODSCRIB. I have coined phrases of things like benchmarking, reorganizing, orchestrating, delegating, and powering others. If there is any message, it is that if you think yourself as a manager and you think “I’m in charge, I’m going to get it done by commanding people and controlling people”, you’re crazy. This is not where we are in American business, in American enterprise, in American universities, and in American local government. We are about the facilitators, leaders, communicators, translators. So, my three lessons for management are three things, very simple. One of them is there really is no free lunch. A city councilman said to me in a debate in Allentown one time, “Bill, you never give us a cost-free alternative”, and I said, “Thank you very much. You’ve just told me I’m doing my job. There is no cost-free alternative”. No matter how much you think this is the best solution and you are presenting it to

your mayor and to your council, here's another idea that is probably better: they need to know what the costs will be in terms of money, lost opportunity, or other things that could've been pursued. The second thing is information is, in fact, power. Knowledge is power. You need to gather as much as you can in every way that you can about the issue or the problem that you are dealing with. Information and knowledge are power. That doesn't mean you can be a procrastinator, an apostle of postponement, "I just need a little more time", "I just need a little more information", you've got to do the best you can, get the most information you can and ultimately decide—that's what they are paying you for and that's what this job is all about. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, don't believe your own propaganda. No matter how much you think a program is good and an alternative is bad, there is probably just as good an argument on the other side. Don't believe everything that you are saying because we all get locked into thinking, "Boy, I know exactly how this should be done". It's not the only way. I've given many alternatives in life and if we could just understand that and recognize the primary value in the ICMA code of ethics, the value and a belief in representative democracy is that the final decision has to be made by the elected officials. Those who come from the people, those who are selected by the people and our job is to give them information.

I have a favorite story about four people riding on a train in Europe after the Second World War. There was a general in the army, a private, a lovely young girl, and a very stately, matronly English lady. As the train rumbled along it went into one of these long, dark tunnels that's in the mountains in Europe—a tunnel that was probably going to take 20 or 30 minutes. Shortly after they went into the tunnel, the car that they were riding was plunged into darkness. They couldn't see anything, not even a hand in front of your face. After about three or four minutes, there was a sound of a soft, endearing sound of a kiss and then there was a sound of flesh on flesh—SMACK! As they rode along, each of them wondered what had happened. The general was furious, He couldn't believe that an Army Private would be that rude to make a pass at a lovely young lady and be that ungentlemanly, and furthermore that young lady had slapped him because she thought he was the one who did it! The young lady thought, "How horrid, this General of the Army has obviously made a pass at the matronly woman". She was glad that the woman had defended the honor of women by slapping him in the face. The elder woman thought the world was coming to an end. Here was another young smart-aleky Army Private who would try to kiss a young girl in the dark. She was glad that young lady had smacked him. But only the Private had all the information, knew the cost of what he was doing, and didn't believe the propaganda for he had kissed his own hand and smacked the General right in the mouth. We need in many ways to understand what management is about and we at ICMA are on a journey, which we've just about completed, to define what we mean by professional management, in terms of education, experience, and qualifications. And that journey is going to be a very significant step forward in the next two years in this profession. And how we define that will have to do with the understanding of those three essential principles.

The fourth word, quickly, is governments, and if, 40 years ago, when I started, you defined a successful local government by how it provided services and how fairly it regulated the society and regulated the community, then today you defined a successful community by how well the government's system works. That undefined system that involved the creative

interaction between business, private enterprise, government, the faith-based institutions, non-profits that are independent, neighborhood organizations, citizen advocate groups. How that advocacy, how that interaction plays out will define the success or the failure of a community today. And my colleagues here, all of them, are now facilitators of the system of governance as much as they are guardians of community and managers. They are externally driven and they need to know their communities like the back of their hands. They need to be able to create that interaction and facilitate those comments and those contexts in those parts of that system. We are even more externally driven as managers than we ever were before.

And, finally, change. It's a truism and it's trite. But there is no constant but change. I read a wonderful book that I commend to you, and maybe all of you have probably read it, this is a great faculty as Bob has said, and I'm sure he'd have you read "Who Moved My Cheese." It's a marvelous little metaphor and the cheese is the metaphor for happiness and success, and just when all the mice find the cheese and they're very happy, somebody moves the cheese, somebody changes the goal, and somebody changes the perspective. And, your alternative is to get angry about it and say, "Oh, I'm going back to the same place. Somebody's going to bring that cheese back." Or, to go running around, banging into things, hollering and screaming, saying, "I can't find the cheese, I can't find the cheese!" Or, to creatively go out, take your time, find the cheese, enjoy the cheese and recognize it's going to happen again, the change is going to happen all over again. The metaphor I've found in all of the management literature, in all the things we've talked about the last 40 years, that I have really found to be the most significant and the most meaningful for me is the phrase "continuous improvement", that comes from the quality movement. It means that following that guide star, you don't have to say, "I did anything wrong. I may have done things very, very well, but my job is to do it better tomorrow. Even if I'm the best community in subject A or subject B, even if my agency as a public administrator is giving the best possible service to its customers, we can do it better tomorrow!" My last day as Executive Director of ICMA will be October 2nd of this year. And I really pray that that will be the best day I will have given to the association—better than the day before, and the week before, and the month before, and the year before. And as a human being, I really pray that the last day I spend on this earth will be the best day in terms of honoring God and honoring my fellow human beings and being able to serve well. I'm a lucky guy, I've had a great career, I've had work in a great profession, I've had great colleagues, and this particular moment is a very special moment for me. Thank you very much.