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## Introduction: Special Edition on Local Government and Local Government Policy in Australia

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Introduction: Special Edition on Local Government and Local  
Government Policy in Australia

# **Introduction: Special Edition on Local Government and Local Government Policy in Australia**

Brian Dollery and Bligh Grant

## **Introduction**

Welcome to this Special Edition of *Journal of Economic and Social Policy* edited by Brian Dollery and Bligh Grant from the UNE Centre for Local Government at the University of New England. Since 1994, the UNE Centre for Local Government has provided an interdisciplinary platform for research into Australian local government, primarily in economics, finance, political science, organisational and leadership studies. The papers in this Special Edition reflect this cross-disciplinary approach. Before providing a synoptic review of the papers, a brief word by way of placing local government in the current Australian political context seems warranted.

If we were to restrict our view of Australian politics to the federal arena, it might appear that local government has enjoyed an increased prominence since the election of the Rudd government in December 2007 and the subsequent minority Gillard government following the election of August 2010. Over this period, the Australian Council of Local Government (ACLG) was initiated in 2008 (ACLG, 2008) and has to date held three meetings attracting over 500 delegates from local governments across Australia on each occasion. These fora have accompanied increased Commonwealth infrastructure spending directed toward local governments (albeit within the ambit of the \$42 Nation Building and Jobs Plan in response to the global economic downturn (Australian Government, 2011)). ACLG has also witnessed repeated pledges by the Australian government to pursue Constitutional recognition of local government, now a bipartisan Federal commitment, although at the time of writing a far from settled affair in terms of the final shape of the proposed reform (see, for example, Albanese, 2010; ALGA, 2010).

Further, under the direction of the ACLG Steering Committee (ACLG, 2009) the federal government has also initiated the Australian Centre for Excellence in Local Government (ACELG), housed jointly by a consortium of institutions

headed by the University of Technology Sydney and Canberra University. ACELG has announced a program of training and research and development (ACELG, 2011), which has yet to take shape.

Taken together, these reforms may signal a new era for local government in the political configuration of Australia. Yet this is belied by the fact that local governments have continued to experience far-reaching, externally imposed reform processes, framed primarily by the problem of financial sustainability. To begin with, Andrew Kelly documents the adoption of State of Environment Reports (SoERs) in NSW in three phases extending from the *Local Government Act 1993*. While SoERs have been a statutory requirement only in NSW, Andrew's account demonstrates that legislative requirements can be foisted upon all local governments in a particular jurisdiction despite the high degree of variability between municipal entities in their capacity to address these legal requirements. He also demonstrates how councils have responded to these challenges and how legislation has been refined to incorporate both a regional perspective on environmental reporting alongside Community Strategic Planning (see also Prior and Herriman, 2010).

Two contributions to this Special Edition centre on an emergent theme in Australian local government; the creation of different forms of shared service provision. While the concept of shared service provision aimed at both enhancing service delivery and achieving efficiencies is relatively simple, it has been difficult to successfully implement, as the experience of some state bureaucracies in Australia has borne out (see, for instance, Dollery and Grant, 2010). With this in mind, in their paper for this Special Edition, Don Ramsland and Brian Dollery propose a two-tier model of decision-making within regional service provision co-existing with the preservation local preferences. In a similar vein, Simone de Souza and Brian Dollery examine the 'Common Service Model' developed by Brighton Council in Tasmania, which provides tailored solutions for other municipalities in a range of services, including IT, and planning and financial management.

The experience of the Lake Macquarie City Council internal review process as presented here demonstrates that reforms to internal processes can be identified and implemented from within a council structure thereby avoiding the conflict and turmoil of structural change. Brian Dollery, Glen Walker and Brian Bell document how a thorough internal review of operations targeted both sources of savings and areas of business expansion for Lake Macquarie City Council.

Two of the papers for this Special Edition discuss leadership in local government, in particular the roles of appointed executive officers, a subject that has received scant attention in Australia compared with other jurisdictions (see, for example, Mouritzen and Svara, 2002; Grant, Dollery and Gow, 2011). In his study, Stephen Jones examines the changing role of CEOs in Victoria and Queensland, arguing that clarity of performance-based contracts can serve as a significant impetus for the generation of efficiencies and accountability at the municipal level. Breaking from the largely empirical approaches of the other contributions to this volume, Bligh Grant and Josie Fisher examine what they, following Chandler (2008), refer to as a direct ethical justification for local government in Australia, inclusive of a decisive role for council managers/CEOs. In deploying Mark Moore's (1995) theory of public value, these authors argue in favour of the role that appointed executives play in the council-manager form of local government compared to the roles of administrators in other governmental contexts. These more familiar contexts are characterised by ministerial authority and attendant ideas of accountability and, indeed, obedience.

Finally, Lou Conway with Brian Dollery and Bligh Grant examine the ambiguities surrounding the idea of 'regional development' as deployed by Regional Development Boards in NSW and Western Australia, which, in many instances, are constituted by long-serving participants in local governments. Echoing the contribution of Stephen Jones et al. in an earlier contribution to *Journal of Economic and Social Policy* (Jones, et al., 2009), the authors suggest that while regional development is primarily conceptualised as business development and as a mechanism of leveraging funding from other tiers of government to enhance economic growth, there are also significant ambiguities and indeed a degree of cynicism attendant to the idea, to the extent that, even with a revitalised structure and a highly experienced Minister in Simon Crean, the current focus on regionalism might be in danger of slipping toward the fate of previous efforts under post-war Labor administrations (Kelly, et al., 2009). Certainly, the interface between local governments and these revitalised regional structures, particularly in terms of key personnel, suggests itself as a subject for reflection and future empirical research.

The overall portrait generated by the research presented in this Special Edition is that of a vital and innovative local government sector, one which is worthy of the renewed political legitimacy sought by some. This is well demonstrated by the innovations generated at the local level – the 'bottom-up' reforms initiated at Lake Macquarie and emerging shared service arrangements in Brighton, Tasmania. Indeed, shared services as a means of achieving financial efficiencies

while retaining 'local voice and local choice', is emerging as an important area for future research.

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