

Subversive Leadership: Hegemony, Contestation and the Future of Regions

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Regional research and researchers in Australia have paid relatively little attention to questions of regional leadership. Academic work in this area has tended to be dominated by accounts of charismatic individual leaders and the personal capacities they may, or may not, exhibit. More attention has been paid to the question of governance in Australia and the ways in which neo liberal policies of government seek to shift the responsibility - and cost - of territorial development to individual communities. Research in Australia has not sought to understand the relationship between leadership and governance and has largely ignored the emerging international literature on place leadership. This paper seeks to shed light on the leadership of places in Australia by drawing upon the experience of two non metropolitan locations in South Australia. The paper argues that there is a strong interaction between government, governance and leadership in Australia with leaders sometimes taking an oppositional role to government and in other instances serving to mediate relations across spatial scales. The paper brings into question the nature of leadership in rural and regional communities in Australia and the ways in which leaders interpret their roles.

The processes and outcomes of regional development in Australia have attracted the attention of researchers for more than half a century. Beginning in the immediate post-War period, Australian governments have sought to encourage the development of selected localities, both to reduce the perceived over-development of the major metropolitan centres (where more than 60 per cent of the population resides) and address the limited scale and fragility of many non metropolitan regions. As Collits (2002) and others (Beer, Maude and Pritchard 2003; Gray and Lawrence 2001) have noted, the policies of population decentralisation that marked the period from 1945 to the mid 1970s have been followed by waves of engagement and dis-engagement with explicit regional policies in Australia at both the State and Federal levels. The decentralisation policies of the past, however, continue to cast a long shadow over regional policy and debate in Australia. In the mainstream media and public discourse 'regional' Australia is presented and discussed as non metropolitan Australia, despite the fact that analysts and much policy development acknowledges that regions encompass both urban and non urban settings. Currently the Australian Government is committed to explicit regional development policies and this engagement is reflected in the establishment of a new Department of Regional Australia (DoRA), the creation of a Cabinet level portfolio focussed on regional issues, and the roll out of a number of new regional programs¹.

¹ The Australian Government's current commitment to regional issues reflects, in large measure, the fact that two non metropolitan members of Parliament hold the balance of power and maintain the current government in office.

There is a rich and vibrant literature on regional development in Australia but most scholars have focussed on the role of structural processes in their examination of both how regions have developed and the consequent patterns of population and economic activity. There are solid intellectual grounds for this focus on structural processes because, as Logan (1976) argued, the division of responsibilities and taxation powers between the three tiers of government in Australia – Federal, State and local – has resulted in a fundamental mismatch in capacities and responsibilities (Brown and Bellamy 2007). Local government has the most clearly articulated and well developed interest in the development of individual regions, but lacks the resources to achieve change. The Federal Government, by contrast, commands sufficient funds to reshape development processes but does not have a clear Constitutional or political mandate to engage with this agenda. State Governments, on the other hand, are trapped by the competitive nature of Australian Federalism (Neutze 1978) – with each jurisdiction competing for public and private investment – and an entrenched pattern of metropolitan dominance that discourages the commitment of resources outside the capitals (Beer, Bolam and Maude 1994).

There are a second set of structural processes that have had a determinant influence on the pattern of regional development in Australia and which have attracted the attention of Australian scholars. Over the last century market processes have consistently favoured metropolitan over non metropolitan places for the location of economic activities, especially manufacturing and service industries. Colonial development in the 19th Century resulted in metropolitan primacy in virtually all parts of Australia. This pattern of development was reinforced, rather than eroded, following Federation – partly because businesses sought to establish close to their major markets and in some measure because of the explicit infrastructure investment decisions of state governments. More recently, the liberalisation of the Australian economy that began in 1984 with the floating of the Australian dollar, the reduction of tariffs for most imported goods and the de-regulation of labour markets, has resulted in new growth dynamics. The removal of many of the supports that sustained metropolitan based manufacturing industry has allowed other industries – including mining and agri-business – in other locations to flourish (Beer and Clower 2009; Haslam McKenzie et al 2010). These changes in the structure of Australian industry and their implications for the pattern of regional development have been critical and have been the subject of much research into the processes shaping Australian regions.

The liberalisation of many parts of the Australian economy that commenced in 1984 and continued for at least two decades reshaped the nation's economic drivers but also recast the role of government in society and the economy. As a number of commentators have noted, there has been a shift away from a 'welfare' state to a 'workfare' model of income support in Australia (Larner 2005) and the re-evaluation of previously unchallenged social pillars – including relatively open access to social housing (Baker and Beer 2007) and government-provided income support in older age (Australian Government Treasury 2010). As a number of authors have commented (Beer et al 2005; O'Neil and Argent 2005), neoliberalism has fundamentally recast the

relationship between governments and the regions in Australia. Grey and Lawrence (2000) have argued that since the early 1990s both the Australian Government and state governments have promoted locally based regional development initiatives while advocating a 'self help' ethos that suggests regions can shape their own future. At a practical level, this interpretation of regional processes has been challenged, because while some authors and practitioners have argued that any locality can plan and act strategically to secure their prosperity (Kenyon and Black 2001, others have contended that these advocates are 'false prophets' (Forth 2002) who ignore the impact of structural influences and mislead communities in their development.

The evolution of Australia's regions and the history of regional analysis is significant for this paper because it provides an important context for the discussion of debate around regional leadership. Analysis of regional development in Australia has been dominated by a focus on structural influences with little systematic attention paid to agency within regions. While there are numerous accounts of the actions and strategies employed by individual regional development bodies (see Beer, Maude and Pritchard 2003 for a summary) much of this literature is chaotic and without a conceptual or theoretical foundation. Research into leadership serves as a conduit to reintroduce questions of *agency* into our understanding of regional processes and gives life to the lived experience of each region. It also helps us to better understand the differences between regions, and how scale can influence the processes of development. This paper examines how persons in a number of different positions within a region understand and constitute their role as leaders in one Australian region, the Riverland of South Australia. The paper considers the governance of Australia's regions before moving on to explore both contemporary European and Australian perspectives on regional leadership. The paper then examines the accounts of individuals from the case study region and the interaction between the system of governance and local leadership. The paper highlights that, in Australia at least, local leadership is often subversive of the wider agendas of central governments and that through both contestation and more subtle resistance, regional leaders commonly seek to reposition their region in opposition to the apparent interests of government.

Leadership of Place and Leadership in Place: European and Australian Perspectives

There is an emerging international literature focussed on leadership and its relationship with particular places (see Collinge, Gibney and Mabey 2010; Stough 2003, Stimson et al 2008). Much of this writing is of European origin and reflects on-going debates within the European Union around territorial development and related issues (see Lyons 2007). The leadership of place, in this context, has been explicitly linked to the now mature debates around 'joined up' government and the development of integrated approaches to the apparently intractable problems confronting some cities and regions. There is a second, equally important connection to research and policy on 'place making' and the multi-layered nature of place as a *location*, a *locale* and a

'*sense of place*' (Agnew 1987). Leadership is seen as important in achieving the integrated development of cities, regions and sub-regions (Collinge and Gibney 2010 p. 14). Moreover, as Collinge and Gibney (2010) have noted, issues of the adequacy and effectiveness of leadership are now seen as helpful in seeking to explain policy and implementation deficits associated with recent urban and regional innovations. The restructuring of key parts of the economy has also called into question 'the efficacy of contemporary arrangement for local and regional economic development.....and is placing 'formal' political and executive leadership...under the spotlight (Collinge and Gibney 2011). Critically, research into the leadership of place (Mabey and Freeman 2011) notes that our conventional understanding of leadership, its expression and qualities, is inadequate because of the greater complexity associated with guiding places with multiple stakeholders, goals and timescales when compared with more conventional organisations, such as corporations (Collinge and Gibney 2011). Collinge and Gibney (2011 p. 20) argue that

It seems to be generally agreed that 'something new' is occurring in the wider leadership environment (Trickett et al 2008). The research literature suggests that there are 'new' complexities being encountered by leaders outside the single organisational context; leaders find themselves representing places rather than organisations; there are more uncertainties to be accommodated as outcomes are difficult to pin down and there are more unknowns; leaders are increasingly required to lead initiatives without formal power but with responsibility.

The leadership of place literature recognises complexity both in the ways in which leadership is expressed and enacted. There is, for example, both a 'leadership of the led' and a 'leadership of the governing', there are synergies between the concept of 'network' governance and place leadership; and, as Soturatua (2010) has argued, there are new ways of understanding leadership as a process, rather than as an outcome, that acknowledges and privileges the role of public service professionals and managers in ways that conflict with more conventional accounts of leadership.

Emerging and current research on the leadership of place clearly suggests that new types and forms of leadership are emerging and finding expression in urban, rural and broader regional settings. Researchers have also identified multiple epistemological stands to research on the leadership of place. Mabey and Freeman (2010) argue that there are at least four major philosophical perspectives: a functionalist discourse that seeks to document the positive and reproducible features of leadership; a critical discourse that examines the ways in which 'leadership' is used to excuse leaders from 'censure and critique'; a constructivist discourse that examines the ways in which leadership is defined and understood socially and culturally, and, a dialogic discourse that is concerned with the way in which an event or situation 'becomes' leadership in the understanding of a group.

Research into leadership and place in Australia has tended to focus not on the **leadership of place**, but on **leadership in places**. In this respect much of this work has been essentially functionalist in its epistemology and broadly atheoretical. Little attention has been given to the relationship between leadership and the development of places nor of conceptualising why leadership might be called for in these instances.

Australian research examining the role of leaders in rural communities has suggested that effective local leadership builds community resilience and can help secure an economic future for a region or community (Epps and Sorensen, 1996). A study by Smailes (2002a; 2002b) in South Australia found that leaders had a pivotal role in providing ideas and a vision for the future and thus provided a focus around which community identity and belonging could be fostered (Smailes, 2002a, 2002b). Four rural communities in Queensland were included in a study of leadership undertaken by Epps and Sorensen (1996) and this research found four key qualities of effective rural leadership:

- the formulation of a realistic vision of the community's economic and social development;
- the achievement of a high level of community approval of, if not active commitment to, that vision;
- motivating key persons and groups to achieve the vision; and finally,
- leading by example.

The literature on leadership often characterises leaders as the vision holder, the keepers of the dream, or the person who has a vision of the organization's purpose. The communication of a vision is instrumental in setting challenging goals, making followers assess and question traditional methods, values and beliefs (Kirkpatrick and Locke 1996). Rafferty and Griffith (2004) define vision as 'the expression of an idealized picture of the future based around organizational values' (p. 332). Their study investigated the relationship between vision and outcomes and found that articulation of a vision does not always influence followers in a positive way (p. 348). Conger and Kanungo (1987) asserted that charismatic leaders were able to attract followers because of the impact of their communication style (p. 643). They argued that transformational leaders ascended to their role by showing self confidence, dedication to the task and by displaying flamboyant, risky or expressive behaviour. Other researchers have interpreted the drivers of leadership differently. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) argued on the basis of empirical evidence that charismatic forms of communication have no major impact on the performance or attitudes of groups, but that instead group 'buy in' is a function of the cogency of the vision and its ability to result in desired change.

Kroehn et al (2011) examined two instances of regional leadership in Australia's rural periphery – the Wheatbelt of Western Australia and in Port Lincoln on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula. In the former instance leadership was associated with the emergence of a potential new industry – the commercialisation of products from oil mallees – with a number of public sector actors playing an important role in fostering the emergence of this new

industry. In the case of Port Lincoln, Southern Bluefin Tuna harvesting was reborn as an aquaculture industry through efforts of a small group of local charismatic industry leaders linked to overseas interests. Importantly, Kroehn et al (2011) concluded that while the oil mallee industry was ultimately unsuccessful because of its failure to alter key government policies, the latter group were successful because of their capacity to act outside the constraints of conventional public sector processes; their ability to exploit the emerging strategic interests of the South Australian Government and their linkages to a global market.

Governance and Australia's Regions

The concept of *governance* lies at the centre of much contemporary theory on the role of the state and the implementation of urban and regional development programs (Kearns and Turok 2000; Jordan *et al* 2004; Whitehead 2003; Jessop 1997; 2002). Jordan *et al* (2005 p. 478) observed that 'there is no universally accepted definition of governance; there is not even a 'consensus on which set of phenomena can be properly grouped under the title of governance'. While there is an element of truth to this argument, much of the literature recognises common elements as typical of governance, including a shift from the formal structures of government to the incorporation of a wider range of interests in decision making and the achievement of program objectives (Whitehead 2003). Typically governance is associated with the rise of partnership arrangements and a reduced ability of governments to directly determine outcomes. Governance takes different forms in different nations and Blatter (2004) notes that within federal systems, governance is marked by both horizontal links between agents and institutions, and also hierarchical, competitive and co-operative modes of interaction. Governance, therefore, can lead to complex forms of interaction within federations, with both positive and negative outcomes and interactions. Importantly also, policy approaches and initiatives that are ostensibly decentralised often reveal very little decentralisation of power and resources (Smyth *et al* 2004).

Geddes (2005 p. 360) noted that the move to governance is commonly associated with neo liberalism and that governance practices do not necessarily result in the revival of localities. Instead, he argues, the rise of governance approaches often results in the stripping away of previous institutional structures and an intensification of competition between places. The 'roll out' of neo liberal policies in Australia was accompanied by a further centralisation of power in Australia, with the shift from Keynesian to monetarist economic management resulting in reduced public sector borrowings and expenditure and micro economic reforms – such as the privatisation of government trading enterprises - that adversely affected some regions, especially non metropolitan places.

Any discussion of governance explicitly or implicitly raises questions around the scale at which governance occurs. McGuirk (2003) has argued that we need both to comprehend the scale at which governance is undertaken and

the political struggle that has produced that outcome. From McGuirk's (2003 p. 203) perspective

Scale, therefore, not only provides a setting for social and political contestation, but as Brenner (1998) suggests, is also one of its principal stakes as dominant social and political forces struggle to form a secure and scalar organization of governance that can serve their particular strategies....Governance at any scale is constructed simultaneously and constitutively by actors, institutions, and politico-economic forces operating across a range of spatial scales (Cochrane, 1999; Jessop, Peck and Tickell, 1999). Thus there is a politics to scale and a scale politics.

Put more simply, McGuirk (2003) draws our attention to the fact that there is on-going conflict over the scale at which key decisions are made. Issues of scale are critical because while some regions – such as central Sydney in McGuirk's (2003) research – may be awarded strategic priority by central governments – others are recognised as peripheral to the core interests of governments and the economy and suffer for it (Beer and Thomas 2007). Governance and the scale of decision making therefore has the potential to be critical to the wellbeing of individual regions.

There is a substantial body of work on the nature and structure of governance arrangements for regional development in Australia (see Beer and Maude 1997; Beer, Houghton and Maude 2003; Martin and Eversole 2005). While the Chifley Labor Government established a national network of Committees for Development and Decentralisation in 1945 (Logan 1972), effective governance structures intended to promote regional development did not emerge in most parts of Australia until the 1990s (Beer 1998 – Local Economy). By the end of that decade most Australian states bore witness to a multi-tiered approach to regional development and governance. Many local governments continued to support a range of economic development initiatives within their jurisdiction, while state governments financed various initiatives and worked at a broader scale via a regional development board, Regional Development Commission or similar agency. At the same time, the Australian Government sought direct regional engagement through its structure of Area Consultative Committees, through which a number of infrastructure and other programs were funded (ref the auditor general report). Following its election in 2007, Australia's new Rudd Labor Government established Regional Development Australia Committees to serve as the primary conduit for both national and state government engagement with the regions. This innovation reflected both the outcomes of governmental enquiries into the previous, fragmented structure (Keniry 2002), and academic commentary in this area (Maude and Beer 2005).

The emergence for government-sponsored regional development structures has not been accompanied by a burgeoning of evident regional leadership. This absence reflects a number of structural conditions: first, Australian governments have not embraced an ethos or philosophy of subsidiarity and the introduction of government funded regional development agencies has, in

some measure, supplanted local initiatives. Second, having established regional development entities, governments have tended to carefully select their boards of management and key personnel. As (Conway 2006; Conway and Dollery 2009) noted from research on regional development in New South Wales and Western Australia, governments have ensured that appointees both accept the philosophies of the government of the day and are willing to work within government-defined boundaries. Thirdly, while some state governments (Haslam McKenzie 2002) and non-government institutions have sought to promote the development of leaders, graduates of such programs have had limited opportunity to express such capacities within the public sphere. Davies (2009) also noted the marginal efficacy of such programmes, observing that they tended to focus on issues of management rather than the achievement of genuine transformation.

The review of regional governance in Australia raises critical questions for our examination of leadership. A fundamental issue to arise from this review is whether regional leadership in Australia is naturally inclined to be oppositional – that is, are the centralising tendencies of governance so great that regional leaders are inevitably called upon to stand in opposition to central governments? Secondly, it is important to ask, how do individual leaders interpret and understand their role relative to government policy? Do they consider the potential for conflict with governments, and if so, how do they negotiate that both personally and in their public lives? Third, what are the strategies and tactics used by regional leaders to negate the hegemonic tendencies of centralised governments? That is, how do they seek to achieve their objectives and potentially overcome those of governments? Finally, how do leaders seek to both build and maintain their position as legitimate leaders within the community? Earlier studies have suggested that regional development agencies in Australia may be viewed as illegitimate leaders (Beer and Maude 1997) but for most others this is not the case. It is therefore important to ask, what is the source of their influence, and how is that maintained and negotiated over time?

Regional Leadership in the Riverland of South Australia

The Riverland of South Australia is an area of irrigated agriculture on the River Murray that was first occupied by European settlers at the start of the 20th Century and which subsequently grew on the back of citrus, stone fruit and other horticultural industries. Beginning in the 1990s grape production for wine escalated rapidly, though subsequent declines in the Australian wine industry have challenged that sector of the regional economy. In 2009 the South Australian Government announced a Riverland Futures Taskforce, charged with responsibility for developing a new future for the region. The Taskforce was constituted as a partnership between the three local governments in the region, the South Australian Murray Darling Basin Natural Resource Management Board, Regional Development Australia and the Government of South Australia. Some \$ AUS 20 million was set aside to implement the eventual plan and encourage the growth of new industries. The specific objectives of the Taskforce were: promotion of diversification of existing industry, strengthening of local enterprises and enhancement of

business structures and local value added opportunities; promotion of environmental policies and programs that align with the strategies of the SA Murray Darling Basin Natural Resource Management Board (MDBNRMB); and promotion of education and social policies that enhance community infrastructure and development and encourage population stabilisation and future growth ; to assist in the carriage of the Riverland Regional Investment Opportunities Project and work collaboratively with the Regional Development Australia; and develop projects that attract new, sustainable industries to the Riverland.

The establishment of the Taskforce reflected the significant challenges confronting the region. The Riverland had been affected by declining economic conditions for more than two decades as a result of increased competition from global competitors, including competition from suppliers of dried apricots in Turkey and juicing oranges in Brazil. At the same time, the strengthening of the Australian dollar after the year 2000 hindered the prospects of the wine industry and resulted in some contraction. Finally, a decade long drought in the Murray Darling Basin, in combination with the over-allocation of water resources upstream, resulted in reduced water availability and further industry decline.

This section of the paper examines the experience of regional leaders in the western part of the Riverland in South Australia – centred on the small town of Waikerie - and in particular considers the ways in which these individuals interpret and understand both their role and their relationships with government. There have been two significant governance innovations in this region over the last five years: the emergence of the Waikerie District Development Committee (WDDC) and the Riverland Futures Taskforce which covered all parts of the Riverland, including Waikerie and its surrounding areas. Each will be considered in turn with respect to: membership and constitution; scale; relationship with central government; vision and aspirations and both objective and subjective markers of achievement.

The Waikerie District Development Committee

The Waikerie District Development Committee was established in 2005 as Waikerie's economy faced significant challenges from industry restructuring and an economy that had been sluggish for a considerable period. The Waikerie District is an irrigation area that was first established in the early 1900s. There are a number of irrigation districts in the Riverland of South Australia and each has had a distinctive history, reflecting both the origins of the arrivals and various eras of engagement and disengagement with agrarian experimentation. At the start of the 21st Century Waikerie District Council merged with the local government in the – relatively – nearby town of Loxton, effectively creating a much larger, but less immediate, local tier of government. It was within this economic and environment that the Waikerie District Development Committee was established.

The Waikerie District Development Committee is an incorporated not-for-profit organisation that had its origins in a gathering of businessmen over a

drink in a hotel. The businessmen were motivated to establish a new forum for advancing the interests of the Waikerie area because they were concerned there was a lack of community desire for change and because they believed the district was not receiving appropriate support from council. The original impetus for action was *ad hoc* and informal but was formalised through after several meetings.

The scale at which decisions are made and enacted was seen to be an important part of the genesis of WDDC. Interviews with key leaders involved with the WDDC indicated that the catalyst for formation was the amalgamation of local government which saw senior management located in Loxton with the result that they were 'too far from Waikerie' and 'not attuned to what you can see all the time'. There was a perception that the physical absence of key local government staff meant that Waikerie's interests were not always placed first.

The WDDC's origins have meant that it was perhaps inevitable that the Committee has, in some ways, stood in opposition to formal government. Interestingly, much of its opposition has been directed at council which by global standards can only be thought of as small scale and local. The WDDC has both provided an alternative focus for governance to the formal processes of government in Waikerie and its district, and actively questioned many of its decisions. It lobbied and made presentations to local government, its chair met monthly with the local government Chief Executive, and in consequence the WDDC and its office holders were perceived as 'protagonists to some degree, because we were promoting this area'. In the words of one leader

they see us as a 'stirrers' group – as we comment on Council business plans.

In many respects there appears to be a cultural gap between the WDDC and the local government within which Waikerie sits and this has emerged despite the election of local councillors. From the perspective of one regional leader associated with the WDDC

nothing seems to happen – Councillors don't seem to have influence – power lies with the (professional staff) Directors.

In large measure this comment reflects both frustration with perceived inactivity and a lack of understanding of the constraints under which local governments operate. It does, however, highlight the sense of powerlessness community members and leaders from outside government often feel.

The WDDC's explicit and implicit critique of formal governance included the wider Riverland Regional Development Board, with the Committee taking on a task – the raising of funds for the purchase of a paddle steamer, the Murray River Queen – that was beyond the Board's capacity. The Committee has also lobbied state politicians and senior public servants and met with the Riverland Futures Taskforce. Critically, leaders associated with the WDDC saw themselves as excluded by the Riverland Futures Taskforce. They

believed work they had commissioned for an economic plan for Waikerie was simply replicated by the Taskforce and that they were effectively excluded from substantive engagement with that initiative. As one leader noted, 'a relationship, we just didn't have one'. Importantly, the Taskforce was seen to be patronising and attuned to an agenda at odds with the Committee's concerns.

The WDDC's vision and aspirations have always been focussed on promoting the economic interests of the town and its district. In many respects it has always been an archetypical growth coalition (Stone 1989), dominated by local business interests. Current priorities include lifting the image of the community, boosting tourism, re-introducing secondary industry and developing a transport hub. The WDDC has remained active, despite a period of senescence due to the increased activities of the Riverland Taskforce, organising major community events such as the Hangar Ball, and lobbying for new industries.

A narrow focus on economic growth – potentially at the expense of other nearby communities – has the potential to discount the Committee's leadership credentials, both inside and outside the community. Leaders within the WDDC recognise that they are perceived to be parochial by some outside the district but contend that

We recognise that other districts have issues too – and work with them – but we are always sure we are driving our own agenda ... but we acknowledge that we have to be part of the wider scene.

Participants in the WDDC are also aware that members of the Waikerie community may not acknowledge them or their organisation as leaders. When asked if the community recognises them as leaders, one respondent replied

some would – others would see it is a select group of businessmen pushing their own barrow – but we are working for the benefit of the community.

The Waikerie District Development Committee appears to have a well grounded future because while only four of the original businessmen remain engaged, other, younger persons have joined. There is some evidence that the alternative 'voice' offered by the WDDC has come at some cost to some of its members who have found themselves no longer able to maintain their careers in the region. One current aspiration of the WDDC is to raise sufficient funds to employ a staff member on a full time or part time basis in order to increase their capacity to achieve their ends. As one leader noted, in order to secure their future, 'we need a win... a staff member and a win would do the job'.

The WDDC has accumulated both objective and subjective indicators of success. Perhaps most importantly many of the events and activities it organises are well attended, which suggests widespread acceptance of its leadership role across the community. Other more concrete markers include

organising the purchase of the steam boat the Murray River Queen as a tourist attraction, the success of its major community event – the Hangar Ball – on an annual basis, and the willingness of state and local governments to engage with Committee. The WDDC has experienced setbacks as well as successes, the Murray River Queen as a tourism enterprise collapsed after four years, and the Committee's influence on the formal processes of government appears to have been muted. However, it has endured, and as Beer and Maude (2007) argued, longevity is one of the key determinants of success in Australian local economic development.

The Riverland Futures Taskforce

The Riverland Futures Taskforce was established in 2009 by the South Australian Government in response to the perception of an on-going crises in the region. The Taskforce was established with a government Member of Parliament as the Chair, and a range of members, including representatives of local government. The Chair of the Taskforce was replaced early in its life when the Member of Parliament was elevated to the Ministry and a member of the local community was appointed to replace him.

The role given to the Riverland Futures Taskforce was, in many respects, a conventional government response by an Australian government to the challenge of regional decline (see Beer and Thom s 2007). They were charged with mapping out a new future for the region and in providing advice on appropriate avenues for investment to achieve that end. They consulted with the community, engaged consultants and sought a wide variety of views on the region's best prospects. The Taskforce was scheduled to conclude at the end of 2010, but was carried over until the 30th of June 2011 and after that time the new Regional Development Australia Committee will take on their on-going responsibilities. For local community members, participation in the Taskforce immediately elevated them to the role of significant regional leaders, but unlike the members of the WDDC, their leadership roles sat within the sphere of government, rather than outside the machinery of the state.

Leaders participating in the Taskforce operated on a much greater *spatial scale* than those involved with the WDDC, because while the latter's focus is on a single town of approximately 4,000 people and its immediate district, the Riverland extends for over 160 km east west and 30 km north south. The *operational scale* of the Taskforce, however, was in some ways more limited than the WDDC because their role was tightly defined to include consultation and the development of an investment prospectus and devoid of operational responsibilities. Critically, the Taskforce was not charged with recommending projects for funding, but was instead just one part of the advisory panel. The final decision on projects to be funded remained in Adelaide, the state's metropolitan centre and seat of government.

The vision and aspirations of the Taskforce were focussed on building community consensus, defining and achieving a sustainable future for the region, and, critically, working with the state government to secure

investment. The objectives and vision of the Taskforce inevitably resulted in leadership being constructed and understood in a way that was fundamentally different to how it found expression within the WDDC. Instead of being overtly oppositional, leadership was understood by the respondents to embed a dualism: at face value leaders needed to be aligned with the avowed priorities and mission of government but in their dealings behind closed doors they sought to redirect and challenge government decisions. For individual leaders it was a matter of negotiating each situation and each challenge as it arose. As one leader noted,

If you are going to be in those roles you need to be a bit canny... advocacy wasn't the only role of the Taskforce...you need to know when to keep your mouth shut but also know when to be articulate.

One leader neatly summarised their leadership role as one of subverting the adverse decisions of governments, noting that

...even within the Taskforce it was a matter of challenging Government... the role is to present flaws in the plan to government... its about being subtly subversive.

At a practical level this meant choosing to speak out on some of the decisions made by government. Examples included a proposal to reduce exit payments to farmers leaving the industry, as well as proposed cuts to water allocations. Other decisions, however, have gone unchallenged. Where necessary, leaders were willing to use the media to present their views in opposition to government announcements, but on other occasions used the same outlets to support the policies and directions of the state government.

Knowledge of government processes and outcomes was seen to be of critical importance, because, in the words of one leader

Government relies on country people being not well informed and not very active in advocating for change.

In some key respects this view of regional leaders as co-optees of government suggests an awareness by both sides of the roles each will play in such initiatives. One respondent responded that,

What do they think of leaders? They identify who the leaders are in the community and they befriend them for their own purposes. We both use each other....I doubt that politicians have much view of what a community leadership is except for what use they are.

Identifying the objective and subjective markers of achievement for the Riverland Futures Taskforce is, in some ways, much more difficult than in the case of the WDDC. Critically, the Taskforce served as part of the broader machinery of government and it is therefore much more difficult to isolate and identify specific outcomes. The leaders themselves partly acknowledged this complexity with one noting that

Success in regional leadership – its about building community agreement.

Another perspective on success in leadership was that it was

about building community capacity – so they are competent, informed and competent to do it themselves.

Perhaps the most powerful insight into the nature of leadership under these circumstances was the view that

..its about demonstration of sameness not difference.

This comment referred specifically to the generation of a common viewpoint across a region, but it serves also as a metaphor for the nature of the engagement between community representatives and government decision makers on initiatives such as the Regional Futures Taskforce. These major government interventions in a region offer an opportunity to develop a commonality of perspective across the two sectors and through that process potentially establish longer term relationships and better outcomes for the region.

Conclusions

This paper was concerned with examining the relationship between leadership and governance in Australia. Using one region as a case study, the paper has explored the social construction of leadership in two very different, but overlapping, organisations. Importantly, the research shows that regional leadership cannot be thought of a single or unitary entity: there is not one set of behaviours or actions that can be construed as leadership. Instead, leadership finds expression in multiple ways, depending on circumstances, the background of individuals, scale and engagement with both government and the broader community. It is the argument of this paper that persons involved with both the WDDC and the RFT have acted as regional leaders and have made an important contribution to the future of the places in which they live and work.

This paper has been concerned to explore the relationship between governance and leadership in non metropolitan Australia. It was hypothesised that the hegemonic tendencies of central government in Australia would inevitably result in regional leaders taking on an oppositional role to government. The fieldwork has shown that under two very different sets of circumstances regional leaders have sought to achieve defined outcomes that they believed would advance the interests of their region. In the case of the WDDC it was a matter both of acting independently of government when the public sector was perceived to be inadequate, and of challenging the actions and decisions of state and local government when they were perceived to be ineffective. Within the RFT the focus of oppositional activity was more subtle and nuanced, with leaders trading off

endorsement of one set of government initiatives for the capacity to challenge and change other decisions.

The case study has documented two very different types of organisation and styles of leadership. Both can be considered to be effective in their own terms, though their achievements have been constrained by the concentration of power and resources within central governments. The findings have broader implications for our understanding of regional leadership both in Australia and other societies. The outcomes of this research do not support the idea that the simple articulation of a vision for a region is sufficient to establish leadership for a region. Instead, while vision may be a necessary precondition, leadership appears to be a much more complex and contested role. In the case of the WDDC, the vision for the region is not even codified, it is a simple commitment to put the interests of the district first, regardless of opposition or wider concerns.

In some respects, the local members of the RFT encapsulate the new complexity to place leadership identified and discussed by Collinge and Gibney (2011). For them leadership has involved balancing local or community interests on the one hand, and the need to maintain engagement with government on the other. Judgements have needed to be made on an issue by issue basis, and the simple boosterism of the WDDC would be inadequate and inappropriate under these circumstances. There is, perhaps inevitably, a place for both types of leadership across regional Australia. Direct advocacy and boosterism is needed to force often distant governments to act, but would be counterproductive in subsequent negotiations over action.

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