

Multi-Sectoral Collaboration in Central Queensland: Bringing the State Back in?

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Abstract

In recent years, a wave of public sector reform, emphasising multi-sectoral collaboration, 'joined-up' government and community engagement has swept through Australia and other advanced liberal nations. To a large extent, this is consistent with a well-documented shift in the way contemporary society is governed — that is, from a model of government administration to one of governance in which state and non-state actors work 'in partnership' to achieve particular outcomes. This, in turn, has been associated with discourses of 'small government', 'active citizenship' and the 'rolling back' of the state. Yet, what appears to be emerging more recently is a call for a more active and interventionist state, albeit one that is more participatory and responsive to local needs.

This paper forms part of an ARC-funded 'Engaged Government' project: a large, collaborative research project on government-community engagement for regional outcomes, which involves four Queensland government departments and three universities. The paper suggests that changes to state activity should not be interpreted as an attempt by political authorities to govern more, or to govern less, simply by rolling the state in and out at will. Rather, new forms of governance reflect a desire by state agencies to govern *better* by continuously posing themselves questions such as who should be governed? How? And by whom? This paper considers these questions in the context of various attempts at multi-sectoral collaboration in Central Queensland, and identifies potential incompatibilities between state and community objectives, which may render this new approach problematic.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been considerable public sector reform throughout Australia and other OECD nations. In its report *Globalisation and Devolution*, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2001a) criticised 'top down' approaches to governing, arguing that devolution would bring with it opportunities for innovations both in business decision-making and in institutional arrangements. An important change has been that associated with collaborative (so-called 'joined-up') approaches to governing in which different tiers and sectors of government work to develop what has been termed a 'whole-of-government strategy'. More broadly, notions of joined-up government also involve governments working with agencies that have traditionally been located outside the auspices of the state, such as the community and the private sector (Head 1999; Adams and Hess 2001; Reddel 2002a; Geddes 2005). These changes have occurred alongside two major recent shifts in approaches to governing within advanced liberal democracies. The first has been the move from government administration to one of 'governance' in which decision-making is moving

beyond the hierarchies of the state to various hybrid forms of management comprised of state and non-state actors (Rhodes 1996; Stoker 1998). The second has been the growing focus upon spatial or place-based modes of governing, in which particular communities and regions have been encouraged to take responsibility for various forms of planning and decision-making (Jones 2001; Reddel 2002a). While this has previously involved an emphasis upon all things local, more recent attempts at place management have devolved the scale of action 'upwards' towards the regional level. The intersection of these two shifts towards governance and regional place management comprises what we might broadly term 'regional governance'.

It is apparent, however, that governments — notably state government agencies and local government bodies — are facing challenges in dealing with the new approaches to governing at the regional level (Reddel 2002b; Everingham et al. 2003; Lawrence 2004). One of the most significant challenges is that of finding ways of working with other levels and portfolios of government to enable the delivery of a whole-of-government approach, and of involving non-government sectors, including community and business, in decision-making processes. These challenges relate to different interpretations concerning what constitutes good collaboration and participation — and indeed, what even constitutes the community or region with whom state agents are required to engage. Questions have also been raised about the effectiveness of collaborative and participative approaches compared to more independent or unilateral action, as well as the type and degree of collaboration that is likely to work best. Finally, there is a recognised need to identify the factors that facilitate or impede better governance; and — arising from these considerations — to consider the issues of power, capacity, marginalisation and disadvantage that are likely to emerge in the implementation of these new approaches.

The purpose of this paper is to tease out these issues as they are played out in the context of Central Queensland, Australia. The research upon which this paper is based forms part of the Engaged Government Project,¹ which investigates recent attempts at participatory regional governance in the Central Queensland region. The project examines the experiences of collaboration from the perspective of chiefly government (state and local) personnel involved in a number of multi-sectoral collaborative projects in the region. This paper draws on notes taken in preliminary meetings over a 15-month period, prior to the commencement of formal project fieldwork, with both these regionally based personnel and those at the more central level typically involved in policy development. In presenting the preliminary findings from this research, we show that the concept of collaboration is certainly being embraced by state government bureaucrats and local government representatives and officials, yet there is also scepticism and concern about the move towards collaboration over a range of issues.

¹ For more details see <<http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/cgpp/projecteg/>>.

Framing the issues: the new terminology

The collaborative approach to governing that has been advocated and applied, in varying degrees, throughout Western democracies is accompanied by a particular terminology that describes a number of conceptually independent yet complementary practices of 'working together'. The terminology is often unclear. For this reason we seek to clarify, below, what we understand is meant by the various terms of community engagement, multi-sectoral collaboration, joined-up government and regional governance.

Community engagement

Community engagement is generally used to refer to the inclusion of 'the community' (in variety of possible forms) in government decision-making. This definition counterposes government and the community, with the former seen as the initiator of the engagement. However, both 'community' and 'engagement' can be defined in various ways. The community can refer to a group living in geographical proximity or a group linked by a common interest, such as 'the business community'. In practice, it often appears that when government commentators use the term 'community engagement' they take the term 'community' to refer to a very broad range of individuals and groups including private citizens, geographically-based groups, businesses and a whole panoply of interest-based and issue-based entities (Head 1999). For the purposes of this paper the geographic basis of community will be used, as we will be utilising *place*, specifically Central Queensland and the localities that comprise it, as the unit of analysis. All the various individuals and non-governmental groups — including businesses, industry and 'community' associations, environmental groups and Indigenous organisations — will be viewed as comprising the community of Central Queensland.

'Engagement' refers to government interaction with the community as a basis for incorporating community views into government decision-making processes. The degree and type of interaction can vary along a scale from minimal (such as the provision of information) through various degrees of consultation, coordination, and collaboration, to strong partnership or, potentially, to full community control of decision-making processes (Bishop 1999; Bishop and Davis 2002). Thus, community engagement may refer to widely divergent practices based upon the extent to which a government entity is prepared to include the community.

Multi-sectoral collaboration

This term is often used interchangeably with that of community engagement to denote a range of 'working together' arrangements between different sectors of society. Multi-sectoral collaboration is defined by the Tamarack Institute (2004, p. 1) as a:

"project in which many diverse actors – 'sectors' – share responsibilities, resources, and expertise. These actors may include any combination of national and local government, large and small business, non-governmental organizations and charities, and people who live in the community."

It is important to note that the term 'sector' is commonly used in two quite different ways. One meaning, and that which is used here, distinguishes between three 'spheres of society' in terms of modes of governing, that is, of the state (government and public service), the market (private business and industry), and 'civil society' (the voluntary or community sector). A second common use of the term distinguishes sectors on the basis of social functions that are *to be* governed (education, health, housing, transport, industry, and so forth) common to various portfolios of government. This latter use of 'sector' is not considered adequate for the purposes of this paper because it only stipulates *what is* to be governed rather than *who* is doing the governing, that is, what interests are involved in the collaboration. In contrast, a sector viewed as a sphere of society is inclusive of both senses of the term.

It is apparent in these formulations of community engagement and multi-sectoral collaboration that both exist under the umbrella concept of 'participatory democracy'. Participatory democracy is essentially synonymous with the concepts of 'deliberative' (Fung and Wright 2001) and 'associative' (Bradford 1998) democracy and refers to more direct participation of citizens in government decision-making. Participatory democracy has been variously formulated as 'governing of ourselves, by ourselves' (Bishop 1999: 12) or as 'deepening the ways in which ordinary people can effectively participate in and influence policies that directly affect their lives' (Fung and Wright 2001, p. 7). For Lovan et al. (2004, pp. 246-7), participatory governance encourages business, environmental, civic and a host of other groups to enter consensus-building arrangements, to develop 'authentic' (rather than agency-generated) dialogue, and to improve the capacity for seamless, integrated, policy making.

'Joined-up' government

The term 'joined-up government' refers to government initiation, or support, of multi-sectoral collaboration for the purposes of governing more holistically (Ling 2002; Reddel 2002b; Wilkins 2002). Governments 'join-up' — collaborate, partner, and align — with various public, private and community organisations in order to achieve a more integrated approach to decision-making. In a narrower sense, joined-up government has been used to refer to collaboration *within* the government sector. This can be both inter-agency (across portfolios) or inter-governmental (across levels of government) (Bellamy 1999; Pollitt 2003; 6 2004). However, this is more aptly described as 'whole-of-government' because the arrangements apply exclusively to governmental collaborations (Commonwealth of Australia 2004, p. 3). Thus, although it is tempting to see joined-up government as simply another term for multi-sectoral collaboration (from the government's perspective), it appears, in addition, to incorporate a notion of a government entity in a process of actively going beyond itself to include other groups in addressing issues.

Regional governance

Regional governance involves two concepts: 'regional', suggesting a geographic or place-based approach to governing (Reddel 2002a) and 'governance', suggesting a form of governing beyond the traditional concept of government administration. The shift from notions of government (administration)

to governance is an attempt to encompass the broad sweep of collaborative approaches that have emerged in recent times. Decision-making is viewed as moving out of the traditional government hierarchies to forms of management-by-negotiation via various networks with key 'actors', 'partners' or 'stakeholders' (Stoker 1998; Reddel 2002a; Lawrence 2004).

The focus on place management, the governing of a defined territory, space or locality, has increased in recent years in Australia and other Western nations, principally the UK and Europe (Jones 2001; Reddel 2002a). This has included a more traditional and long-standing interest in the local (geographic) community — which may include anything from street level to neighbourhood, town, or local government area — with a great deal of current interest being shown in regional level governance (MacLeod and Goodwin 1999; Everingham et al. 2003). A region is generally considered to be a larger planning unit than a single shire, but smaller than the state/province level, with the collection of shires potentially cutting across existing state boundaries (Everingham et al. 2003). Thus, regional governance encapsulates the practice of governing through collaboration, and via networks, at a scale between the traditional levels of government (national, state, local).

The rise of place management — community and regional level governance

A prominent aspect of the new public sector reform 'modernisation' agenda has been an emphasis upon 'place management' — the governing of particular localities (see Head 1999; Reddel 2002a; Lawson and Gleeson 2005). Although conceptually distinct from collaborative approaches to government decision-making, place management arises logically from the wish to have a range of parties affected by issue involved in discussing, and ultimately deciding upon, the options. This is in keeping with the principles of community engagement, multi-sectoral collaboration and joined-up government. It is important to distinguish between governing by the state (a top-down approach to place management) and what are considered 'community-led' (bottom-up) approaches. The latter is consistent with 'localism' (Everingham et al. 2003), which has been in evidence at least since the early 1970s and entered Australian government policy discourse in the mid 1980s (Higgins and Savoie 1995), becoming particularly prominent in the 1990s (Everingham et al. 2003).

Localism appeared to go hand-in-hand with the market-based reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, emphasising self-reliance, capacity building, competition, and minimal government intervention. Representative government was construed as being too distant: what was needed was increasing public involvement in decision-making — so-called 'thick democracy' (Woods 2003). The state would have an 'enabling' role in providing the appropriate policy environment to support the emergence and consolidation of self-help approaches in the regions (Everingham et al. 2003; Herbert-Cheshire 2000). Localism has, however, been criticised for generating its own set of problems. For example, under localism:

- the most disadvantaged communities appear to be the least able to rejuvenate themselves
- there is a dependency by communities on one-off government grants
- there is a lack of coordination between communities in various regions

- there are problems with decision-making mechanisms, such as ‘elite capture’ of local agendas (Higgins and Savoie 1995; Goldfrank 2002; Everingham et al. 2003).

Such criticisms have prompted government intervention so as to engage with, and support, local efforts (evident in collaborative approaches to government), particularly in improving their coordination with neighbouring localities. This has been accompanied by a move ‘upwards’ in terms of vision of scale to the regional level in order to address issues more strategically (Everingham et al. 2003; Lawrence and Cheshire 2004).

From localism to regionalism

The move to regional level governance has been impelled not only by the need for a more coordinated, strategic approach amongst smaller localities but also by a number of other factors. These include the desire for greater involvement of regional stakeholders; the growing focus on environmental issues; and the desire to stimulate regional development. The rise of the environmental agenda, apparent in the discourse of ‘sustainable development’, has provided a major impetus to planning at the community and regional levels. Schemes such as those of landcare, rivercare, bushcare and coastcare, along with the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality — all funded by the Natural Heritage Trust — are providing capital for on-ground activities aimed at producing better regional environmental outcomes (Lawrence 2005). Here, the focus on bioregions and riverine catchment areas shifts the scale of consideration beyond local government jurisdictions to the regional level.

Issues of regional development policy appear to have generated increasing interest among commentators in Australia since the early 1990s (for useful reviews see Higgins and Savoie 1995; Murphy and Walker 1995; Beer 2000). It is apparent from these analyses that a number of approaches to regional development have been utilised by both state and federal governments including top-down intervention (the traditional method of the state governments through their agency operations at a regional level) as well as more ‘bottom-up’ mechanisms inspired from within the regions themselves (often with the encouragement of state or federal governments) (Higgins and Savoie 1995; Garlick 1997; Beer 2000). More recently, in keeping with the latest innovations in public sector reform outlined earlier, collaborative approaches have been attempted that seek to govern through ‘community engagement’ and ‘joined-up government’ mechanisms (Everingham et al. 2003; Hellmuth and Russell 2003; Lawrence 2004). This has required both ‘whole-of-government’ (inter-agency and inter-governmental) and multi-sectoral collaborative mechanisms, as well as a range of other community engagement mechanisms to gauge regional public opinion.

The limits to collaboration

A range of writers in recent years has begun to critically assess the notion and practice of ‘regional governance’, along with the more widely applied collaborative and participative approaches to

governing (Reddel 2002b; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002; Lawrence 2004; Shortall 2004; 6 2004). Common criticisms that are raised include problems of:

- legitimacy, with unelected representatives on decision-making bodies (and often associated with 'elite capture')
- inequality between stakeholders in terms of differentials of power, knowledge and resources
- the human resource intensiveness of collaborative and participative activities (which can divert attention and resources from substantive issues and outcomes)
- the mismatch between the goals and operating principles of the different sectors (government, community and market)
- issues of autonomy and decision-making authority, notably of resistance to governments' attempts to control and manage these supposedly autonomous regional decision-making bodies
- proliferation of organisations within the region with some requirement to collaborate with others, possibly leading to the creation of a 'congested state' (Everingham forthcoming 2005; Lawrence 2004; Lawrence 2005; Shortall 2004; 6 2004).

These limitations suggest that the search for better ways of governing regional areas has by no means concluded. Various 'experiments' in collaborative and participative approaches are a feature of regional life in many countries of the developed world (Lawrence 2004).

Preliminary empirical assessment

Fieldwork for this project is still ongoing, so it is not possible to provide other than a brief overview of the project and to report on early dialogue between the researchers and government personnel. What is clear from this preliminary research is that while the need and usefulness of collaboration and engagement is undoubtedly recognised by personnel both at the regional and central level, it is also apparent that governments face a number of challenges as they seek to adopt collaborative and participatory approaches in a regional context.

Embracing the change

There was broad recognition of the value that collaboration and engagement potentially bring to achieving better regional outcomes. The benefits of regional collaboration were generally seen in aligning and integrating initiatives to provide a more strategic, holistic approach; pooling or sharing resources to gain critical mass for projects; and avoiding duplication or working at cross-purposes. Community or stakeholder engagement was also seen as important as it enabled better tailoring of projects to diverse needs and thereby produced greater commitment to project objectives. Broad participation also tended to help manage 'project risk' by pre-empting potential objections and subsequent costly and time-consuming negotiations over disputes. However, while state and local government officials and representatives generally endorsed the new collaborative and participatory approaches, they were also concerned with 'how it could be done better'.

Developing a regional 'model' for collaboration

At a broad strategic level, the regional managers interviewed for this research were unclear about what a regional model of collaboration could, or should, look like. A regional model would, ideally, 'map' the institutional architecture of the region and assess the 'fit' of various regional bodies in that model. In Central Queensland, for example, these bodies include the Regional Managers' Coordination Group, as well the local government Regional Organisations of Councils [ROCs] and the Central Queensland Local Government Association; the regional community consultative process known as the Ministerial Regional Community Forum; the regional planning mechanism of Central Queensland: A New Millennium; and finally the regional catchment management group, the Fitzroy Basin Association. These organisations, while usually having distinct and complementary roles in the region, do not appear to possess mechanisms or processes that allow them to relate in a positive and 'seamless' manner to one another. At least part of the reason for this may be that these bodies are variously 'convened', 'facilitated', or 'supported' by different government agencies that have not aligned their approaches at higher levels of government. That is, the mechanisms for engagement are limited or prescribed by government departments — each of which has its own predilection for a particular mode of interaction — rather than being developed locally by the regional bodies and agencies themselves.

The problem of developing an appropriate institutional model at the regional level is also mirrored at the shire level. In some cases, a multiplicity of organisations tasked with planning for the shire may exist, creating challenges of alignment and integration, similar to the case at the regional level. Somewhat ironically, in the case of some (usually more isolated) shires there is a paucity of planning organisations, with local government alone taking much of the responsibility for planning. In the latter case, where change is occurring at a more moderate pace, local government has ample capacity to plan relative to such change. Problems would seem to exist, however, when change is substantial and rapid and where local governments possess limited planning capacity. It is here that pressures mount within the community for the creation of alternative arrangements for planning that might link to local government. Local government comes to be seen as only one 'player' in development.

Top-down versus bottom-up and centre versus periphery issues

A number of problems were raised during fieldwork concerning the challenge of regional-level collaboration in the context of one, or both, of higher-level bureaucratic/political decision-making, and lower-level community planning. An example of this 'tension' is that which was mentioned earlier — the alignment of regional structures is largely dependent upon the degree of alignment of the strategies of agencies. There is a strong tendency for governments and their agencies to 'override' decisions at the local level (Moore 2004). Other concerns and issues relating to top-down/bottom-up and centre/periphery decision-making were also raised by regional managers, including:

- the traditional distinction between policy development roles and service delivery roles usually means that those who are developing policy — most usually city-based bureaucrats — may have only a limited understanding of the problems experienced at the regional level. When policy is then

put into practice at the regional level, it may not fully accord with the needs and interests of the regional population. The regional service deliverers are often frustrated by their relative inability to influence policy development at the 'higher' level

- the extent to which community aspirations should drive government decision-making is problematic; what emerges is an 'uncomfortable' mix of government strategic planning and community level demands and strategies
- relatedly, difficulties are being experienced in aligning community 'blue sky' vision-building with the strategic resource allocation of government agencies and local governments
- power relations within the emerging multi-level modes of governing are asymmetrical. In particular, differences in the power, authority and legitimacy of elected governments and of community- and industry-based bodies provide for tensions that often remain unresolved
- the need for regional managers to gain both higher level bureaucratic and political support for regional level initiatives — as well as support from stakeholders within the region itself — is both time-consuming and resource-intensive
- similarly, government agencies now operate within a structure of two-way accountability (legislative requirements of government as well as community demands and expectations) — increasing the complexity of government activities in the context of serving two masters
- there are difficulties associated with the interpretation of the intentions of central policy makers: are the 'signals' from the centre being understood and acted upon in an appropriate manner? Is there genuine commitment at the centre to the policies advocated, and at the regional level to endorse policies emerging from the centre?
- as regional bodies become increasingly powerful there is the potential for this to lead to the politicisation of local agencies — both as an internal 'defence' against the growing influence of those bodies, and as an attempt to develop the most appropriate strategic alliances at the regional level
- regional approaches can be viewed, in many cases, as focussing upon the symptoms of problems rather than their (wider) structural causes.

As can be seen from the above, regional managers and local government officials face a difficult time in seeking to satisfy both the requirements of central bureaucracies, and the growing demands of regional communities.

Issues related directly to collaboration, participation and engagement

A broad range of concerns relating specifically to the practices of collaboration and engagement were also raised by regional managers during this research. Some of these touched upon fundamental issues, such as how to determine the value of collaboration, what defines collaboration (and especially 'good' collaboration), and how collaboration might be assessed and measured. Other questions related to the legitimacy of collaborative structures — after all, representative democracy entails voting for citizens who are then empowered to speak on behalf of their constituents. In contrast, participatory democracy appears to be about identifying and seeking the input of various stakeholders and/or

appointees whose role it is to represent the view of particular groups. Where does the latter fit within the Westminster system of government? There are many challenges relating to the mechanics and practicalities of making collaborative structures effective in relation to community engagement. These include:

- how to get different portfolios (agencies) and levels of government to work together, and with other sectors, in a more positive and cohesive manner
- building trust, participation and commitment to collaborative initiatives
- developing a shared vision, set of objectives and overall approach
- how to engage with the community more productively, particularly regarding what could be termed the 'management of expectations' (both for government and the community)
- developing an active regional leadership that is viewed as legitimate
- identifying the factors, conditions, enablers for, and barriers to, the long-term success of collaborative arrangements
- identifying and managing the risks, dilemmas and paradoxes of collaboration and community engagement
- developing the capacity for collaboration in terms of internal and relational institutional arrangements, political support, resources, knowledge, skills and expertise, and attitudes and values
- identifying the range and limits of collaborative and participatory approaches and the contexts for which they are appropriate
- dealing with questions of power, community and institutional capacity, and social exclusion and marginalisation
- understanding the politics, personalities and institutional agendas that challenge collaborative initiatives
- balancing the need for bureaucratic protocol, correct procedure and accountability with the reality of what is required to make human relationships work such as trust, reciprocity, goodwill, flexibility and compromise.

Discussion

Recent authors have traced the historical development of collaborative and participative approaches to government (Bishop 1999; Head 1999; Adams and Hess 2001; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). Demands by local people for a greater say in decision-making has been associated with the radicalisation of the community development and community organisation movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Smith 2004a; 2004b). Growing criticisms of the state-centric, bureaucratic, approach to governing — with perceptions of bureaucratic ineptitude (March and Simon 1958) and the crisis of the welfare state (Mishra 1984) in the mid to late 1970s — have also been seen as crucial in sparking a resurgence in interest in more collaborative and community-based approaches (Head 1999; Adams and Hess 2001; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). The OECD (2001b) also identified the desire for greater decision making powers at the local level, limitations in representative government and the compartmentalisation of portfolios within public services as three of the factors that have

stimulated the emergence of new forms of governance at the local level. Furthermore, the adoption of 'neo-liberal' market-based approaches by governments across the developed world in the early 1980s — and the subsequent economic and social marginalisation of particular groups in the community — demonstrated the failure of government policy to achieve benefits for all citizens (Brett 2003). The primarily market-based approaches to governing, termed New Public Management (NPM) (Hood 1991), tended to prioritise *outcomes* such as efficiency, productivity, flexibility and competition over *process* (Gerritsen 2000). This new approach produced two main consequences that led to sustained criticism. First, significant service 'gaps' appeared mainly in less cost-effective or profitable markets such as small, remote, rural communities and among 'client' groups that were less able to pay (Gerritsen 2000; Gray and Lawrence 2001; Brett 2003). Second, the combination of decentralisation of administration, contracting out, privatisation and competition resulted in even greater fragmentation of the state (Reddel 2002a; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002).

And, it seems, attempts to address these concerns by introducing 'joined up' approaches were of limited success and, in some cases, exacerbated the problems they were designed to solve. For example, in 1999 the Blair government in the United Kingdom produced a white paper entitled *Modernizing Government*, in which it was claimed that 'joined up' government would be a means of focussing upon the needs of citizens, rather than the desires of government bureaucracies (Cowell and Martin 2003). An evaluation of the first few years of government reforms has revealed that what appeared to be a coherent set of strategies actually disguised a number of major conflicts. In an attempt to join up local and central structures (that is, improving vertical links), central authorities appeared to exert increasing, and tighter, control over local-level decision-making, resulting in the inability of government departments at the local level to build more productive horizontal links. That is, central attempts at joining up militated against local level attempts to join up (Cowell and Martin 2003, p. 159). Why? The authors suggest that processes of the marketisation of key areas of public responsibility eroded the functions of local authorities while, at the same time:

“...increase[ing] institutional fragmentation [and] blurring lines of accountability as duties, powers....and resources [were] spread increasingly thinly across an array of special-purpose bodies, businesses, voluntary organisations and community groups” (Cowell and Martin 2003, p. 160).

In other words, there was a lack of coherence in, and insufficient funding for, the package of reforms that sought to modernise government delivery, that is for reforms that were attempting to move local-level decision-making out of an 'old culture of paternalism and inwardness' (Cowell and Martin 2003, p. 163).

Indeed, the NPM approach — based firmly upon marketisation — is seen as creating new imperatives for collaboration that create, in turn, the need for further waves of public sector reforms (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002, p. 11). What it now reasonably well understood is that current public sector 'modernisation' prioritises:

- performance and a ‘managing for outcomes’ approach
- democratic renewal and a range of strategies used to engage with citizens and communities and encourage their participation in decision-making processes
- decentralisation and devolving decision-making authority closer to the community and regional level (in line with the principle of subsidiary)
- a more holistic way of defining public policy or social problems in outcome-focussed ways, or ‘joined-up thinking for joined-up solutions’ as seen in multi-sectoral collaboration
- a whole-of-government approach to identifying and solving problems (Head 1999; Reddel 2002a; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002).

From the discussions with regional managers in the Central Queensland region, it is recognised that multi-sectoral collaborative approaches vary in form, complexity, impact and acceptability (for both the community and government). Experiments with joined-up and whole-of-government approaches are challenging current institutional arrangements and there is some debate (and not a little confusion) as to how agencies might move from current practices to those which both embrace local citizens in decision making and, at the same time, break down barriers within government. There appears to be no single ‘recipe’ for fostering community input into local-level state decision-making and there have been concerns that the expectations of communities — if not ‘contained’ — will necessitate increasing investments of time and money by the agencies. Facing greater community expectations (Cavaye 2004) yet finding their funding, and their control over it, quite limited, agencies find it difficult to meet existing demands, let alone new ones generated through participatory mechanisms and requiring the personnel-intensive sharing and learning that is part of ‘authentic dialogue’(Lovan et al. 2004, p. 249). However, any reduction in community-focused service delivery could readily be interpreted – by an increasingly informed and more ‘empowered’ public — as the state reneging on its commitment to better regional governance. The issue of the level of resources that might be necessary at the regional level to foster joined up and whole-of-government decision-making and actions does not seem to be one that has been properly addressed by state government. It appears that regional managers are expected to embrace the changes by redirecting existing resources, rather than by being provided with additional funding and staffing. That is, the changes desired by the state appear to be required to be achieved in a cost-neutral manner. While this certainly accords with higher-level demands for ‘performance’ and efficiency, there is the real danger that change will either be slow and/or initiatives thwarted and/or the public and agency staff frustrated, because of insufficient funding.

It is perhaps ironic that the various approaches we are seeing do not accord with ‘small government’ or the ‘rolling back of the state’ but, rather, indicate that the state is seeking new ways to govern *better*. Yet how, might it be asked, can the state govern better if the (new) costs associated with participation are not incorporated into the regional budgets of government agencies? How can the modern ‘enabling state’ (Cavaye 2004) foster partnerships, inclusiveness, and improve community capacity if it is not funded to invest in these new functions and if the players in local partnerships lack the requisite funding to maximise their involvement?

According to Geddes (2005) partnerships may have the capacity to create governance processes that are pluralistic, inclusive and efficient. But, to do so, three elements must be present:

- cross-sectional collaboration between actors within each of the spheres of state, market and civil society
- coordinated institutional and organisational change
- coordinated multi-level processes (see Geddes 2005, p. 28).

In many regions, each of these three crucial elements is either not present together, or if they do exist are often not well developed or integrated. As Geddes (2005, pp. 28-9) reminds us:

“Most (regional) partnerships are only weakly constituted in organisational terms, and the great majority have only very limited dedicated staff and financial resources. It is asking a great deal for such weak local organisations to achieve the kind of joined-up delivery that government itself finds very difficult.”

Similarly, according to Wiseman (2005, p. 60), any alternative to the neo-liberal approach to governing will require a reinvestment in ‘community and public sector capacities, infrastructure and partnerships’.

Of course, it is not all about money. It has been possible to identify what might be termed ‘limits to collaboration’ over and above those of the financial ability to meet the new challenges of governing in the regions. These include:

- currently-existing structures — inflexibilities within existing government departments (with their hierarchical arrangements and agency ‘cultures’) and attitudes of local governments (lack of vision and/or suspicion of the new bodies and emerging partnerships) militate against the emergence of new partnerships
- emerging structures — for reasons outlined above, the new regional bodies may not have the capacity to deliver better outcomes than current forms of government. The question of institutional ‘thickness’ (the strength of local institutions, together with social capital) is not one that has been systematically explored in Australia
- complexity of arrangements — in Australia the three levels of representative government are now accompanied by numerous regional governing bodies. There is diversity of activities and priorities within and between regions in terms of policies and programs. The advent of ‘triple bottom line’ decision-making simply adds to the difficulties of seeking coherency in strategic planning at the regional level
- confusion over roles — with a multiplicity of programs (whole-of-government, joined-up governance, multisectoral collaboration, partnerships, etc.) and a large array of bodies involved in those programs and pursuing a variety of aims, there is confusion about who should be doing what, when, where (and, in some cases, why)
- power relations — within the new bodies the problem of ‘elite capture’ can emerge. Also, in relation to wider power relations, little change is likely to occur until there is genuine devolution of power to

the regional/local level. The reluctance of existing levels of government to share power and responsibility with newly-formed bodies is viewed as a major barrier to progress in partnership development and in achieving more positive regional outcomes (for more information on the points above see Amin and Thrift 1994; Amin 1999; Gray and Lawrence 2001; Low and Hill 2004; Reddel 2004; Rainnie 2005; Whelan and Oliver 2004; Geddes 2005; Head 2005; Lawrence 2005; Eversole and Martin forthcoming).

Will the limits to collaboration be overcome? We would predict that as frustrations mount at the regional level there be increasing calls to 'bring the state back in'. This would not see the abandoning of the regional groupings and initiatives. Rather it is likely to be a demand for more 'steering' (to ensure that the regional partnerships have direction, legitimacy and improved status) and for the provision of sufficient funding to meet locally-based priorities as identified in regional investment strategies.

Conclusion

From preliminary research in Central Queensland it appears that the move to new forms of regional governance is one that is being both embraced and questioned. It is being embraced by state government's central bureaucrats as a means of increasing efficiencies in service delivery and, at the same time, getting closer to citizens. It is being gradually endorsed by many stakeholder groups anxious to improve the socio-economic and environmental outcomes for the region. With, at times genuine enthusiasm, it is also accepted by regionally-based government agencies that see community-endorsement of local plans as a means of achieving greater ownership (and acceptance) at the local level. Government officials also view structures of regional governance as providing novel and productive ways of interacting with the community. Although often having stakeholder input, commercial businesses appear to be rather 'distant' from the processes of regional change.

Despite its general acceptance, regional governance is also questioned by each of the groups above. There is a concern about which interest groups are having a voice in decision-making (and which are being excluded). There are questions about the capacity of state institutions, and of stakeholders, to become involved in regional governance. The role of local government is coming to the fore as a major 'issue' in the possible devolution of power (and finances) to regional groupings. There have also been concerns expressed about the 'tension' between enthusiastically embracing regional decision-making, participatory, models and keeping the ambitions and aspirations of the regions in check.

At this time in the Central Queensland research project, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions about the nature of governance, nor pass judgements about the success or otherwise of current arrangements. It does seem, however, that we have uncovered a number of tensions and problems for further analysis including those associated with current and emerging structures; the complexity of arrangements; confusion over roles; and the nature of power relations. We will also be exploring the idea (that appears to be emerging in theory and practice) that an appropriate means of addressing the

issues relating to, and problematic status of, regional governance might require 'bringing the state back in'. In Reddel's (2004) terms, an active state in conjunction with an engaged civil society would appear to be the combination required for improved regional governance. How, when and in what ways the combination of these elements might be achieved is largely speculative at this time and is a matter of some debate.

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