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Is Australian Local Government Ready for Localism?

Abstract

Localism is widely supported as an antidote to what are seen as the adverse impacts of globalisation and one-size-fits-all, top-down central government. But interpretations of localism and views on how it should be practised vary greatly. This presents particular challenges for local government, which typically sees itself as the rightful beneficiary of a localism agenda focused on devolution and decentralisation, but must then confront difficult questions about its own institutional frameworks, its revenue base, and sharing power with local communities. While local government in New Zealand is exploring these issues through a national Localism project, its counterparts in Australia seem ill-prepared to follow suit.

Keywords local government, devolution, regions, communities, neighbourhoods, democracy

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The recent launch in New Zealand of a national Localism project (LGNZ, n.d.) raises a number of interesting questions for observers of Australian local government. Those questions revolve around interpretations of 'localism' and the likelihood of a coherent localism agenda emerging in Australia. How might the New Zealand project translate across the Tasman Sea? Does Australian local government want to follow a similar path, and would it be ready to do so?

Interpreting localism

Support for localism reflects widespread concerns about, on the one hand, the adverse economic, social and environmental impacts of globalisation, and, on the other, continuing centralisation of power in the hands of national governments (Albertson, 2017; Brooks, 2018). Many believe that local action can address some of the 'wicked' problems that governments appear unwilling or unable to resolve: communities should be empowered both to deal with their local concerns and to help address 'big picture' issues. Localism is thus intertwined with the governance principle of subsidiarity:

central governments should act only with respect to those tasks that cannot be performed effectively at a more local level.

Precisely because it espouses such a broad agenda, definitions of localism and ambitions for its implementation vary dramatically. The Oxford dictionary suggests 'Preference for one's own area or region, especially when this results in a limitation of outlook' or 'A characteristic of a particular locality, such as a local idiom or custom.' Cambridge has a different view: 'the idea that people should have control over what happens in their local area, that local businesses should be supported, and that differences between places should be respected'.

goal, not local government' (Commission on the Future of Localism, n.d., p.12). This point is highlighted in Taylor's account of the 'new localism' adopted by Britain's Labour government in the late 1990s. While local government was seen as a key player, it was 'far from clear to minister [sic] and policy advisers in government that councils are the best bodies to promote relevant and effective forms of accountability and public engagement' (Taylor, 2013, p.23). Other options were floated, such as the direct election of hospital boards and police chiefs, and there was talk of 'double devolution': power needed to be shifted downwards 'from Whitehall and Westminster down to town

'institutional infrastructure – at the neighbourhood scale' is imperative for localism to happen. Her research into the development of localism in urban England found that 'in EVERY case, localism depended upon the existence of an independent neighbourhood forum that was able to represent local interests, develop an agenda for the local area, and make things happen'.

The policies of the UK government can also be seen as an expression of what might be termed 'neo-liberal localism', which is concerned with efficiency as much as democracy, through the medium of competition. In his global review of localism, Hartwich refers to the work of Hayek, who preferred local to central government, but favoured private provision of services above all, and Tiebout, who argued that residents and businesses should be able to choose between municipalities with differing policies, tax rates etc. Hartwich argues that:

> Localism is fundamentally about 'place' and bringing people and organisations together within a framework of places in order to address social, economic and environmental concerns.

'Local government' is not mentioned in either case, but there is a strong body of opinion that sees elected local councils as a principal means by which localism agendas may be pursued. This belief seems to lie at the heart of the New Zealand Localism project:

> Localism involves a new approach to governing New Zealand, one in which citizens and communities, *working with and through their local governments,* have a more active and meaningful role … This requires re-distributing roles and functions between central and local government. (LGNZ, n.d., p.3, emphasis added)

By contrast, the Commission on the Future of Localism, established by two British community-based organisations – Locality and Power to Change – concluded that 'Reducing the debate on localism to the question of "what powers are devolved?" while a key part, misses the fundamental point about localism: people are the end

halls, and from town halls to communities and citizens' (Mulgan and Bury, 2006, p.5).

This was the approach adopted by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat government that assumed power in 2010. Its 2011 Localism Act strengthened to some degree the position of local government, but also included provisions that offered communities and civil society a greatly expanded role in local planning and service delivery. Prominent among those provisions were the right to bid to wrest ownership and/or management of services and facilities from councils, and processes for existing parish councils and newly created neighbourhood forums to prepare binding 'neighbourhood plans' that could amend councils' land use and development policies.

Parish, town or community councils (known collectively as 'local councils') function across much of England and Wales. They are all popularly elected and offer a ready-made vehicle for localism, especially if 'double devolution' is a central objective. Wills (2016) argues that

> Subsidiarity is a central element of good governance …This is the best way of enlivening democracy, engaging citizens with the political process, and preserving individual freedom … Local government can be more efficient in the services it provides. Arguably, it could also provide them at a better quality within a system of competitive localism. (Hartwich, 2013, pp.13–14, 11–12, 30–31)

A very different strand of localism is 'direct action' by communities in supporting local businesses, co-production of food and other necessities, tackling social issues and environmental sustainability. A typical example is Re>Think Local, a community organisation in the Hudson Valley, New York. Its objective is 'co-creating a better Hudson Valley' and it sees localism in the following terms:

> Localism is about building communities that are more healthy and sustainable – backed by local economies that are stronger and more resilient ... The goal is real prosperity – for all … Localists also recognize that while our focus is primarily on our own communities, our vision is global. Each of us is

crafting a piece of a larger mosaic – a global network of cooperatively interlinked local economies. (Re>Think Local, n.d.)

The reference to a global vision and network points to the crucial issue of scale: how local is local, and how does localism deal with wider concerns? Localism is fundamentally about 'place' and bringing people and organisations together within a framework of places in order to address social, economic and environmental concerns. It incorporates themes such as place-shaping, integrated place-based planning and service delivery, and collaborative leadership (Hambleton, 2011). But the geography of place is complex: spatial relationships vary depending on the issues involved. So as Stoker commented: 'The difficulty is that we are still very unclear about the territorial level at which to conduct the new localism. Is it the regional, county, district or neighbourhood level? If it is all four, how can the system be made coherent?' He argued that localism must also address the big issues, and identified weaknesses in the framework and practice of local politics as a significant constraint to be overcome (Stoker, 2002, p.22).

In a similar vein, Wills highlights the recent shift in emphasis in Britain from neighbourhoods to devolution at the regional level, with the establishment of combined authorities of councils and negotiation of city/devolution deals between those authorities and central government. She notes:

an expectation that these city deals will involve the further decentralisation of political power within the areas concerned but the jury is out on whether and how this will happen. The connections between city-deals and localism are yet to be seen and … many remain cynical that the city-deals will simply move from one set of elites in Westminster and Whitehall to another in the local town hall. (Wills, 2016)

This brings us back to questions about the role of local government within a broader conception of localism. The recent history of local government in New Zealand, and the intent of the current Localism project, offer a valuable point of reference for considering these questions, and in particular the prospects for localism in Australia.

The New Zealand Localism project
The launch document for the New Zealand Localism project asserts that:

Instead of relying on central government to decide what is good for our communities it is time to empower councils and communities themselves to make such decisions. This means strengthening local self-government, putting people back in charge of

> … the New Zealand Productivity Commission is currently undertaking a wide-ranging review of local government funding that will consider, among other things, options for new funding and financing tools

politics and reinvigorating our democracy. We are seeking an active programme of devolution and decentralisation.

It goes on to invoke the principle of subsidiarity based on the following values:
- that the allocation of responsibilities to councils will be designed to ensure accountability is clear and elected members incentivised to act in the best interests of their communities;
- that citizens will have a meaningful say about the range and nature of local services in their communities;
- that the decentralisation of services will be accompanied by financial resources commensurate with the cost of providing those services; and
- that localism will ensure a 'place-based' and integrated approach to the provision of services and local governance. (LGNZ, n.d., p.2)

This framework evidently favours a form of localism chiefly focused on, and

led by, local government. Its reference to decentralisation of services is particularly worthy of note. First, it reflects a strong emphasis on improved service delivery being a key element and benefit of localism. Second, it implies that localism depends on central government either funding a sizeable proportion of the increased costs to councils, or enabling councils to raise additional revenues. With Local Government New Zealand's support, the New Zealand Productivity Commission is currently undertaking a wide-ranging review of local government funding that will consider, among other things, options for new funding and financing tools (Productivity Commission, 2018). However, requests for additional grants carry the risk that central government will instead support provision of services by community organisations, as occurred in Britain, while councillors would have to shoulder the political risk of raising any new local taxes or charges.

Another significant feature of the launch document is its emphasis on local government becoming more accountable for its expenditures and performance. It commits local government to independent, external performance reviews, and to rigorous scrutiny of expenditure and policy decision making that ensures community needs and preferences are met in an efficient and effective manner (LGNZ, n.d., p.2). This perhaps echoes neo-liberal 'competitive localism'.

Oddly, the document does not mention the potential of New Zealand's statutory regional councils and neighbourhood-scale community boards, which are either wholly or partly elected

and could be used to facilitate localism agendas at different spatial scales. Over the years unitary authorities (local councils with wider powers) have replaced some regional councils, and in many places there are no community boards, their establishment being optional.[1] Nevertheless, experience gained over three decades in allocating responsibilities across three different forms of local government, and engaging with and empowering local people through community boards, would seem to provide a solid foundation for multi-scale and multifaceted localism. Australian

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local government certainly has much to learn from that experience.

Prospects in Australia
Drawing together the various strands of localism outlined above, a localism agenda for Australia might comprise the following elements:
- devolution of additional powers and functions from central to local governments, and from local governments to representative locality-based organisations;
- expanded regional cooperation between local governments to enhance their capacity to address 'big picture' issues affecting the well-being of their communities;
- more widespread use by local governments of integrated, place-based planning and service delivery; and
- enhancing local democracy through improvements to electoral systems and greater emphasis on participatory and deliberative mechanisms;

An agenda along these lines was in fact put forward in a declaration adopted by delegates to the 2017 Future of Local Government conference held in Melbourne. The declaration asserted that:

> Our present ways of thinking and governing are neither coping with the pace of change nor meeting citizens' expectations. There is an urgent need for a fresh approach and responsive leadership … Councils have a unique mandate to support, represent and give voice to 'communities of place'. They can provide an ideal platform for governments at all levels to strengthen their engagement with communities – and there is also a real opportunity to

bring about a renaissance in local government itself.

It then urged local governments to 'Consider how their own roles and approach to community leadership may need to change, and … Adopt a decentralised model for their own activities, including place-based planning and service delivery, and devolving decision-making to communities' (Future of Local Government Conference, 2017).

So is Australian local government willing and able to champion such an agenda? To answer that question it is important first to highlight some critical features of Australia's federal system. This is characterised by what might be termed 'double centralisation': federal (national) expenditures as a share of the total are around the OECD average, but the states and territories account for nearly all the rest and receive all but $3 billion or so of federal transfers. Also, the states control every aspect of local government, and intervene in local affairs more or less as they see fit, while the Australian Capital Territory has no separate local governments

at all. Local government accounts for only 4–5% of total public expenditure, less than half the New Zealand figure.

Rather than devolve responsibilities to local government, the states have repeatedly centralised functions. For example, in the 1990s the New South Wales government 'resumed' electricity distribution from county councils, and almost every state has increased its direct control over land use planning and major urban developments. All the main utilities and public services (transport, education, health, police etc.) are run by state agencies or have been privatised, except for some public transport in Brisbane, and water supply and sewerage across Queensland, Tasmania[2] and non-metropolitan New South Wales. In particular, the states totally dominate the governance of metropolitan regions, where local government remains divided into numerous municipalities that play a distinctly 'junior' role. South East Queensland is a partial exception, due to the size and spending power of Brisbane City Council and its populous and rapidly growing neighbours, including Gold Coast. But even there recent years have seen increasing centralisation. Significantly, none of the states has legislated to *require* councils to establish regional local governments to which they or the federal government could readily devolve powers and functions (Sansom, 2019, p.16).

Faced with these challenges, Australian local government tends to focus on its weaknesses rather than its strengths. It appears preoccupied with state centralism on the one hand, and the belief that it is entitled to more federal financial support on the other. Councils and their representative associations rarely project their potential to contribute considerable financial and human resources to state and national agendas. Councils generally see their revenue base as inadequate for the tasks they already face, and devolution of more functions would undoubtedly be opposed unless it was matched by increased grants or expanded revenue sources – the same position as that adopted by Local Government New Zealand. In part this reflects the continuing presence – and influence – of large numbers of small (in population) rural-remote municipalities that already depend on federal and state

grants to discharge even basic functions such as building and maintaining local roads.

The sector's mindset was apparent in policy statements for the New South Wales and federal elections held respectively in March and May 2019. Local Government NSW (the state association of councils) set out 12 priorities (Local Government NSW, n.d.). At first glance there are hints of a robust localism agenda in headings such as 'Support local decision-making' and 'Promote strong governance and democracy', but it soon becomes apparent that the focus is firmly on local government's longstanding concerns about inadequate state grants, cost shifting and rate pegging; excessive state controls and interventions in local affairs; removal of land use planning powers; and 'domestic' issues such as election spending laws, councillor superannuation and skills shortages.

For the federal election, the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) proposed 12 initiatives to 'deliver for Australian communities' (ALGA, 2018). All but three were wholly or largely bids for additional federal grants to councils, amounting to a doubling of current transfers (some $3 billion more per annum). There were repeated assertions that local government simply could not do more with its own resources. While several initiatives portrayed local government as a 'partner' in the federation, none spelled out ways in which councils could or would play a stronger role without more federal assistance.

At the same time, Australian local government has demonstrated a marked reluctance to create or support substantial regional or neighbourhood entities. Councils everywhere are free to establish regional agreements and organisations to discharge some or all of their responsibilities, and all states except Victoria have customised legislative frameworks in place. However, as noted earlier, regional collaboration remains voluntary. Regional organisations of councils (ROCs) and similar non-statutory alliances are widespread, but their activities are typically limited to advocacy, some joint procurement and perhaps a few other shared services, non-binding strategic

plans, and externally funded regional projects (Sansom, 2019, pp.11–13). There are evident concerns that state governments will interfere in the operations of statutory entities, and that 'too much' cooperation could lead to 'amalgamation by stealth' (ibid., p.20).

Such concerns were reflected in the reaction of Local Government NSW to proposals made by the New South Wales Independent Local Government Review Panel (Local Government NSW, 2014, pp.51–6; Independent Local Government Review Panel, 2013, 81–87) for new regional joint organisations. These were intended to facilitate

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greatly expanded cooperation amongst local councils and with state agencies, not least as an alternative to unwanted council amalgamations. But the association argued successfully for a much weaker version of the concept which largely maintains the voluntary 'opt-in, opt-out' culture of ROCs and restricts mandatory cooperation to non-binding regional strategies.

There are no specific legislative provisions anywhere in Australia for neighbourhood bodies along the lines of New Zealand's community boards, although again councils are free to form area-based committees with community representatives, and to delegate some decision-making powers. Indeed, many have done so. But a study of the widespread use of citizen committees as a source of advice and to help manage community services and facilities struck a cautious note. It concluded that if formally recognised within a community governance

framework, 'citizen committees have the potential to represent and advocate from a community perspective. Unfortunately this potential is seldom realised. Councils appear reluctant to explore the possibilities of adapting citizen committees to fulfil this kind of remit' (Bolitho, 2013, p.27).

When the Independent Local Government Review Panel recommended that the Local Government Act make specific provision for elected community boards as an option, this was flatly opposed by Local Government NSW, which dismissed the idea as 'introducing another layer of government for no apparent purpose' (Independent Local Government Review Panel, 2013, pp.93–5; Local Government NSW, 2014, p.61). Similarly, Dollery, Kortt and Crase argued that 'there is no need to "reinvent the wheel" in NSW local government by introducing additional "sub-council" structures since existing regulation already enables local authorities to engage in local co-governance' (Dollery, Kortt and Crase, 2014, p.747). This conveniently ignores the fact that under 'existing regulation' only councils can determine what forms of 'local co-governance' may be implemented; communities are not enabled to decide these matters for themselves.

A similar discussion had taken place in Queensland in 2007. The Queensland Local Government Reform Commission was required to consider 'the ability of community boards (and other similar structures) to deliver services and preserve and enhance community and cultural

identity'. After quoting at length from an unfavourable (and unreferenced) review of New Zealand's community boards submitted by the Local Government Association, the commission saw:

> no advantage in incorporating community boards as a formal part of Queensland's local government structure … installing another tier of 'elected' members to a community board derogates from the concept of representative government. Nor should ratepayers be faced with the burden of having to fund a second tier of

are not uncommon, and several states have promoted further reductions in the number elected. Moreover, there is a trend to electing councillors 'at large' in a single electorate rather than by locality-based wards or divisions. These features reflect the idea that councillors should operate as a small, policy-setting 'board of directors' that leaves implementation of policy and programmes in the hands of professional managers.

While all this may not bode well for an Australian localism, there is another story. As the 2017 Future of Local Government conference declaration acknowledged, many councils do have a record of achievement

and very similar principles emerged again in the 'integrated planning and reporting' (IPR) provisions added to the New South Wales Local Government Act in 2009.[3] These require councils to work with their communities to prepare community strategic plans and delivery programmes that clearly identify key strategic issues and desired outcomes, and how those outcomes are to be achieved through concerted action by the council and other responsible agencies, including community organisations. Similar provisions were adopted in Western Australia a few years later.

More broadly, over the past two decades Australian local government has made great strides in improving community consultation and engagement, and some local government acts now require councils to prepare comprehensive community engagement strategies that go far beyond consulting from time to time on specific plans and projects. A number of councils have experimented with deliberative democracy through citizen juries and online panels in order to determine expenditure priorities and obtain regular community input on current and emerging issues. In Victoria, councils have assisted residents to prepare formal (but non-statutory) community plans that outline a vision for the township or locality and identify priorities for expenditure on facilities, services and other initiatives.[4] And, as noted earlier, councils routinely work with citizen committees and community organisations in the provision or management of services and facilities.

But it remains telling that only one council, Waratah–Wynyard in north-west Tasmania, has formally established and empowered a 'community board' for part of its area, and even there the members of the board are appointed by the council (after expressions of interest and a selection process), not elected by local people (Waratah–Wynyard Council, n.d.).

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community representation. (Local Government Reform Commission, 2007, pp.49–50)

In the absence of substantial entities at neighbourhood/district level, the electoral system for councils assumes particular importance. In Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria – that is, for the great majority of Australians – voting in local government elections is compulsory, as it is for state and federal elections, and voter turnout is around 70% or more. However, in South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania voting remains voluntary: turnout in the former two is very low (around 30–35%), although in the recent Tasmanian elections it reached close to 60%. This may be explained in part by the use of postal voting, the relatively small populations of most local government areas, and the popular election of all mayors.

From a localism perspective, a significant drawback of local government electoral systems across Australia is the typically low number of councillors per head of population in most metropolitan areas and large regional centres. Ratios of one councillor (usually part-time except in Queensland) to 10,000 or more residents

on which to build. 'Community development' has been a recurring theme in local government practice since at least the 1970s. In the early 1990s ALGA formulated and secured federal government support for a programme of 'integrated local area planning' (ILAP) that promoted local government's role in 'place management', including coordination of planning and service delivery with federal and state agencies. ALGA advocated six ILAP principles:

- More appropriate [tailored] responses to differing local circumstances and needs;
- A holistic, integrated approach to the issues affecting a local area;
- A shared understanding of those issues, and a shared vision of desired futures
- More effective use of resources through improved coordination between programs;
- Increased community involvement in planning and management processes
- Pursuit of local government's mandate to play a leadership role. (ALGA, 1993, p.1).

Although the ILAP initiative as such petered out in the mid-1990s, it anticipated what later became known as 'new localism',

Conclusion

Despite some significant constraints, Australian local government could, if it wished, pursue a substantial localism agenda. Local government acts provide a power of general competence or its equivalent, including the ability to establish

regional and neighbourhood bodies and to delegate decision-making (but not budgetary) authority to community committees. Moreover, most urban municipalities and some rural shires enjoy a high level of financial independence: their relatively limited responsibilities are well matched by their own-source revenues from property rates and service charges. And as the populations of metropolitan municipalities and regional cities continue to grow, so does the need to consider whether different localities within those local government areas would benefit from tailored approaches to governance and service delivery.

But many – perhaps most – councils remain preoccupied with the burdens of state centralism and the perception (unquestionable reality in the case of rural-remote areas) that they already lack sufficient resources to do their job. Local government thus shows little or no inclination to take the risk of playing a larger role. There are of course exceptions to this generalisation, but the prevailing narrative is one of incapacity. The New

South Wales Independent Local Government Review Panel called for 'revitalisation' and for the 'old debates and slogans' about amalgamations, cost shifting, rate pegging and increased grants across the board to be put aside (Independent Local Government Review Panel, 2013, p.7). But they persist.

It therefore seems unlikely that even the local government-centric version of localism set out in the launch document for the New Zealand Localism project would win majority support. Devolution might beget more cost shifting, while increased regional collaboration could threaten councils' autonomy and lead to 'amalgamation by stealth'. Prospects for closer engagement and co-governance with local communities are perhaps brighter, especially given emerging legislative requirements for engagement strategies that include elements of deliberative democracy. But there are no moves towards elected neighbourhood bodies or far-reaching delegation of decision-making authority.

Stoker saw the need 'to construct political and institutional forms that reflect and can manage the diverse, complex and conflict-laden nature of localities' (Stoker, 2002, p.22). Local politics must both address the 'everyday' things people care about *and* deal with bigger issues. This requires a willingness to consider how local and regional democracy might evolve to meet new challenges. Australian local government may be clinging to a model that becomes increasingly redundant.

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1 However, across New Zealand citizens can initiate the establishment of communitiy boards, and the amalgamated Auckland Council, created in 2009, has local boards mandated by its Act, which have specific statutory functions. Most serve much larger populations than community boards elsewhere.
2 Tasmania has a state-wide corporation owned by local government.
3 IPR also reflected New Zealand's arrangements at the time for the determination of preferred community outcomes and preparation of long-term council community plans.
4 See, for example, https://www.mildura.vic.gov.au/Council-Services/Community-Development/Community-Planning.

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