From Citizen Participation to Participatory Governance in Australian Local Government

Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance
Issue 2: January 2009
http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/cjlg

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Abstract

This paper identifies types of citizen participation in local government in Australia, in particular focusing on the past two decades when local government systems have been the focus of intense reform. The paper considers the extent to which contemporary views of participatory governance have taken root at local and sub-local levels and concludes that despite reforms intended to engage local citizens more in local government activity, citizen participation has yet to develop significantly into arrangements that reach the level of participatory governance. It also argues that for participatory governance to be further developed, leadership may often have to come from organisations outside institutional local government.

1. Introduction

> The opportunity to take part in the political system is such a fundamental tenet of the democratic system of government that its very existence is rarely questioned. People must be able to have their say – to vote, to engage in political debate and to let those in power know their views on issues which concern them. This is what democracy is about (Richardson 1983:1).

While there is almost universal acceptance of the principle of citizen participation in democratic societies, the means and extent of this participation are frequently

contested. Citizen participation in *government* has traditionally centred on measures to facilitate greater public access to information about government, enhance the rights of citizens to be 'consulted' on matters which directly affect them, and ensure that all voices can be heard equally through fair systems of representative democracy. Such measures typically include standardised rules, protocols, and enabling legislation and regulation (Bridgman and Davis 2000). However, there is a growing appreciation that participation in *governance*, or participatory governance, involves different principles and methods for engagement. These might include developing transformative partnerships; establishing system-wide information exchanges and knowledge transfers; decentralising decision making and inter-institutional dialogue; and embracing relationships based more on reciprocity and trust (Reddel and Woolcock 2003:93).

The shift from government to governance involves the provision of means to engage individuals and organisations outside government through 'structures and arrangements which support effective relationships across the public, private and community sectors as they collaborate in decision-making' (Edwards 2005:12). This has been described by Putnam as 'social connectedness', a critical element in the formation of social capital (Putnam 2000). It involves an active role for government in enabling or capacity building in local communities, rather than the more passive role implied in traditional notions of citizen participation. However, both the traditional notion of citizen participation and this emerging idea of capacity and relationship building have roots in the notion that citizen participation is a 'basic building block for contemporary democratic society and sustainable communities' (Cuthill and Fien 2005:64). Citizen participation in governance also aims to devolve power and resources away from central control and towards front-line managers, local democratic structures, and local consumers and communities in what Stoker terms 'new localism' (Stoker 2004). This has implications for traditional ideas of representative government with communities moving away from vicarious engagement in democracy towards more direct involvement in decision-making processes.

Not only are new means of participation evolving with governance, so too are its goals. For example, an earlier classification developed by Arnstein (1971) has been immensely popular in describing traditional notions of consultation and participation. At the apex of Arnstein's ladder of participation she describes 'citizen control', which contrasts with current approaches to governance that focus on setting and achieving goals through partnerships and collaborations amongst a broad range of stakeholders.

This paper aims to map citizen participation at the local level in Australia, in particular focusing on the past two decades when local government systems have been one of several focuses of intense public sector reform. These reforms included a move away from earlier notions of 'ratepayer democracy', with the introduction of provisions to strengthen universal suffrage in local government and remove or reduce property franchises – reforms designed to enhance *citizen participation in*

government. The paper also considers the extent to which contemporary views of participatory governance have taken root at the local level, as well as the capacity of local government to promote this agenda. It concludes that if participatory governance is to be advanced, it may often be necessary to look for leadership in organisations other than institutional local government. The author shares the view that *citizen participation in governance* is very much a work-in-progress, and further research is required to map and evaluate the diversity of state and local government policies towards participatory governance (Smyth *et al*. 2005:8).

2. Local Government Reform: Legislating Further Citizen Participation

Citizen involvement in Australian local government in the latter part of the twentieth century fell largely within the ambit of 'indirect participation', that is, 'those legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of [their representatives] and/or the actions they take' (Richardson 1983:11). These activities include voting, campaigning on behalf of candidates or issues, and engagement in political parties or interest groups. While citizens were seen as capable of exerting important influence, this influence was typically focused on policy delivery rather than design (Sharp 1980). This form of citizen participation is much more congruent with Bridgman and Davis' (1990) articulation above, in that it has focused on enabling protocols, regulation and legislation more than on those forms of participatory governance that actively engage communities in the formulation of policy. 'This was typically in the context of citizens participating in pre-determined policy debates rather than agenda-setting or active two-way deliberation' (Curtain 2003:127).

With such citizen participation, the role of government is a relatively passive one, simply offering a degree of access to those 'participants' who choose to become involved. It is aimed broadly at developing greater transparency and engagement within a context of representative democracy, where primary decisions are made through the representative process. It may also include structural changes that enhance effective local autonomy. These measures reflect traditional political values of equity (for example, through encouraging voting systems that promote universal franchise and principles of one-vote-one-value), responsiveness (for example, in introducing provisions for referenda or protocols for community planning), accountability (for example, through ensuring access to information about decisions, programs and policies), and devolution to local communities.

All three spheres of government in Australia have undergone continuous reform during the past two decades, representing the most significant set of changes since federation in 1901, with the transformation of the public sector both swift and dramatic. In the local government sphere, reforms have been comprehensive at the management, legislative and structural levels, and have focused on two primary agendas: first, the improved management of resources and second, governance issues – especially the redefinition of roles and responsibilities of the various actors in the local sphere (Aulich 2005; Marshall 1998). It is the second agenda that is of particular interest in this paper.

Halligan and Wettenhall identify an earlier phase of local government reform dating from the 1960s when 'the combination of grass-roots participation and the discovery of the urban problem stimulated wide interest in [local government's] potentiality' (Halligan and Wettenhall 1989:80). Consistent with broader pressures for social change, the reform agendas at that time, *inter alia*, included moves to widen the franchise, eliminate multiple voting, and redraw boundaries to ensure greater adherence to principles of 'one-person, one-vote, one-value'. It represented a shift away from the earlier notion of 'rate-payer democracy' in which the dominant considerations had been the 'protection of one's own interests and those of one's own kind' (Chapman and Wood 1984:27). However, the reform impetus appeared to dissipate in the late 1970s.

More recent reforms, undertaken in the context of comprehensive reforms of the Australian public sector at all levels, have aimed at strengthening the accountability of local governments through increased transparency provisions; establishing greater opportunities for community referenda; and mandating reporting provisions to communities. In all states[1] provisions have been enacted for councils to develop strategic or management plans (especially to be more responsive to community wishes); for stricter reporting regimes, both to the community and to the state government; for making key documentation more transparent and available; for continuing the electoral reforms begun in the 1960s; and for extending Freedom of Information coverage to local government. These provisions were designed to strengthen accountability both to the local community and to the state government, improve management capacity and make local government more democratic. In this context, however, being 'more democratic' was understood in terms of enhancing representative democracy and improving both transparency and accountability of local government management activity, rather than considering options for stronger, more direct community engagement. Legislative initiatives in most jurisdictions involved amendments to state local government Acts, or the introduction of new legislation, to strengthen public consultation requirements in relation to councils' proposed activities, forecast expenditure, required total rate (property tax) revenue, and the anticipated level and distributive effects in broad terms of various components of the rating structure.

There is significant variation between local government electoral systems in Australia. These variations relate to the length of council terms, the size of the elected council, who can vote, obligations to vote, and the voting system itself. Significantly, in some states voting is compulsory, aligning this obligation with state and national elections, while elsewhere voting is not compulsory at local government level. While some vestiges of a colonial past, such as multiple voting based on property ownership, have been removed, a majority of states retain a property franchise of some sort in addition to a universal franchise for residents.

[1] The term 'states' is used in this paper to refer to the six states and the Northern Territory governments at the intermediate level of the Australian federation, all of which have local government systems with similar arrangements.

Voter turnout, one measure of successful participation, is low in those states where voting is not compulsory (see Table 1). While the introduction of postal voting has increased the level of turnout (for example, in South Australia it was primarily responsible for a rise from 15% to 39%), rates of voter participation in those states where voting is not compulsory remain low. Voter turnout at local elections ranges from 12% to 65% with averages in the low 30s. In most rural local governments only a minority (about 30%) of all seats are contested at elections, although this figure in higher in urban elections (about 60%) (Gerritsen and Whyard 1998:42).

Table 1: Voter Participation in Local Government Elections

NSW	Voting in LG elections is compulsory. Turnout for the 1999 and 2004 elections was 84% and 85.7% respectively.
VIC	Voting in LG elections is compulsory with an option for postal voting. Average turnout of 75% (range from 67-87%) for 54 councils where elections were conducted in 2002-2003. For November 2004 postal elections (22 councils) the average turnout was 75% (range 65-84%).
QLD	Voting in LG elections is compulsory. The local government association estimates average voter turnout in 2004 election at 80%, with the average informal vote at 5%.
SA	Voting in LG elections is not compulsory. State average turnout in 2003 election was 33% (range from 23-68%). From 1997, all councils in SA were given the option of conducting their elections by postal voting. The councils who conducted their elections this way saw an increase in turnout of 150% on 1995, with an average of 39%, compared with 15% in councils using polling booths in 1997. Based on the 1997 results, exclusively postal voting was made mandatory from 2000.
WA	Voting in LG elections is not compulsory and polling is conducted exclusively by post. Elections held in May 2005 showed an average turnout of 36% compared to an average of 22% in councils that had used polling booths in 2003.
TAS	Voting in LG elections is not compulsory and polling is conducted exclusively by post. Elections held in 1999, 2000 and 2002 achieved turnouts of 55%, 58% and 57% respectively. .
NT	Voting is compulsory and conducted through polling booths only. Average turnout in the most recent elections was 72% (including informal votes); the range was 66-76%.

Sources: State departments responsible for local government

While variations in electoral arrangements *may* reflect local preferences, what is significant is the limited capacity of local governments themselves to change these arrangements. Only in New South Wales can individual local governments change some aspects of electoral arrangements unilaterally, subject to citizen referenda. In

all others, state government or electoral commission approval is required, and in some cases, changes may require amendments to local government legislation.

The levels of allowance or remuneration paid to councillors also vary across states, and in some instances, between councils in the same state. For example, in Queensland the allowance system has resulted in 'large variations in allowance levels' to the extent that in some councils mayors and elected members can be employed full-time (DoTARS 2005:14). While these variations again reflect local or state preferences, serving as an elected member remains largely a part-time occupation, and this tends to restrict the opportunity to become a councillor to those with other sources of income. Given that payment for members of parliament has been a basic feature of democratic societies for more than a century, precisely to give all citizens the opportunity to represent their communities on a full-time basis, the failure to extend a similar provision to local governments appears somewhat anachronistic.

What is clear is that there remain some structural impediments to full and unencumbered access to the local government system, both for prospective elected representatives and for citizens wishing to vote. The local sphere of government has been described as the 'Cinderella' of Australia's public administration, as it simply has not won for itself that place in our polity which a long history has given it in Britain (Finn 1990:49). One of the markers for this is the level of voter participation, especially where voting is optional, which at present suggests that the enfranchised are not overly enthusiastic about exercising their right to vote in local government elections. Perhaps there is still some remnant of the poor reputation of elected councils revealed in research conducted in the 1980s, which found that many Australians considered their local councillors 'at best incompetent and, at worst, corrupt' (Bowman 1983:180). It may also reflect a view that local government is not treated seriously by governments in other spheres, especially in relation to the allocation of functions and resources; in which case it is hardly surprising that local communities also may not be inclined to treat the sector seriously.

As noted earlier, the recent revitalisation of the reform movement in local government coincided with a period in Australian history of intensive administrative change across the whole public sector. The centrepiece of local government reform was the reformation of state government legislation: between 1989 and 1999, the local government Acts in each state jurisdiction were reviewed and wholly or largely rewritten, with the Northern Territory following in 2008. Common to all changes was the shift away from prescriptive provisions reinforced by the doctrine of *ultra vires*, which restricted councils to performing only those activities specifically nominated under the legislation. In the new Acts, forms of general competence powers were granted to enable councils to undertake almost any activities necessary for them to fulfil the functions and powers delegated to them (subject to other state and federal laws). Typical was the *Victorian Local Government Act*, which gave councils the power to 'do all things necessary or

convenient to be done for or in connection with the performance of its functions and to enable it to achieve its purposes and objectives' (section 3F).

However, whilst these legislative changes widened the scope of local government *activities*, the nature and extent of the delegated *powers* did not change significantly in any state jurisdiction. Despite the modernisation of local government Acts, there is no evidence of significant changes to the state-local power nexus. Reserved powers remain with the state governments, typical of which is the provision in the New South Wales 1993 legislation which gives the Minister for Local Government 'the power to issue any order that a council may issue'; and in Queensland, where the state government is empowered to refuse approval to by-laws, overturn existing gazetted by-laws and overturn council resolutions. Thus even under the reformed local government Acts, local government remains a creature of state and territory governments, all of which retain strong over-rule powers (Aulich 1999; 2005).

Any commitment to local autonomy was particularly tested in those states then collectively known as the 'rust belt' (Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania), in which the financial problems of state governments drove approaches to reform. In these states reforms focused attention more on cost reduction rather than on enhancing local governance (Aulich 2005). In justifying this reform effort, states claimed they had brought about lower local taxes, debt retirement and improved quality of services to residents – few mentioned the impacts on traditional local governance issues and values.

Nevertheless, the reform processes themselves suggested a strong preference for consultative and participative mechanisms: discussion papers, exposure drafts of legislation, inquiries, seminars, community consultations, training programs for newly elected local members and the like were typical of the tools used. In New South Wales, for example, the process of review took four years: it included the release of a discussion paper and an extensive consultation program which involved over 3,000 attendees at seminars, 900 written submissions and 450 telephone calls (NSW Government 1991:3). These reform processes could be described as pluralist and participative, utilising activities designed to lift the level of awareness of participants.

While apparently consultative, the process of local government reform was not without its critics: there were complaints from local government associations in several states that their submissions were not sufficiently considered, particularly in relation to the preservation of state government reserve powers and the overall impact on local autonomy (LGSA 1991, 1992; LGAQ 1992).

Moreover, a recent report by the House of Representatives Economics, Finance and Public Administration Committee found that local government has been short-changed, particularly by the actions of state governments in maintaining revenue denial. There are increasing expectations of local government to provide services,

but they lack adequate revenues of their own, and/or insufficient funds are granted to them, to undertake additional functions delegated or prescribed by state governments. The report, completed in 2004, recommended a series of follow up activities to establish a blueprint for future intergovernmental arrangements (HREFPAC 2004), but at the time of writing, there have yet to be put in place any substantive changes to the current nexus.

Martin argues that this resource deficit is precisely the reason why local governments have been unable to become further engaged in community building, and that leadership in this area has 'been usurped by the State government' (Martin 2006:1). He asserts that this use of community development opportunities for state political purposes detracts from the effective public management of 'what is regarded in other parts of the western world as important social processes at the core of effective local governance' (Martin 2006:1).

Thus at the end of nearly two decades of reform, there has been some devolution of functions to the local sphere, but the historic reality of administrative subordination of local government continues to be a central feature of central-local relationships in Australia (Gerritsen and Whyard 1998). While its counterparts in many overseas jurisdictions enjoy the fruits of growing acceptance of new governance principles such as subsidiarity and joined-up government, Australian local government continues to wrestle with a nineteenth century legislative stranglehold imposed on it by state governments.

Nevertheless, the language of partnership between state and local governments and their communities is beginning to emerge, as participatory governance and community building become the new strategic focus of some state governments. By contrast with previous iterations of 'citizen participation', this emerging form of community engagement seeks a more active relationship between government and citizens, by enabling citizens to play a significant and more direct role in shaping the nature and priorities of their communities.

3. Participatory Governance: Active Partnership with Local Communities

This recent interest in more engaged, collaborative and community-focused public policy and service delivery finds its sources in the United Kingdom (UK), the European Union and to some extent the United States. In particular, 'Third Way' politics has popularised a number of reforms centred on ideas of devolution, stakeholders, inclusion, partnerships and community (Reddel and Woolcock 2003:81), ideas which are generally related to community participation. Paradoxically, this is occurring at a time when globalisation and supra-national interests have also become focal points of national activity. These two apparently contradictory trends are complementary to the extent that participation models appear to enable governments to better deal with the consequences of globalisation, especially those regional inequalities that arise from it. Communities are being

challenged to develop their local capacities or social capital to cope more effectively with issues like social exclusion and disadvantage, which have often accompanied economic restructuring in response to global imperatives.

This signals a shift from local government to local governance – the involvement of a wide range of institutions and actors drawn from within but also beyond government, and the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities for tackling social and economic issues (Geddes 2005). As Stoker (1998) argues, governance implies that the capacity to get things done does not rest only on the power of government to command or use its authority. There is a growing enthusiasm for new forms of 'distributed local governance that draws on the skills and resources of public, private, and civil society sectors' (Reddel and Woolcock 2003:81).

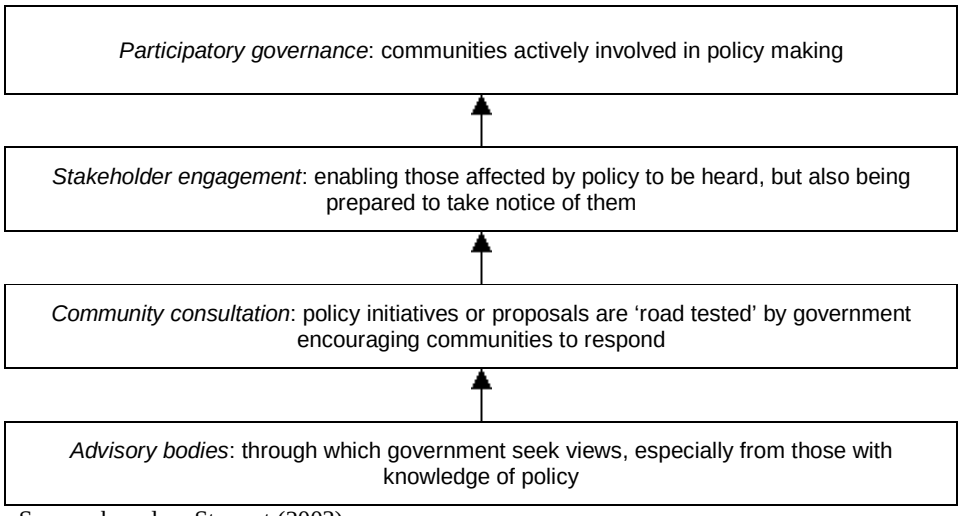
The acceptance of tenets of the 'New Public Management', particularly in Australia, has also added impetus to the need for greater participation by communities, especially through policy-making processes. Governments are now more likely to search for alternative sources of advice to that traditionally monopolised by its public services, and many of those actually providing public services are outside government. To be effective, policy makers require more information about service delivery and what works, and participatory processes can provide essential feedback for policy making (Edwards 2003; Curtain 2003).

Governments are also responding to demands for participation from a better educated, more articulate and more demanding citizenry, many of whom express a declining level of trust in political institutions and a belief that purely representative democracy often results in a 'democratic deficit' (Pharr and Putnam 2000; Edwards 2005). This belief is expressed in demands for supplementary engagement of citizens beyond the traditional democratic processes of three or four year elections, with calls for more meaningful exchanges with government (Curtain 2003). Further, there is recognition that today many more policy problems are cross-cutting and highly complex, or 'wicked', and seem to defy resolution by government alone (Stoker 2004; Geddes 2005). There is growing understanding that 'governments cannot simply deliver outcomes in complex areas that rely on enhanced individual responsibility and behavioural change to a disengaged and passive public' (APSC 2007:1). 'Wicked' problems may require greater engagement by communities to assist in their resolution.

Stewart (2003) distinguishes different forms of governance and the associated institutional arrangements that governments use to gather information and opinion. These are presented as a continuum (Figure 1) in which interests external to government are progressively more able to influence and shape policy and its implementation: in this continuum, power moves downwards and outwards. Participatory governance is at the apex of citizen engagement both as a form of participatory and deliberative democracy (Caddy and Vergez 2001), and as a form of governance that seeks active partnerships and collaboration between civil society, the private sector and governments (Reddel and Woolcock 2003). Shifts

through the continuum reflect increased acceptance of ideas of community, social capital, and localism as the foundations of political activity and policy-making.

Figure 1: The Governance Continuum



Source: based on Stewart (2003)

Participatory governance gives stakeholders the opportunity to engage in policy making directly, leading to 'cross-boundary forms of negotiated order that involve government agencies and other stakeholders in both policy formulation and implementation' (Stewart 2003:151). It involves a shift from technocratic development of policy with its programmatic or regulatory control, to situations where some control may be negotiated away from single government agencies. It marks a sharp divergence from the neo-liberal concept of reducing the role and size of government, to conceiving government as an active partner in 'associational governance', collaborating with a wide range of other stakeholders (Smyth *et al*. 2005).

Such participation is not new in Australia: local governments have (perhaps intermittently) long provided forums and organising capacity to facilitate arrangements that engage and build local capacity. A generation ago, local government's singular focus on physical infrastructure, reflected in the label 'roads, rates and rubbish', was supplanted by increasing concerns for the provision of community and human services, and for stronger community participation in matters such as land-use planning and community development.

At state and federal government level there is a long history of facilitation of area improvement programs, regional initiatives and local capacity building projects. However, these have rarely been sustained and too often their effectiveness has not been evaluated. Federal governments have asserted an interest in social capital formation but appear unwilling to invest directly in such programs. While believing 'in the ability of people to generate their own solutions to their own problems' and that 'social participation helps people to grow and flourish as human beings and be

full members of Australian society' (Reddel and Woolcock 2003:82), federal governments appear to have decided that this is best achieved if handled largely without government or bureaucratic support.

By contrast, almost all state governments have taken a more direct role in facilitating community capacity building. Typically, this is formalised through establishing agencies or administrative units tasked to encourage 'joined-up' and community building initiatives. This activity carries an implicit view that traditional notions of consultation and centrally managed community input into the policy process are no longer sufficient to manage community expectations and the complexity of modern political life (Davis 2001:230).

In Victoria, for example, the government has commenced work on community capacity building, on measures for social capital, service integration and community well-being, and on local learning and employment networks. It has also formally adopted a set of principles to underpin its engagement policy, and has encouraged local governments to develop four-year community plans that include processes of community participation (Martin 2006).

However, Wiseman concludes that while the Victorian government has energetically explored an extensive program of consultative and community-building strategies, it has been more cautious about opening up debate about participatory and deliberative decision making processes. He observes that in Victoria:

> there is mounting concern within local government and non-government organisations about the extent of state government commitment to back the language of partnership with real changes to decision-making and resource allocation processes (Wiseman 2005:69).

At the same time, there is evidence that due to resource constraints, some local councils are actually withdrawing from community engagement at this time when state level governments are enhancing their involvement (Martin 2006).

In Western Australia, the state's Citizenship Strategy aims to actively promote the concepts of democracy, citizenship and sustainability (DPCWA 2004), and the Queensland, Tasmanian and New South Wales governments have all initiated engagement strategies (Reddel and Woolcock 2003). These state programs have tended to emphasise locality and local disadvantage, and 'place management' has emerged as a new term in spatial policy language to signal a holistic approach to the needs of localities (Smyth *et al*. 2005:39).

In Queensland, the intention to utilise multi-sector partnerships was signalled by the Premier who declared that:

> There is … an emerging service delivery model involving governments working in partnership with communities to determine needs, devise strategies for meeting these needs, implementing activities consistent with these strategies and ultimately

> monitoring results. The emphasis is on community empowerment and not on traditional functional program delivery (Queensland Government 2001:10).

The government of Queensland has issued a package of policies and programs aimed at greater participation in policy development and service delivery, although it should be noted that these represent strategic intentions which have yet to be fully implemented or evaluated (Reddel and Woolcock 2003). Reddel and Woolcock argue that these strategic intentions are overdue in that past practices have failed to appreciate the critical role of local government, community associations and other forms of civil society; and even when recognised, their diversity and complexity were not always easy to accommodate because of the dominance of managerial policies which foster largely passive notions of consultation and agency coordination. More recent reports on the Queensland programs indicate some positive gains, notably the community renewal program focusing on fifteen disadvantaged areas in the state, and the Cape York initiative to address long-standing social problems in indigenous communities in that region. In both cases, the authors claim that these early successes may be due to the use of techniques of associational governance, whereby integrated policy responses involve a movement beyond the traditional social welfare constituency to engage communities more broadly (Smyth *et al.* 2005).

A growing number of cases are emerging where local governments have developed or contributed to associational governance, often through giving prominence to the notion of 'place'. For example, the City of Playford (South Australia) in its development of a high-performance growth hub (Genoff 2005), or the Sydney Harbour Manager project involving a memorandum of understanding between 14 agencies and 19 local councils. The latter is a particularly interesting development as the 'model emphatically does not seek a single vision, an ongoing consensus, or a grand plan. It assumes many voices, competing interests and goals, and shifts in interests and alliances. The model enables clusters of stakeholders and interest groups to develop joint positions and then enter into a dialogue with other main players' (Dawkins 2003: 63).

There is also growing interest in and practice of alternative means of enhancing community engagement. For example, deliberative democratic processes are being employed by governments at all levels in Australia (Carson 2007). These are robust consultation methods that add value to policy-making processes, especially in enabling governments to deal more effectively with complex policy issues such as stem cell research, Aboriginal reconciliation, asylum seeking and climate change. Techniques used also include innovative collaborative planning methods, such as those being used to mediate water and land-use conflicts in British Columbia (see, for example Frame *et al.* 2004); citizen panels, now established by more than three quarters of UK local authorities; citizens' juries; and community dialogues, which are becoming more common in Canada (Curtain 2003). A significant number of Australian local governments are following suit.

4. Some Key Issues

A number of important issues emerge from this discussion. First, as indicated earlier, the data is incomplete and anecdotal about the extent of any shift towards more participative forms of governance. This, of course, is not a problem specific to Australia. In the Canadian context, Stewart (2006:197) argues that 'few efforts have been made to address [evaluation of] good governance at the local level, perhaps mostly because of data collection difficulties.' Further research is required to map the diversity of state and local government policy interventions and to evaluate their effectiveness. For example, there are profound differences of perspective in relation to recent 'community strengthening' initiatives. Some report positively on early trends and anecdotal feedback on the results of some of these initiatives, especially in Victoria, whilst others suggest that:

> many claims about the benefits of strengthening social bonds and increasing civic participation are overblown, and that attempts to present local self-help, volunteering and social entrepreneurship as panaceas for deeply rooted structural inequalities and injustices are naïve and misleading (Wiseman 2006:103).

A second issue relates to the endemic weaknesses of local government in Australia, and the burden imposed by the increasing tasks mandated for it by other spheres. In the UK, Geddes (2000) questions the capacity of local partnerships to create structural change and resolve complex economic and social problems, so given the stronger role of local government in that jurisdiction, it is likely to be even more difficult for Australian local governments. In particular, concerns have been expressed about local government's capacity to assume broader roles in developing leadership in regional participatory governance arrangements. As Beer *et al.* conclude:

> it is not surprising that most economic development agencies [at local level] were small with very few staff and limited budgets, that they have been unstable, and that in many cases they did not have community and political support and in the perceptions of practitioners had little impact on their locality (quoted in Rainnie 2005:132).

With 560 Australian local governments, or 78% of the then total number, classified as 'rural' or 'regional' (DoTARS 2005:3), the urban-rural divide represents a critical dimension of uneven resourcing that tends to generate a 'lowest common denominator' effect and restrict the potential of the sector as a whole. This has been recognised by the provision of relatively large national government grants to those councils most in need. However, despite horizontal equalisation these local governments appear poorly placed to assume the type of leadership required to advance participatory governance. It is more likely that leadership in these resource challenged environments has to be assumed by regional bodies such as voluntary regional organisations of councils or regional development networks in concert with state and not-for-profit agencies – provided that these regional bodies are themselves able to marshal sufficient resources and leadership expertise for the purpose.

Third, and on the other hand, there are doubts that state governments would ever be able to effectively manage local initiatives for participatory governance. As Martin comments, there is a 'question [of] how far state governments can go in brokering community engagement strategies across small rural towns and communities' (Martin 2006:2). By contrast, it has often been acknowledged that many local governments in Australia have satisfactorily met their intended functions of service delivery, adequate representation and participation, and advocacy of constituent needs to higher levels of government (Marshall 1998). Self (1997:298) argues that the Australian local sector 'remains genuinely local and grass roots in a way that is no longer true of most overseas systems'. This provides some confidence that local government has a significant place and skill set to be a valued partner in participatory governance, even if there are questions about the capacity of many smaller councils to lead this process.

5. Conclusions

For there to be real benefits from citizen engagement, consultation about public policy needs to move beyond the piecemeal and haphazard process which is evident in Australia today (Curtain 2003). At state and local government levels, in contrast with their federal counterpart, there is considerable evidence of a willingness to engage with citizens rather than merely consult people as users of public services or 'customers'. However, while most states and many local governments have developed policies or protocols to facilitate this higher level of consultation, as well as signalling to their communities that such consultations are valued, there are few examples where effective engagement has been established and accepted as a citizen's right. The concept of engagement appears to be valued, perhaps even seen as necessary, but in few instances has the practice yet been accepted as a fundamental right of communities to enable them to assume a formal place in governance.

State governments are being challenged to surrender their legislative power over local government in order to facilitate 'real' partnerships with local communities and embrace notions of participatory governance. At this stage, it is unclear whether Australian local governments will be able to meet this challenge in ways seen in some other countries, such as the United Kingdom or Canada, where principles of subsidiarity, citizen empowerment and community engagement are more established features of the political landscape. Given current constraints on local government's autonomy and resources, in many cases effective moves towards participatory governance may need leadership and support from outside.

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