

REDRAWING THE MAP OF AUSTRALIA: THE COMMONWEALTH'S REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT Though relatively low profile in terms of media coverage, it can be argued that the Commonwealth's Regional Development Program was one of the more significant and ambitious policy initiatives introduced by the Keating Government during its recent term in office. In the view of some commentators, including the author of this paper, the successful implementation of this program has the potential to facilitate fundamental changes to Australia's political, administrative and economic structures. Following the recent change of government it is timely to review the historical significance and fundamental assumptions underlying this Federal Government program. Some two years after the release of *Working Nation*, which outlined the Federal Government's regional development policy, just what has been achieved through the implementation of a program which sought to establish a national network of some thirty to forty Commonwealth Regional Development Organisations (RDOs). After providing a brief overview of the origins and key elements of the Commonwealth's Regional Development Program this paper examines some of the political and conceptual difficulties inherent in this important policy initiative.

I. INTRODUCTION

As part of a general review of Commonwealth employment policies in the immediate post-election period, the Federal Government established a taskforce on regional development, appointing Bill Kelty, Secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, as chair. The report produced by the high profile Kelty Taskforce complemented the Industry Commission's draft report *Impediments to Regional Industry Adjustment* (released in September 1993), which identified the need for better co-ordination of government programs and encouragement of more 'self-help initiatives' as the key policies required to assist regional economies. The Kelty Report with its recommendations for an ambitious national program of regional

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infrastructure, received only cautious endorsement from the Federal Government. Although, 'mainly composed of glossy photos and 'wish lists' from the regions, rather than broad-ranging analysis of regional needs and conditions' (Alexander, 1994), the Kelty Report succeeded in putting regional development back on the national agenda. While the Kelty Taskforce was visiting major centres in all states to hold discussions with regional leaders, the Commonwealth commissioned the international consulting firm McKinsey and Co. to undertake a nationwide study to identify key factors that influence business investment in regional Australia. Together with the more detailed Industry Commission and Bureau of Industry Economic Report, it was largely the findings of Kelty and McKinsey that provided the rationale for the Commonwealth Government's regional development policy.

Released on 4 May 1994, the *White Paper on Employment and Growth - Working Nation*, outlined the Government's four-year regional development program which was to be implemented by a special unit established within the Department of Housing and Regional Development (DHRD) under the Minister, Brian Howe. Based on the key recommendations of McKinsey, the White Paper argued that 'regions [should] be encouraged to help themselves' and 'without a sense of regional commitment little can be achieved of any lasting significance'. In administrative terms, the key regional policy initiatives outlined in the White Paper were the establishment of a national network of Commonwealth funded Regional Development Organisations (RDOs) and Area Consultative Committees (ACCs). Certain aspects of these policy initiatives had much in common with the post-war reconstruction program of the Chifley Government and the Whitlam Government's decentralisation policies of the early 1970's (Murphy and Walker, 1995, p. 120). However on this occasion the Federal Government emphasised the need for a 'bottom up' approach and modest funding for the program which it was claimed was basically designed to assist regions to help themselves.

As well as being integral to the Prime Minister's vision of a restructured, internationally competitive Australia, this Commonwealth policy initiative had the potential to bring about fundamental changes in Australia's current political structures. Though the political significance of the Commonwealth's regional development policies has been downplayed, the establishment of regional economic councils with direct access to Commonwealth funding has obvious implications for local government and future financial arrangements between Canberra and the States. While it is too early to predict whether or not RDOs might eventually become a fourth tier of government, the Commonwealth's regional policy development, if successful, clearly has the potential to fundamentally change the political and economic face of regional Australia.

In July 1994 in its *Guidelines for the Regional Development Program*, the Commonwealth provided specific advice regarding just how this 'New Approach to Regional Development' would provide 'economic growth and the delivery of employment opportunities across regions'. The first of the program's three major components - Structures, Strategies and Projects - provided for funding to assist with the establishment and operational costs of Commonwealth *approved* Regional Development Organisations. Once approved, RDOs could apply for funding of up

to \$80,000 to conduct a regional audit and develop an economic development strategy for their region and for other funding for projects which met DHRD's criteria.

Undoubtedly one of the major incentives to 'regional stakeholders' to form RDOs was the program's second component which provided for an allocation of \$80m for Regional Strategic Infrastructure projects. In a speech at Warrnambool on 6 May 1994, Deputy Prime Minister Howe made it clear that Commonwealth assistance would only be provided for 'small scale infrastructure projects that would be identified as vital for overcoming impediments to development and increasing export competitiveness' which would be 'financially supported by the other spheres of government and/or the private sector' (Burdess, 1994, p. 5). In theory, all projects were supposed to *fall out* of RDOs' audit based strategies for sustainable growth. However at a meeting with regional representatives during his visit to Warrnambool, the Minister indicated that some Commonwealth funding would be available for 'lighthouse' projects before the completion of regional strategies partly to encourage initial local support for RDOs. To provide some sort of strategic basis for 'lighthouse' projects, RDOs were required to develop interim strategies which outlined a sustainable vision for their region and justified regional priorities. It was probably the case that most regional groupings which applied to become RDOs were motivated by the prospect of securing Commonwealth funding for *existing*, rather than new, infrastructure projects.

The third, and what was possibly considered to be the least important component by most regional stakeholders, was the Management and Skill Enhancement Program. Under this program, organisations were invited to apply to be recognised as 'Regional Best Practice Centres', an initiative which apparently resulted in a flood of applications, but to date little action, on the part of the Commonwealth. During the first half of 1995, DHRD's Regional Economic Development Group (REDG) engaged KPMG Peat Marwick to conduct around 150 short courses designed to broaden the skills of people involved in 'regional development'. (*Regional Leader*, Vol 1, No.1, July 1995, p. 7) To encourage effective regional leadership, this component provided for the development of appropriate 'Management and Economic Development Modules' and 'Skill Enhancement (training courses) for Regional Development Practitioners'.

2. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF RDO's

One of the 'basic principles' underlying the Commonwealth Guidelines was that 'continued improvement' resulting in significant, sustainable economic (hence employment) growth would be achieved through the adoption of international best practice in regions. One key to achieving such growth involved 'developing effective, sustainable partnerships between relevant stakeholders' to provide strategic, flexible leadership and facilitate the more co-ordinated provision of government services to regions. In its *Guidelines* concerning the establishment of RDOs, the Commonwealth made it clear that each region 'should be sufficiently large ... so that it [formed] part of a national development framework' of around 30-

40 regions. As well as being administratively convenient for the Government to deal with fewer, larger regions, it was assumed that in order to realise their potential for economic growth that regions needed to have a minimum population and geographic breadth. In demographic terms, this meant that many existing regions and non-metropolitan centres would need to merge with other regions and centres to become 'wider regions'.

The Commonwealth's *Guidelines*, and the advice provided by DHRD officers to organisations seeking to become RDOs, made it clear that the membership of RDOs should be broadly representative, largely industry based, and not dominated by any single industry sector or organisation. Specifically, the Commonwealth was concerned that local government representatives and officers should not be in a position to effectively control the policy direction of particular RDOs². However, the listed membership of several of the more recently established RDOs contained in *The Directory of Commonwealth Funded Regional Development Organisations* (February, 1996) could indicate that DHRD has taken a more flexible position on this issue. However, in most instances, it was more a matter of a group of local government representatives playing a central role in the establishment of a RDO from which they had subsequently withdrawn. Given that existing organisations seeking to form RDOs were frequently part of, or closely linked to, local government, the extent of direct local government representation in RDOs has remained a potentially contentious issue.

It is significant that the Commonwealth allocated only \$150m (\$80m to establish RDOs and for non-infrastructure projects, and \$70m for infrastructure projects) for this program and was not prepared to make a longer term commitment to funding regional development. Prior to the release of the White Paper, the Kelty report had raised expectations in non-metropolitan Australia, regarding the possibility of substantial Commonwealth funding for infrastructure projects. As convener of a Working Party to establish the Greater Green Triangle RDO and chairman of the Victorian Government's Frameworks Consultative Committee for South West Victoria, the author was involved in discussions with State ministers and their senior advisers from the Victorian and South Australian State Governments. At these meetings, State Government Ministers and their senior officers questioned the Commonwealth's commitment to assisting regions to address fundamental issues identified by Kelty and McKinsey. It was pointed out that as the Commonwealth intended to establish around forty RDOs, the average total DHRD funding for each, if evenly distributed, would amount to only around \$4m each. It was suggested that for many regional organisations, this would not provide sufficient incentive to make either the effort or the compromises required to form RDOs which met the Commonwealth's criteria for approval.

The stated aim of the Commonwealth Regional Development Program was to

² This and several other observations made in this article are based on semi-confidential discussions the author held with Canberra and Melbourne based DHRD officers regarding the development of a submission to establish the Greater Green Triangle Region Association as a Commonwealth RDO.

provide assistance to all, especially 'poorer performing' regions, to help themselves to manage the changes required for regions to achieve their potential for 'sustainable growth'. With McKinsey providing a blueprint of what needed to be done, the Commonwealth's regional development program was meant to provide 'regions' with the incentive and limited financial assistance to achieve their own 'sustainable visions'. However, given that assistance was only available for regions which met the Commonwealth's criteria, the overall result could well have been that most available funding would be allocated to better organised regions which need it least. Lacking a strong sense of regional identity or an existing organisation to provide the leadership and resources required to develop a RDO, it is difficult to see how some regions would be able to readily access this program. In short, for regions to qualify for Commonwealth approval and funding support as a RDO, substantial resources, a clear and agreed sense of regional identity and a degree of co-operative leadership within the 'wider region' would be required. Some isolated rural regions, that were most in need of Commonwealth assistance, clearly found it extremely difficult to meet these requirements. If it turns out that one major outcome of the Commonwealth's Regional Development Program has been to provide Australia's more prosperous, better organised regions ('Australia's engines of growth') with additional resources, then it will rightly be criticised for relative lack of assistance provided to 'poorer performing' regions.

For some 'wider regions' the establishment of RDOs clearly required initial leadership and resources to be provided by a strategically positioned sponsoring organisation. Take for example, the establishment of the Greater Green Triangle Region Association which with Illawarra, was one of the first two RDOs approved by the Commonwealth. This was somewhat surprising given that the Greater Green Triangle clearly lacked a strong sense of regional identity (compared to say the Gold Coast or Sunraysia), had a recent history of destructive inter-centre rivalry and a 'failed' Green Triangle movement to take into account (Forth, 1994, pp. 60-62). To a large degree, the establishment of the Greater Green Triangle RDO was due to the sponsoring role undertaken by a regional university in 'partnership' with eight local regional development boards. As part of its regional role, Deakin University, through its Centre for Regional Development, provided substantial resources, acted as the 'driving force' and played the role of 'honest broker' in the complex negotiations required to develop the RDO proposal and establish the Greater Green Triangle Region Association as a functioning organisation (Dryden and Forth, 1995).

In discussions with DHRD representatives regarding the membership of the proposed Greater Green Triangle RDO it was made clear that the Government was looking for significant private sector involvement as well as representations from unions, local government and education and training institutions. In providing advice to groups seeking to become Commonwealth approved RDOs, DHRD was concerned that if RDO's were dominated by public sector representatives, the program would be criticised as creating another level of bureaucracy. It had been assumed that high profile local business leaders would welcome an opportunity to participate in the time consuming and often quite complex tasks involved in establishing RDO's, developing regional strategies and so on. If the experiences of

the GGTRA were representative, it could be argued that few regional business leaders have either the time or incentive for this level of involvement. It was also the case that the GGT Working Party did not consider approaching local businesses with requests for sponsorship to partly underwrite the proposed RDO's operating costs. It was our view that the RDOs would need to attract funding for 'lighthouse', particularly infrastructure, projects as a pre-requisite to obtaining significant support from local businesses. Reflecting a somewhat sceptical attitude towards the Commonwealth's involvement in regional development, we considered that most regional business leaders would require evidence of significant achievements before committing themselves to providing financial support for RDOs.

3. RDO's AND STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

As part of the required process to become a Commonwealth approved RDO, the Greater Green Triangle Working Party sought statements of support and modest funding from both the South Australian and Victorian State Governments. While statements of support were eventually provided by the key ministers, both State Governments made it quite clear that they were not prepared to provide even minimal funding to support the establishment of RDOs. In later negotiations with senior State Government officials regarding possible state funding for GGT infrastructure projects, it was made clear that both Governments saw it as their right, and not the Commonwealth's, to determine regional development priorities for their states. At about the same time, the conservative Premier of Western Australia was reported to have strongly attacked the proposal to allocate resources directly to regions rather than State Governments which the Premier claimed to be 'the logical vehicle for managing regional development' (O'Reilly, 1995, p. 37). While the Commonwealth's low profile Regional Development Program did not become part of the debate on State's rights, it had the potential to do so. Had regional development politics become an electoral issue in the recent federal election, the Federal Opposition would have presumably sided with the conservative State Governments in criticising the program as being overly-bureaucratic and attempting to create an unnecessary fourth tier of government. In a pre-election regional development policy statement, the Coalition claimed that 'Labor's often heavy handed and political approach . . . aroused suspicion . . . that RDOs are part of a longer term agenda to erode the authority of State and Local Government' (Hawker, 1996, p. 4). Clearly, any major Commonwealth initiative to directly fund regions, rather than providing State or local government with funding for 'regional development', had the potential to exacerbate tensions between Canberra and the States.

State Government ministers were clearly reluctant to directly fund what they clearly regarded as essentially a Commonwealth initiative. The key Victorian ministers held the view that there are already appropriate regional development policies in place with substantial state funding provided to local regional development boards. Why, they argued, should State Governments provide additional funding for RDOs for which the Commonwealth would obviously get

most of the credit? Given the difficulties, at least in the short term, of attracting significant private sponsorship or direct funding from State Government, intending RDOs were faced with the prospect that the Commonwealth would provide only around fifty percent of the recurrent funding required to meet the RDOs operational costs for three years. Essentially, for most RDOs to survive, especially beyond the Commonwealth's four year program, local government support needed to be significant and ongoing. Yet, available evidence supports the impression that throughout much of regional Australia, local government representatives were less than enthusiastic in their attitude towards Commonwealth establishment of RDOs.

In a report prepared for the Municipal Association of Victoria, Angela Munro was highly critical of the Commonwealth's regional development program which she claims was undemocratic and unworkable (Munro, 1994). Munro's report supports an alternative form of regional economic council with a 'core membership' of elected local government representatives and regions based on water catchment boundaries. Munro argued that 'local government . . . [was] well placed to take the lead in developing solutions' and that 'regions cannot work without the effective involvement of local government'. According to this report, the Commonwealth's motives for involvement in regional development included the Federal Government's desire to 'influence the decisions and priorities, or bypass other spheres of government, especially in relation to resource allocation' and 'to bypass or dilute the influence of one or other sphere of government' and 'to gain electoral advantage'. Though not endorsed as MAV policy, Munro's paper reflects general concerns on the part of local government representatives in Victoria who clearly regarded regional development as their proper responsibility.

Partly as a response to rising unemployment and a decline in business investment, local government organisations have assumed increased responsibility for facilitating economic development in much of regional Australia. The recent restructuring of local government in Victoria has resulted in fewer, larger councils each having a clear mandate to attract increased business investment. Though no uniform pattern has emerged to date, it now appears likely that most of Victoria's state-funded, regional development boards have been or will eventually come under the control of local government. It also seems likely that there will be further consolidation of local government in Australia resulting in fewer, larger municipalities and shires and that most councils will become members of some form of regional local government association. As far as the long term success of the Commonwealth's Regional Development Program is concerned, the critical issue is whether these larger councils or local government associations will become in effect alternative regional economic councils to RDOs. In many instances, from the Commonwealth's perspective, it may have been practical for RDOs to be partly based on or merged with State-funded organisations controlled by local government. However in 1994, the Commonwealth made it clear that it would not support RDOs that were effectively controlled by local government. Not only would the membership of such organisations not be broadly representative, but such RDOs would obviously be subject to direction by State Governments who largely control local government. It is clear that the Howard Government is concerned that the

establishment of some RDOs may lead to unnecessary duplication and has resulted in a degree of conflict between Commonwealth RDOs and the existing regional economic development boards (Hawker, 1996).

4. DETERMINING REGIONS

The term *regional Australia* has traditionally been used to refer to the major urban centres and rural areas outside the capital cities. It was therefore significant that the Commonwealth included metropolitan as well as non-metropolitan *wider regions* within its definition of regional Australia. To make regional, as opposed to rural, development part of the Keating Government's national agenda for job growth, the Commonwealth's Regional Development Program was constructed as part of the Federal Government's *Working Nation* package. In this respect, the Government's approach to regional development reflected the findings of the *Creating Jobs* Discussion Paper (McDonald, March 1995) prepared as part of the Australian Urban and Regional Development Review. McDonald's study indicated that it was the older industrial sections of Australia's major cities and towns such as mid-western Sydney and Newcastle that were worst affected by unemployment related to industry restructuring.

Such a broad definition however has created some difficulty in determining just what constitutes a *region* in terms of the social and economic criteria used by McKinsey and the Commonwealth's own *Guidelines*. It can be argued that *suburban regions* like West Melbourne lack the strong sense of regional identity of major regional centres like Ballarat, or rural regions like the Darling Downs or New England. It is difficult to envisage how such terms as *regional community* and *regional aspiration* can be meaningfully applied to groupings of suburbs where a significant proportion of residents work, shop and possibly have their main social and recreational interests outside the *region*. Was it realistic for the Commonwealth to try to devise a coherent program that provided a clear focus for *regions* with so little in common? Just what, one might ask, does a traditional non-metropolitan region like the Greater Green Triangle or the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales have in common with East Melbourne or Western Sydney?

Speaking at a conference held in Warrnambool in May 1994 to provide a regional response to the White Paper, Richard Walter, a former chairman of the Green Triangle Council of the 1980's, referred to several 'cautionary tales' regarding the Commonwealth's proposed Regional Development Program. (Walter, 1994, p. 24) Concerned that the Government has used *regional Australia* to include metropolitan as well as non-metropolitan regions, Walter spoke of 'the need to recognise that our metropolitan based cousins are an articulate bunch who by capturing the language also capture the funding'. Apart from the metropolitan regions' potential to monopolise available funding, the Commonwealth's decision to include potentially all of Australia in its regional development program presented obvious problems. With the relatively modest amount of Commonwealth funding and resources available for the program it could be argued that resources needed to be so thinly spread as to have little impact on any particular region.

Difficulties also arose from the flexibility as well as the breadth of the Commonwealth definition of regions. As Munro pointed out 'There were no set of regional boundaries which all key government stakeholders were obliged . . . to use' (Munro, 1994). The Commonwealth's decision to establish around sixty Area Consultative Committees (ACCs), as against approximately forty RDOs, was obviously going to produce overlapping regional boundaries and cause confusion in the minds of many 'regional stakeholders'. In a few *wider regions* RDOs became ACCs, or vice versa, while in others there are plans for the merging of ACCs and RDOs and the establishment of common regions. Clearly, the inclusion of metropolitan regions and the separate establishment of ACCs and RDO's increased the possibility that the Commonwealth's Regional Development Program would lack a clear sense of focus and be administratively difficult to manage.

One also needs to question the Commonwealth's *initial* assumption that most rural regional communities were capable (without substantial government assistance) of forming themselves into regions which would meet the Government's criteria regarding size, common core economic activities, etc. It is difficult to see how some geographically large regions with no existing organisational structure, and a small and scattered population, could meet the Commonwealth's stated criteria for the establishment of RDO's. In terms of making a real difference to regional Australia, would it not have been preferable for the Commonwealth to concentrate on assisting those non-metropolitan regions which clearly lacked effective leadership and were experiencing difficulties in realising their potential for sustainable growth?

While the Commonwealth's preference for larger, fewer regions has been understandable, attempts to facilitate the formation of wider regions which conform to Commonwealth criteria regarding population and geographic size had the potential to seriously undermine the effectiveness of the program. In an article in the January 1995 edition of *Australian Business Monthly*, David O'Reilly refers to secret maps 'tucked away in a file inside' DHRD's Canberra office on which 'superimposed in a glossy colour map of the traditional outline of states are a series of new boundaries which carve the nation up into small provinces' (O'Reilly, 1995, p. 32). Whether predetermined or not, the Commonwealth's insistence on larger, regions was likely to lead to the formation of RDOs which contain unreconciled rival centres (the recent establishment of the Golden Region RDO which includes major regional centres of Ballarat and Geelong could be cited as an example of where this has happened) or constituent organisations which may have little in common apart from the desire to access Commonwealth funding. One could hardly be optimistic about the long term prospects of such RDOs once the incentive of Commonwealth funding would be no longer available.

5. CONCLUSION

Two years after the release of *Working Nation* and the recent change of Government and subsequent review of the program, it is appropriate to conclude this paper by commenting briefly on the achievements, historical significance and likely future of the Commonwealth's Regional Development Program. In spite of the

conceptual, and political difficulties referred to in this paper, by March 1996 the Keating Government had managed to establish a national network of some forty seven Commonwealth approved RDOs. It can be assumed that most of these organisations more or less met the criteria set out in the Commonwealth's *Guidelines* for the establishment of RDOs. However, on the basis of available evidence, one cannot comment as to what proportion could be fairly described as RDOs of *convenience* or how many RDOs would continue should Commonwealth funding be reduced or withdrawn.

As a requirement for continued Commonwealth Structures funding, it was necessary for the organisation to undertake regular, systematic self-evaluation. In April 1995, DHRD engaged the Canberra based consultants, Environmental Research and Information Consortium to undertake a survey regarding the origins, membership and perceived functions of what was then a relatively small number of approved RDOs. In September 1995, DHRD conducted its own survey of 'regional, community and business leaders; . . . to measure how well the RDOs have been functioning in terms of regional development, community acceptance of the organisation and how input from DHRD has been applied' (letter to author from DHRD, 12 September 1995). To date the 'results' of the ERIC and DHRD surveys have not been made available to individuals or organisations who participated in the exercise. Not all RDOs have apparently complied with DHRD's requirement to produce detailed progress reports, which if made available should provide a basis for some overall assessment of the program. On the other hand it could be argued that this type of self-assessment is unlikely to produce an accurate and balanced view of how individual RDO's and RDO's overall are functioning. What is clearly required would be an appropriate form of systematic external evaluation which should provide not only an indication of how RDO's see themselves, but how these organisations would be generally perceived within their region and state.

Though the then Federal Opposition provided an undertaking to maintain current level of funding for the Regional Development Program, the future of the program under the Howard Coalition Government is uncertain. The Coalition's pre-election policy statement *Recharging our Regions*, indicated that the focus of the Howard Government Regional Development Program would be on assisting 'provincial cities and rural areas' rather than a 'reaction to the (unemployment?) problems of capital cities' (Hawker, 1996 p. 3). Two months after the defeat of the Keating Labor Government, it is by no means clear just how this Commonwealth program will be affected by the new Government's current review of expenditure. At one stage it seemed likely that what is now the Department of Transport and Regional Development's mainly Canberra based Regional Development Group would be 'restructured' or have its funding and staffing very much reduced. Such a development together with other funding cuts would clearly affect the future viability of many Commonwealth approved RDO's, even though the Commonwealth is obliged to continue to provide structures funding. However, Senior Officers within the Department of Transport and Regional Development now seem reasonably confident that this Commonwealth program will not be adversely affected by significant funding cuts. The *Recharging our Regions* policy statement suggests that

in future. Commonwealth infrastructure funding for regional development projects will be more closely linked to State Government Infrastructure priorities.

If RDO's do survive as Commonwealth approved regional economic councils, it will, in the author's view, be at least another five or ten years before proper factual assessment can be made of their effectiveness in assisting Australia's regional communities to address such issues as low job growth and lack of general business investment in particular regions. Even then it will be difficult to assess the relative significance of RDO's taking account of complex international, national and local factors which impact on regions. Based on the author's experiences with the Greater Green Triangle and discussions with individuals closely associated with this Commonwealth program, the author believes that the historical significance of RDO's may have much more to do with facilitating changes in Australia's regional culture rather than achieving specific quantifiable outcomes.

From the author's perspective, the Commonwealth Regional Development Program has been critically important in enabling the Greater Green Triangle Region Association Inc. to develop a much clearer sense of regional identity and an agreed vision for our future. As a regional historian, the author is inclined to the view that future historians are likely to look back on the establishment of Commonwealth RDO's as a first critical step that enabled Australia's regional communities to assume much greater responsibility for determining their own economically sustainable futures.

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