REGIONAL POLICY: TOWARDS THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE.

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ABSTRACT The present time provides significant opportunities to bring regional policy issues to the fore in national debates. The conflation of short-term political priorities with widely recognised concerns for the *spatial* dimensions of economic change, means that those individuals and organisations promoting the case for regional policies more readily gain the eyes and ears of national leaders. Of course this is not the first time such conditions have existed. Within Australia there have been a series of political cycles over the past two decades, at least, where inquiries have been launched, undertaken and forgotten. Departments have been established, named, renamed, restructured, restructured again, and subsumed. As Beer (2000, p. 169) observes, past experiences of increased policy attentiveness to regional issues *"have not necessarily resulted in a better quality of life for people living in depressed areas"*. Given this history, does the current window of opportunity for regional policy offer anything new or different from the past? How may regional economic, environmental and socio-cultural issues be addressed in the twenty-first century, either as part of the discourse of sustainable development or through the emerging accounting-oriented metaphor of a triple bottom line? What are regional policy practitioners responding to, and how should they respond?

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper engages with these questions in the following manner. First, we provide some observations on the material manifestations of regional difference at the national level. This provides a context to assess the recent history of regional policy development in Australia, with particular attention to political currents during the past four years. Our edited collection *Land of Discontent* (2000) is situated within, and was published with the intention to influence, this environment. Third, we critically examine the concept of the 'triple bottom line' as a regional policy framework. Our critique is sympathetic, but focussing nonetheless on the difficulties, limitations and question marks hanging over this approach. Finally, we review current debates on the appropriateness of regional policy interventions. We conclude by emphasizing the need for government leadership on national demographic and economic issues such that regional development is not an afterthought to market-led trends, but is an integral part of guiding market forces to help shape a more efficient, equitable and ecologically sustainable Australia.

2. THE MATERIAL BASIS OF REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Our starting point is to make some observations on the material character of regional differences within Australia. In the late 1990s popular discourses and assumptions of 'urban winners' and 'rural losers' arising from the contemporary era of globalisation, gained traction. These descriptions, however, provided a simplified and at times erroneous portrait of contemporary Australian spatial restructuring. For example, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of early 1999 the journalist Craig McGregor wrote a major article on rural and regional Australia titled "The Great Divide" and premised on the assumption of uniform disadvantage outside the 'café latte' belt (McGregor, 1999). Also in 1999, the *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Debra Jopson (1999, p. 4) wrote that "*communities across NSW are battling for their existence*". These generalisations have also extended to politicians, with the then Commonwealth Minister for Employment Services, Tony Abbott (the MLA for Warringah, whose offices are in Manly, NSW) claiming that a "sandstone curtain" is dividing Sydney from the rest of the state of NSW (Grattan, 2000: 13). In June, 2001, Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson told the NSW National Party Annual Conference that when the Howard Government came to office there was *"a broad and widening gap between urban and rural Australians"* (Anderson, 2001a).

However, in this discourse, non-metropolitan Australia, even inland Australia, has been homogenised. It is not uniformly disadvantaged or in decline. Prior to the rise and fall of One Nation, The *New South Wales Social Trends Bulletin* (1995, p.19) noted that "*in the period 1988-93, all NSW Statistical Divisions (SDs) experienced population growth, except the Far West*", while even in this Statistical Division the population figures demonstrated *"a slowing of the rate of decline"*. More recently, NATSEM research provides supporting evidence that although, rural and regional Australians as a whole have lower incomes than their capital city counterparts, *"regional Australia is not uniformly disadvantaged and not uniformly declining"* (Lloyd *et al.*, 2001, p. 290).

Other research corroborates these conclusions. Analysing 1991 Census data through a principal components index of socio-economic status, Walmsley and Weinand (1997, p. 82) conclude: *"no one state and no one type of region dominates the 'winners' or the 'losers'. Rather, the pattern is one of increasing differentiation with the overall pattern suggesting links to the resource and community base in rural areas and to industrial change elsewhere"*. More recently, research for AHURI by Bob Stimson and others (Stimson *et al.*, 1999) analysing economic change in Australia's 58 statistical divisions over the period 1986-96 leads to the conclusion that the nation is experiencing 'dividing societies'. Stimson (2001, p. 199) argues: "*the use of the plural is deliberate, as the divisions discussed are multiple, existing between many groups and between many localities in our society. The divisions are between 'the city' and 'the bush'; between those employed and those who are jobless; between those with high incomes and those in part-time work; between those with the skills to participate in the new growth occupations of the information age and those*

without such skills".

The complex mosaic of regional differences, however, contains several identifiable features. First is a different set of experiences in larger centres vis-a-vis smaller towns. The so-called sponge centre effect has been discussed widely over the past few years. In the most widely cited example of this effect, the city of Dubbo increased in population by 53% over 1976-97 whereas over the same period proximate local government areas dominated by small towns experienced static or declining populations: Cabonne Shire +0.6%; Coonabarabran Shire –6.9%; Coolah Shire –13.5%; Gilgandra Shire –5.6% and Warren Shire –15.8% (Productivity Commission 1999: 28). Second is the process of low income coastal counter-urbanisation. The NSW North Coast for example is one of the fastest growing population belts in Australia, yet is characterised by considerable disadvantage, measured in income terms. When the 70 largest Australian urban centres are ranked in terms of average income per person (based on the 1996 Census), eight of the bottom 15 are found to be on the NSW North Coast (Salt, 2001: 70).

These patterns expose the lie of simplistic accounts that juxtapose the supposed experiences of the cities and coast, with those of inland Australia. Clearly the rich vein of journalistic and popular discourse that tars non-metropolitan Australia as uniformly disadvantaged is simplistic. This is dangerous because generalisations on rural-urban difference have a capacity to ramify into inappropriate and reactive regional policy-making; and to affect community confidence. In the Foreword to our book, Chris Sidoti, the former Human Rights Commissioner, discusses a prevailing sense of disaffection and alienation within rural and regional Australia. While we do not dispute the difficult conditions facing many people in particular regions of Australia, and especially those in inland centres, these discourses can have powerful feedback effects. Communities' abilities to retain their youth or attract skilled professionals can be affected adversely by these neo-Hanrahan discourses; thereby fulfilling their promises. Of course these discourses also feed directly into the electoral aspirations of the reactionary populism of Pauline Hanson and her ilk.

The rise, implosion and current whereabouts of One Nation and its illegitimate offspring are well documented. Davis and Stimson (1998: 81) identify the One Nation vote as being highly correlated with electorates *containing "unskilled workers in blue collar industries, few indigenous Australians or people born overseas, and have a high number of people achieving or attempting to achieve the Australian dream of home ownership"*. At the 1999 NSW state election, Pauline Hanson's One Nation was relatively more successful in poorer urban fringe areas and some rural areas, but was not successful in wealthier rural electorates. A recently published analysis of voter behaviour at the 1998 Federal election in Tim Fischer's seat of Farrer reveals that the National Party's vote was strongest in "*traditional farming areas focusing on grazing and cropping and characterised by intergenerational transfer of family farm units"* (Forrest *et al.*, 2001, p. 176).

Of course One Nation is just one element in the rearrangement of political

allegiances in rural and regional Australia. It is now generally accepted that the success of country Independents including Peter Andren and Tony Windsor in NSW is a prominent new force. Other political aspirants, including disaffected National Party politicians and ex-politicians, are attempting to join the fray. Importantly, these independents are often stronger in rural areas where One Nation did not poll well. Evidently the political landscape has been recast in the wake of Pauline Hanson's One Nation. But ironically, as we note in an article in *Australian Geographer* (McManus and Pritchard, 2000), the beneficiaries from recent policy largesse towards rural and regional Australia may *not* be the One Nation-inclined disgruntled voters in poorer outer-suburban electorates of large cities and rural towns.

This situation poses questions for both national and regional policy practitioners. As suggested by the journalist Asa Wahlquist at the 1999 *Regional Australia Summit*, changes need to be made to the way we think and talk about regional issues in Australia: problems need to be recognised but, at the same time, they need to be placed in their contexts.

3. THE PAST DECADE OF REGIONAL POLICY IN AUSTRALIA

Consideration of these issues requires changes in the ways regional issues are positioned within policy-making. The policy experiences of the past decade suggest that when it exists at all, regional policy operates as an 'after-thought' of other policies. When regional interests (and electorates) are threatened because of policy changes or other factors, politicians and the bureaucracies elevate 'regionalism' as a cause for attention.

These tendencies are well illustrated by Federal Government activities in the 1990s. At the 1991 Federal Budget then-Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe within the Hawke Labor Government placed regional issues squarely within the Commonwealth Government's agenda. After eight years at the helm of Ministries of Social Security and Health, Howe argued for a revitalized regional attentiveness in strategies to address social problems. This period is best remembered for Howe's initiative in establishing the 'Building Better Cities' program, but also included the National Housing Strategy and a host of related initiatives. For some members of the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments, and for many members of the Opposition, Howe's interest in regional policy might have been passed off as the indulgence of a Labor Left Minister, except for the impacts of the recession in the early 1990s. The regional depth of the 'recession we had to have' catapulted and transformed Howe's agenda into the basis for the 1992 'One Nation' and 1993-94 'Working Nation' programs.

The 1996 election of the Howard Government effected an immediate sea-change in Commonwealth regional policy involvement. Within six months of being elected, the Howard Government's Commission of Audit advised the new administration to withdraw from regional policy. Funding for Regional Development Organisations and other institutions established by the Keating Government was abolished.

Within two years however, there were fundamental shifts within this political environment. In 1996 the Howard Government could, with the stroke of a pen

and little attendant controversy, withdraw from regional policy. Following the 1998 Federal election, it became imperative for the Government to strongly articulate a regional policy vision. At the 1998 election the Coalition (especially the National Party) lost ground when disaffected voters voted for Pauline Hanson's One Nation and regional Independents. There was also increased support for the Greens in some electorates, and a general strengthening of the Labour Party's performance. These developments produced a specific set of electoral conditions. Following the 1998 election, a number of formerly safe Coalition seats in rural and regional Australia had small margins and, in many cases, their fate rested on the preferences of minor parties and independents, in particular, One Nation.

The Howard Government was not slow to recognise this electoral reality, notwithstanding debate about the effectiveness of its responses. In February 1999, John Anderson made his widely cited 'two nations' speech to the National Press Club. Later that year the Government released a policy statement for regional Australia (Anderson, 1999) and, in October 1999, Anderson hosted the Regional Australia Summit. These initiatives articulated the Government's regional policy vision as encompassing (i) ongoing commitment to market mechanisms as the primary basis for regional development, and (ii) restructuring of service delivery mechanisms. In the past year this emphasis has continued, albeit with the sharper edge of election politics. The central theme of Anderson's Regional Policy Statement of August 2001 is that: *"The revolution that I have pursued and the Government has carried out has been to give local communities the skills to find their own solutions, and the help they need to put those solutions in place"* (Anderson, 2001b)

These Coalition Government articulations of regional policy provided the immediate context for our edited collection, *Land of Discontent*. Our motivation in bringing together this collection rested with our perception that a reliance on market mechanisms, assisted by some tinkering of service delivery, provides an inadequate framework to address the changing spatial dynamics of difference in rural and regional Australia. Regional problems cannot be interpreted merely as the transitional price of adjusting markets. Such an approach is flawed fundamentally for two reasons.

First, the reliance on market mechanisms to address regional issues is inadequate because of the imperfect nature of competition, factor mobility and knowledge within the real world. Interpreting 'the rural and regional problem' through these lenses identifies geographical inequality and difference as transitory in nature, subject to the efficient clearing of markets. Accordingly, institutions committed ideologically to market theory (such as the Productivity Commission and National Competition Council) emphasise issues such as micro-economic reform and competition in their contributions to regional policy debates. These approaches could be typified as *"geography doesn't matter: markets do"*. They view regional policy as merely *"a means of fine-tuning the spatial pattern of accumulation"* (Tonts, 1999, p. 582). This equates to a mythical "let us assume the long run outcomes exist in the here-and-now". Yet economies are not so simple. Extended time periods are required for regions to

adjust to changed economic conditions. There is a tension between the 'long run' operation of market clearing mechanisms, and the immediate needs of people and communities. To suggest that all will be resolved "in the long run" is, at best, hard justice and perhaps no justice at all for people whose livelihoods are disrupted by economic restructuring. Alternately, economies are produced through an amalgam of always-adjusting spatial territories. Long run resolutions to regional adjustment never occur because of the dynamic nature of capitalist markets. As Keynes argued, *"in the long run we are all dead."*

Second, perceiving regional policy issues as issues of economic adjustments elevates a disembodied conception of 'the market' at the expense of social, cultural and ecological values. Obviously we are not saying that market behaviour and questions of economic efficiency can be ignored. However, there is a need to place questions of market efficiency within their social contexts. Policy settings must be inclusive of a wide array of social, cultural and ecological factors, many of which are non-quantifiable strictly in monetary terms. For policy-makers, this demands a deftness of approach and an acceptance of inter-disciplinarity. To date, much of the policy debate on regional policy has remained wedded to economistic terms. For example, consider the debates surrounding National Competition Policy. In the Productivity Commission's Report on NCP there is a pervasive sense of tension between the supposedly 'hard' and 'value-free' economic evidence generated from the application of econometric models; and the implicitly regarded 'soft' and supposedly value-laden submitted evidence from the public. Yet as regional policy practitioners appreciate, economic models only are as legitimate as their assumptions.

These issues have particular poignancy for contemporary regional policy and practice. To use one example, in 2000, at the *Future of Australia's Country Towns Conference* at Bendigo and at the ANZRSAI *Annual Conference* at Hobart, Gordon Forth created a media uproar following misreporting of his arguments on small town decline. Basing his evidence on comparable processes in the US, Forth argued: "*the decline and ultimate demise of many smaller country towns is part of an inevitable historical process and should be accepted as such*" (Forth, 2000, p. 4)

In recent years Tony Sorensen has made similar arguments (2000). The question we ask is: *"what does this mean for regional policy?"* We broadly accept the logic that Forth and Sorensen bring to this debate—that over time, improved personal mobility may weaken the economic role and importance of many small towns and thus may hasten their decline—but also point out that such changes are not inevitable and that they also generate costs. These costs may take the form of relative isolation (especially from services such as hospitals and schools as facilities are closed) and the unemployment or underemployment of remaining (often older) residents. All-too-often, these kinds of implications are considered separately and belatedly within policy arenas. They are regarded as imposing a call on government financial resources, rather than as a set of issues that are indivisible from other policy pursuits. In *Land of Discontent*, Fiona Haslam-McKenzie assesses these connections between the goals of agricultural efficiency and restructuring on the one hand, and the marginalisation

of community life on the other. Despite the rhetoric of social concern, it appears that the integration of social, environmental and cultural concerns remains a challenge for regional policy in Australia.

4. THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE

The concept of the 'triple bottom line' provides one strategy to link the economic, social and ecological outcomes of regional change. Its ideal is to integrate monetary and non-monetary values within a single analysis, thus facilitating rational policy development.

As a specific management tool, the 'triple bottom line' concept was first initiated in the corporate sector, in response to shareholders' and stakeholders' demands to receive information about a company's performance in not only financial terms, but in environmental and social terms. Over 100 of the Standard and Poor's 500 companies have integrated environmental information into their financial statements and The Institute for Chartered Accountants in Australia has formed the 'Triple Bottom Line Issues Group' to develop the concept locally (Brayshaw, 1999). In the past few years there has been a mushrooming of organisations either seeking to monitor corporate performance along these lines or provide advice to companies on how to better institute these reporting mechanisms (Verschoor, 2001). In 2000 the United Nations joined this debate with its 'Global Compact' initiative, seeking to establish integrated economic, social and environmental reporting mechanisms for large companies.

What do these corporate accounting developments mean for the public sector and for regional policy development in particular? The 1990s witnessed the introduction of this concept as a public sector accounting tool. In Australia, the most robust attempt to apply these frameworks to public policy followed the 1995 election of the Carr Labor Government in NSW. In 1995-96, the newly established NSW Council on the Cost of Government (COCOG) commenced 'Service Efforts and Accomplishments' (SEA) reporting for government agencies. The SEA project, modeled on US General Accounting Standards Board guidelines, attempted to provide wide and inclusive measures of public sector inputs, outputs and outcomes. In part, this initiative seems to have been an attempt to move beyond the financial-focused performance systems instituted by the Greiner-Fahey Coalition NSW Governments. The scope of this project far exceeded reporting standards that existed within Commonwealth and other State jurisdictions, and involved an explicit attempt to match budgetary inputs against monetary and non-monetary outputs.

One local government that has adopted the Triple Bottom Line is the City of Melbourne. This approach is being used in spatial planning for *City Plan 2010*. The vision for the City of Melbourne in 2010 is to be a "Thriving and Sustainable City", which is one that "enjoys economic prosperity, social equity and environmental quality" (City of Melbourne, 2001). It is not too difficult to imagine similar goals for regional Australia, or indeed as part of a National Policy on Urban and Regional Development for this country. The Triple Bottom Line framework is being used by the City of Melbourne to develop indicators on themes such as a connected and accessible city, an innovative and vital business

city, an inclusive and engaging city and an environmentally responsible city (City of Melbourne, 2001).

We acknowledge the benefits of planning and decision-making by organisations, such as the City of Melbourne, that are overtly moving from an economically deterministic single bottom line. However, the Triple Bottom Line approach places activities such as regional policy within an accounting framework, albeit a modified one. We have concerns about this relationship to an economic metaphor, however we also accept that the metaphor may be what is needed to build upon other approaches to integrating economic, social and ecological variables such as the discourse of sustainable development. These two discourses are similar in that they are trying to move beyond the "hard" bottom-line of a dollar value. In Australia today, any discourse that is based on this premise must at least be worthy of further consideration.

If aiming for a Triple Bottom Line outcome was considered desirable, and quite frankly it's sufficiently broad a concept to enlist support from everybody except perhaps the extremist rational economists, the anti-capitalist revolutionaries or dark-green environmentalists, then how can this idea be applied to regional development?

5. POTENTIAL APPROACHES BY NATIONAL AND REGIONAL POLICY PRACTITIONERS

Given the pressures for meaningful action in rural and regional Australia to overcome measurable socio-economic differences and a popular but inaccurate perception of a "great divide", what can and should be done for today and the future?

We are currently witnessing disjointed debates that are the product of the lost years of integrating economic and social development with spatial planning in Australia. For example, in late July, 2001, the Federal Member for North Sydney, Joe Hockey, was advocating that 6.5 million people should live in Sydney by 2021, and 8 million by 2050 (Wainwright, 2001). Almost simultaneously the President of the NSW Local Government Association, Peter Woods, was advocating that at a minimum, an additional 75 000 people be living in rural NSW, west of the Great Dividing Range, by 2021 to ease the pressures on Sydney and to initiate development in locations where it is needed (Jamal, 2001). There is no consensus of numbers or the concomitant spatial planning for Australia's capital cities or for "the regions".

In this context, 'the market' has become the pre-eminent current policy-maker and force of implementation. What is being produced is a centralisation of population and economic growth in certain areas of the nation (especially coastal areas, the Sydney Greater Metropolitan Area of Sydney, and South-East Queensland) with no formal process for evaluating whether this is in the (broadly defined) national interest. In short, spatial planning at the national level is important for the future of Australia, and without it the market will remain the *de facto* spatial planner. Regional planning and regional policy, in this *de facto* market-based scenario, will always be on the back foot.

One strategy to address these concerns is the creation of a National Urban

and Regional Development Policy, similar to that advocated by Brendan Gleeson (Gleeson, 2001). The creation and implementation of a National Urban and Regional Development Policy would shift the political focus in a way that would be beneficial to the nation's long-term interests.

A National Urban and Regional Development Policy could consider the survival needs of small towns, the pressures of rapid development upon fragile coastal locations and the spatial pressures of the continued expansion of our larger capital cities. In short, we are talking about Triple Bottom Line outcomes that are built upon, and cognizant of, spatial factors. While not a surrogate for regional, metropolitan or local planning, a national spatial plan would allow Australia to better address issues such as population increase through migration, interstate and intrastate migration for employment and lifestyle reasons, and the identification of areas where particular attention is warranted. Nationally funded items, such as investment grants, government utilities (or part there-of these days), military expenditure, and so on, would then be required to develop in accordance with this policy, and the impacts of any proposed reductions in staff at particular locations would be considered in relation to the policy. This would avoid the problems encountered by towns such as Wilcannia, amongst others, where the loss of existing employment and prospective employment opportunities has contributed to the increased social burden in the town (Gerritsen, 2000). This approach is similar to the existing idea of impact assessments in government decision-making, except that it is more proactive. The disadvantage of the impact assessment approach is that it is project based, and the individual decision about relocation or closure of facilities is generally compatible with higher-order objectives of efficiency gains across the entire organisation. A National Policy could pre-empt these individual decisions and reduce the emphasis on reactive impact assessment procedures. This approach is consistent with the 1999 call by the Institution of Engineers for greater regional coordination of infrastructure expenditures. There are parallels too in this proposal and the Federal Labor Opposition's plans for an independent National Infrastructure Advisory Council, to establish long-term capital investment goals that live beyond electoral cycles.

The development of such a policy may be facilitated through existing networks such as participants in the National Summit of Cities and Regional Development that was organised by the Royal Australian Planning Institute in June, 2001. At this National Summit at Parliament House in Canberra, national organisations such as the Property Council of Australia, Master Builders Association, Reconciliation Australia, Australian Council of Social Service, and the Australian Conservation Foundation, among others, signed a communique calling for more national-level involvement in cities and regional development. We are suggesting that these established relationships could be developed into an advisory body such as the National Roundtable on the Environment and Economy, which reports to the Prime Minister of Canada. This independent body of academics, labour leaders, business people, First Nation people and environmentalists was established by an Act of Parliament in 1994 to promote Sustainable Development. The group meet four times per year and, as of 2000,

had 24 members and was supported by a secretariat of 22 people (National Roundtable of the Environment and Economy, Canada, 2001).

The model that we are suggesting here is less focused on publications and could be supported by a smaller secretariat than the Canadian case. This particular advisory group could coordinate the development of a National Urban and Regional Development Policy that addressed the spatial components of economic, social/cultural and environmental policies.

As we recognised earlier in this paper, achieving triple bottom line outcomes is a challenge, but any approach to development that does not attempt to address environmental, economic and socio-cultural issues in a spatial context at a variety of connected scales is doomed to fail. Of course there are numerous permutations of policy depending upon how these variables are understood. A National Policy on Urban and Regional Development will likely reflect a government's understandings of these variables, and the political context in which they are being handled. The policy should be developed for a twenty year period with a vision for the longer-term future. We recommend a five-year review period, partly because if carefully thought through it can dovetail with census periods, and cross the three year election cycle. Both of these time periods seem appropriate for the issue at hand, and are consistent with other government policy and review periods such as the Regional Forest Agreements.

This idea is in its infancy, but we believe that it has potential if politicians are willing to adopt and support such an approach.

6. CONCLUSION

Since the end of 1999 barely a week has gone by in Federal politics without an announcement from one of the major parties concerning rural and regional Australia. Many of these announcements are opportunistic and lack long-term vision, or integration with other aspects of the party's policy platform.

In this paper we are also talking about rural and regional Australia, but in a national and international context. We argue for the pursuit of a triple bottom line of economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits for rural and regional Australia. If this goal was pursued with appropriate regard to population pressures on large Australian cities and fragile coastal locations, the benefits accrue in different ways to inland rural and regional Australia, large cities and to growing coastal towns. The way to do this is to formally introduce spatial planning into our migration figures, our economic growth aspirations, and so on. This spatial planning, in the form of a National Urban and Regional Development Policy, should be prepared and implemented in a way that is consultative, transparent and accountable.

Without such a policy, calls for regional development will always be secondary to market forces and, immediately prior to every election, we'll see money and promises of money flowing to strategic political seats where-as the need may be greater in other locations. We are not naïve enough to believe that a National Urban and Regional Development Policy will do away with pork-barrelling, but it may reduce the practice and it should consistently direct resources to where they are considered needed. In this day and age, to not try to

think outside the boxes of regional development, marginal electorates and divisive metaphors is hardly a vision for the future. We believe that Australia can do a lot better than the current situation.

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