Engaged Government: A Study of government-community engagement for regional outcomes

Dr Patrick Bishop

The process of government is continually undergoing subtle changes in Australia, as the interplay of several themes takes place. As the Australian economy grows and specialises, and as society becomes more complex, government tends to play increasing roles in terms of providing services, setting the institutional structures, planning, and providing a welfare net. At the same time, there are pressures for government to become more streamlined and efficient, and part of the microeconomic reform process in Australia has been concentrated on this particular issue.

At the community level, expectations about government roles are often mixed. On the one hand, many people expect increasing levels of service from governments, and call for government to become involved in a broader range of issues. At the same time, many people are confused by the complexity of government processes, and find different layers of government difficult to deal with. There are more calls for government to communicate better with communities, and to closely involve stakeholders in decision making processes. However, such involvement can increase the layers of decision making and requires additional funding and time commitments.

At the regional level, governments often find it difficult to lead development issues or allocate resources where some members or sectors of the community are left at a disadvantage. To be able to gain effective change, governments are concentrating more on long-term engagement with communities so that broad support can be garnered for resource development, protection and allocation issues well in advance. However, there is varying capacity in many communities to engage with government effectively, so some communities need additional support before they are able to engage effectively with government.

While governments try to be reasonably uniform in administration, consultation and engagement processes, substantial differences emerge in the way that governments engage at the regional and community level. This is because of differences in makeup and takeup between communities, varying levels of funding available, and the process of innovation means that different communities are trialling different engagement processes. These variations in the levels and types of interaction between communities and government raise questions about what are the most appropriate types of interactions, and whether there are consistent lessons to be drawn across different levels of government, different communities, and different sectors and government functions.

It is convenient to consider these questions about appropriate engagement in three main ways. The first involves the economic issues, where questions about appropriateness can be asked at two levels. At one level the relevant issues revolve around whether different types of engagement are more efficient at generating economic growth (particularly at the regional level), and allocating resources in ways that meet community needs. (These needs might include issues such as employment levels and wealth distribution.) At another level, the questions are about which forms of engagement are most efficient at delivering a set

outcome, and might involve some analysis of the various costs and benefits of engagement processes.

The second main way to consider engagement is in terms of the social impacts. Engagement processes represent different ways in which people coalesce to develop their interests, and can be very important in terms of building community and regional identity. Determining how engagement processes contribute to community development and ultimately to social capital helps to provide some measure of the returns available. At a more micro-level, an understanding of how personal interactions build engagement processes provides a mechanism for teasing out which engagement processes are more successful than others.

The third main way to consider engagement is in political science terms. Here the focus is on how communities and sectors pursue their own self-interests, and how institutional arrangements contribute to, or inhibit, effective engagement. At a micro-level, a political science analysis can reveal how engagement processes work, and identify the best ways of structuring engagement processes to lead to community development and efficient government.

These approaches to analysing engaged government are being explored in a research project focused on government and community relations in Queensland, Australia. The project is funded under the Australian Research Council Linkage Grant program and is supported by Queensland Government Departments of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy, Main Roads and Queensland Transport, the Local Government Association of Queensland, Griffith University, Central Queensland University and University of Queensland. A primary purpose of the Linkage Grant program is to support University-industry partnerships to acquire new knowledge through research and development projects, which involve risk and innovation.

The project will utilize an action research approach involving researchers and public managers and practitioners in knowledge building around an institutional development/reform agenda. The proposed project is unique in bringing together a multi-disciplinary research team capable of investigating complex matters of governance, public sector management, regional economics and planning, sustainable development and community engagement.

The purpose of the Engaged Government Project (EGP) is to develop a better understanding of trends and drivers in engagement processes, identify outcomes and net benefits of engagement, assess how successful engagement varies by factors such as sector and issue, and identifies which types of engagement appear to be more appropriate. In doing so, there are two broad aims being pursued in the EGP. These are to:

(a) Assess the conditions under which multi-sectoral collaboration (across levels and areas of government and between government and community) at the regional strategic planning level enhances regional policy management; and

(b) Inform the development of strategies for improving regional governing capacity and performance.