

Preface

Away from the commanding heights of Australia's polity, local governments comprise a vital domain of the organisation of people's lives, ranging from providing fundamental services to property and to people through to their role as the third tier of Australia's federal democracy. They also undertake these responsibilities in what, for several decades now, has been an environment of seemingly unrelenting reform.

Despite the centrality of local governments in people's day-to-day lives, we assert—and in this we are hardly alone—that local governments in Australia are not afforded the dignity they deserve. More often than not, this lack of dignity is decried by pointing to the economic importance of local government or by emphasising their role as democratic mechanisms, or indeed both. In part this book is a testament to this importance. Yet we also assert, perhaps to the disconcertion of some of our colleagues, that local government is a worthy—indeed a fascinating—area of academic inquiry from a range of disciplinary perspectives, not the least of which are politics and economics and the moral theory that attends these disciplines.

With this in mind this book has two overarching goals. The first is to bring together the range of writing—some of which is academic, much of which is “public” literature in the form of law, regulations and commissioned reports, and some of which is historical—into a single volume reflecting upon the local government systems in Australia. In so doing our hope is that the book makes a small contribution to understanding local government, particularly in the public policy domains where it is a central area of concern. This includes the future shape of Australia's federation, of which a sustained consideration of local government has to be a part.

The second aim is, unashamedly, academic. Despite the consistent refrain that local government scholarship be “practitioner driven”, we think there is much to be gained in undertaking academic reflection upon local government and have sought to do so in a range of areas inclusive of the origins of Australia's local government systems, the place of local government in the Australian federation both historically and into the future, state–local government relations conceived in terms of the concept of autonomy, the idea of community and how it plays out in the context

of local government, the economic and financial dimensions of local government, the issue of leadership, ethical dimensions of local government, the pervasive topic of amalgamation and how the global cities debate is having an impact upon local government and local government studies.

Equally it is important to stipulate what this book is *not* about. Most importantly, it is not an attempt to provide an updated version of John Power, Roger Wettenhall and John Halligan's (1981) edited collection *Local Government Systems of Australia* published by the Australian Council for Intergovernmental Relations. As admirable as this book is—and we draw from it extensively—it is principally an exercise in political sociology. On the contrary: our text is far more theoretically and normatively engaged. This observation decidedly does not entail that producing an updated version of Power et al. (1981) would not be a valuable addition to local government scholarship. What such a volume would require is the collaboration of six or seven scholars to cover the individual jurisdictions in depth, conforming to a pre-determined structure. The fact that in the current context one would be struggling to find these six or seven scholars is a testament to the dearth of people choosing to specialise in the scholarship of local government in Australia.

In this vein, undertaking a book like this is very much like undertaking a doctoral dissertation in that one finds out how much one does *not* know about the subject under discussion through the course of the exercise. The book has several glaring omissions, which may be addressed at a later date. The most glaring—as will doubtless be pointed out by several of our esteemed colleagues—is that it lacks any discussion of Indigenous systems of local governance. Thus, for example, we could have incorporated the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies (AIATSIS) map of Indigenous Australia in Chap. 3 concerned with regionalisation and regionalism, alongside (for example) a chapter on Aboriginal land councils in Part III of this book concerned with public policy. As with many of the subject areas discussed in this book, this subject could easily form a volume in its own right.

By no means as significant, but omissions nonetheless are discussions of (for example) the intricate systems of oversight for councilors and senior staff, the topic of diversity in the local government workforce, the contribution of various professions to the development of local government across the jurisdictions and the relationship of the full swathe of planning legislation enacted by state governments to local government. Similarly, we could have included a chapter examining reforms to management practices in local government, on the issue of environmental sustainability and how it has had an impact upon intergovernmental relations and—as our colleagues from the Australian and New Zealand Regional Science Association International (ANZRSAI) will point doubtless out—a separate chapter concerned with local government and economic development. With these omissions in mind it is nevertheless important to underscore that this book has an underlying thesis, namely that local government ought, first and foremost to be considered a *political* institution. To argue this case requires that we have an adequate account of what politics is—and we assert that this is a trickier question than might initially be supposed.

In line with the academic nature of much of this book, we would like to think that it is possible to be a *scholar of local government* without necessarily being an *advocate for local government*. Otherwise stated, that it is possible (although admittedly not very likely) that, after a sustained period of inquiry, one reaches the conclusion that local government—however one chooses to define it—is not really all that some of us have been led to believe. We would hope that the church of local government is broad enough to incorporate such views.

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