

# Occasional paper no. 10

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## Governance and Cities: The Shifting Urban Governance Dynamic

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Department of Premier and Cabinet

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## Introduction

The Commonwealth Government has traditionally taken a low key role on the urban front. While decisions made by the Commonwealth have always had an impact on the way that our cities develop, up to now these effects have mostly been the consequences of other policies such as immigration, industry and taxation. Some sporadic bursts of interest, such as the Whitlam Government's urban and housing initiatives and the Hawke/Keating Government's *Building Better Cities* program, have been exceptions (Gleeson, 2007).

As a result, governing Australia's cities came to be a settled two-player game with a degree of certainty in how the game would be played. The dynamic between state and local governments on matters related to city development, while not necessarily smooth, was a simple two way transaction where state governments generally had the fiscal and legislative upper hand.

However, the urban governance dynamic has now shifted. Since its election, the Rudd Government has explicitly stated that it wants to be involved in governing cities (for example, see Rudd, 2009) and it has begun to take action to realise this desire. The Commonwealth's new found urban boldness is sure to have consequences for the urban governance dynamic and therefore, at least eventually, for cities themselves. That is the topic of this paper.

## Why cities? Why now?

The Commonwealth's challenge to the urban governance status quo appears to be underpinned by a set of inter-related factors which are shifting the way the role of cities is perceived and prioritised in the national consciousness. This shift in perception is in turn further accelerated by national involvement, perhaps making cause and effect difficult to distinguish. Some may therefore argue that these factors, which are explained below, serve only as an excuse for an opportunistic centralisation agenda. While this view should not be completely dismissed, there are also genuine reasons of scale, scope and reach which have brought cities into closer alignment with the Commonwealth's responsibilities and objectives. This process can be described as an upwards recalibration or rescaling of urban governance.

## International and Macro-economic Relevance

What occurs within a city's boundaries increasingly affects and is affected by the prosperity of what occurs outside - regionally, nationally and globally (Cavallier, 1998). In particular, cities now have increased relevance in the international domain, and partly because of this, they are seen as increasingly important drivers of national prosperity. Cities are the staging point for global interactions (Newman and Thornley, 2004) and are therefore a key tool for nations to capture the increasingly mobile flow of capital and people by facilitating trade not only in goods, but in financial and other services (OECD, 2007).

One way this has manifested itself both in Australia and beyond is through what has been called the 'Competitiveness Agenda' (OECD, 2007). The Competitiveness Agenda is characterised by the adoption of entrepreneurial approaches for cities by governments and is focused on economic development and the provision of facilities aimed at capturing economic advantage (Newman and Thornley, 2004).

The external importance of cities has also increased due to heightened realisation of their global environmental impact. Climate change is a relevant example of this: cities' transport and energy systems are dominant contributors to this global problem (Corfee-Morlot et. al. 2009). As such, global negotiations, which will have an impact on the way cities develop, fall to national governments.

As a result of these externalities, it would appear that at least some of the decisions for cities are better made from a broader viewpoint than just for those who live in the city itself, and

even decisions made from a single city perspective have become more externally focussed than before. The macro scale of these issues and impacts therefore brings cities into closer alignment with both the scope of the Commonwealth's national perspective and their specific responsibilities for foreign affairs, trade and macro-economic performance as well as others. That the Commonwealth at least views it this way has been made clear by Prime Minister Rudd (2009): "national economic strategy can no longer ignore the characteristics of cities that shape economic performance, social cohesion and environmental conditions."

*Bigger, Broader Task*

Australia has long been an urban nation with the majority of people living within cities, so it is surprising that the Commonwealth has not previously shown more interest (Gleeson, 2007). The somewhat belated new interest may have been sparked because cities continue to grow rapidly and are capturing an increasing percentage of the national population (it is predicted that Melbourne and Sydney's populations will both grow beyond seven million by 2049 - Henry, 2009). As a result, cities are generally expanding spatially, requiring more and larger capital projects to move more people and freight further distances. Essentially this means the urban governance task is getting bigger too, creating the problem of state and local government's urban policy challenges outgrowing their ability to respond. The Commonwealth, with its greater fiscal capacity and spatial reach, may seem to many observers better equipped to meet such challenges.

*What is the Commonwealth Doing?*

Despite its superior fiscal capacity, the Commonwealth does not necessarily have either the constitutional powers nor the local knowledge, to directly implement decisions related to cities. Instead the Commonwealth seeks to co-opt states and sometimes local government to achieve its objectives. This has characterised the Commonwealth's recent renewed involvement, which is outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of the Rudd Government's Involvement in Cities**

<b>National Objectives and Criteria for Future Strategic Planning of Capital Cities</b>	Through COAG, the Commonwealth Government obtained agreement to criteria which all states' city strategic plans must comply by 2012. The Commonwealth intends to link all infrastructure spending to adherence to this criteria. (COAG Communiqué, December 2009).
<b>Building Australia Fund (BAF)</b>	The BAF was established to help fund states' large scale road, rail and port projects, with \$8.4 billion allocated in 2009. While not exclusively for cities, a key objective of this funding is to 'improve the functioning of and quality of life within our major cities and major regional centres' (Albanese, 2008). Previous Commonwealth infrastructure spending focused on links between cities rather than within.
<b>Major Cities Unit</b>	The 'Major Cities Unit has been established to identify opportunities where federal leadership can make a difference to the prosperity of our cities and the wellbeing of their residents' (infrastructure Australia, 2010).

*What about States and Local Government?*

Notwithstanding the above discussion, the upwards recalibration of Australian urban governance has not been absolute; state and local governments retain their leading roles in urban governance. States continue to be responsible for most whole of city functions like transport and other infrastructure, utilities, overarching planning frameworks and ports (even though this is associated with the Commonwealth's trade responsibility), and they can override local government in their role. Local government continues to be responsible for

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localised planning decisions and local infrastructure. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the Commonwealth wanting to get involved in day to day planning decisions (Rudd, 2009).

Globalisation has not resulted in an upscaling of governance to the extent seen in Europe, where a supra-national government (the European Union) has influence in urban governance (Newman and Thornley, 2004). Equally, the combination of economic liberalism and globalisation has not resulted in wholesale urban governance decentralisation as theorised and/or observed in regard to other nations (see Brenner, 2004 and Hackworth 2007). Such a scenario would see power polarised to the two extremes of local and global priorities. Salet et. al. (2003) note that cities overseen by arrangements which include an intermediate government have fewer problems of internal coordination. Australia's intermediate level of government, States and Territories, remain relevant and are therefore well placed to mediate between global and local perspectives (Cavallier, 1998).

#### *What does Commonwealth involvement mean for cities?*

More explicit Commonwealth involvement, combined with the underlying drivers towards greater national centralisation, are likely to mean that the central government perspective will be given greater prominence in decisions made about cities (including those made by other levels). While pinning down exactly how much prominence and what this means for cities is difficult, some possible consequences of the upwards recalibration are discussed below.

#### *Emphasis on Growth*

If the combination of the Commonwealth's macro-economic focus and global forces are reflected in decisions about cities, the political and institutional momentum towards an economic growth objective would grow, potentially eclipsing other concerns (Hackworth, 2007). An economic growth focus could translate to development promotion and facilitation of private sector development (OECD, 2007). A risk with decisions made within such a pro-development governance culture is that decisions will be based on a short term perspective, or not considered in the context of whole of city objectives, inter-relationships between policy objectives and other kinds of impact on individual communities such as availability of public space and aesthetic quality (OECD, 2007 and Boddy, 2003).

The combination of an economic growth focus and the Commonwealth's strategic objectives in the strategic sphere could also lead to a heightened emphasis on population growth as articulated by Prime Minister Rudd: "I have said before that I believe in a big Australia. This is good for our national security. Good for long term prosperity. Good for enhancing our role in the region and the world" (Rudd, 2009). This would mean bigger cities, and possibly denser and/or more dispersed cities. This is an example of how upscaling and Commonwealth involvement are mutually reinforcing (Commonwealth drawn in by growing population, then seeks to accelerate this growth once involved).

#### *De-emphasis on Local Dimension*

If national and global objectives, including economic growth, are now of greater salience in decisions about cities, and cities are correspondingly expected to play additional roles, where does this leave local, neighbourhood and community level objectives?

Increased centralisation of decision making could crowd out local objectives and location-specific decision making. Global, national and even city-wide decision making do not always align with localised objectives and viewing a city simply as a machine for producing economic output is limiting. Cities are also where people interact with each other, engage with the community, access arts and culture and can be a source of identity and pride. These aspects often occur at a finer scale than whole of city.

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With its extensive influence but lack of fine-grained knowledge of place, the Commonwealth is in danger of thundering onto delicate territory. The corollary of focusing too much on higher-order objectives and uniform national decision making can be bluntness and lack of agility. This includes the risks associated with technocratic decision making and homogeneity as well as a lack of understanding of what is happening on the ground. The Commonwealth's Strategic Planning Criteria do contain some local-level objectives (such as social inclusion, health, liveability, community and wellbeing, and housing affordability) but this is not the same as location specific decision making. Decisions made by detached higher levels of government may therefore run the risk of lacking legitimacy and acceptance at the community level (Irazabal, 2005).

It is not simply a choice between national objectives such as economic development and localised interests. Pursuit of economic growth and whole of city/region/nation prosperity is necessary to improve community well being, showing that community objectives cannot be pursued in isolation. However pursuit of overall prosperity can also detract from wellbeing at the level of the particular place. The benefits of large scale capital projects may be felt broadly, but the costs in terms of amenity are generally localised to specific communities where large scale projects are situated (McGuirk, 2007) This again illustrates the tension between national and local objectives, which are equally relevant to citizens (Cavallier, 1998).

#### *Increased Governance Complexity*

The above discussion could be characterised as being about how Commonwealth involvement alters how the urban governance game is played. Perhaps more fundamentally, the involvement of the Commonwealth is likely to transform the game itself. Within urban governance, it is not just the institutions themselves which are important, the way which they interact and relate to one another are also of prime importance (Newman and Thornley, 2004).

The involvement of three (rather than two) governments creates a more vertically fragmented multi-level urban governance dynamic. Whereas in a two player game, interaction could be seen to be a straight forward two way dialogue, a third player triples the number of relationships, increasing the coordination and interaction challenges (Kubler, 2007) This adds to the horizontal fragmentation that exists at the local level.

Like any love triangle, there is a risk of jealousy and self interest. This creates the risk of a more complex urban governance dynamic with an increased prospect of unresolvable disagreements and disputes, not only on the basis of policy substance, but as a result of demarcation disputes and power games, creating decision (rather than infrastructure) bottlenecks for our cities. Another risk is an increased potential for issues connected with poor policy coordination, unnecessary duplication or functional gaps (Salet et al. 2003: xiii).

Conversely, the involvement of central government could be seen as a solution to horizontal fragmentation at the level below. While true of state governments relative to local governments, fragmentation is arguably less important, even unimportant, when it occurs between cities rather than within a city. State governments' individual pursuits of economic outcomes may not be further assisted by the Commonwealth's pursuit of these same objectives.

#### *Where to from here?*

There are robust arguments both for and against making changes to Australia's formal urban governance structures. On the one hand, these structures, despite fundamentally remaining the same for over one hundred years, have generally been flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances and can arguably continue to adapt to meet future challenges. From this point of view, the Commonwealth's re-engagement in response to contemporary

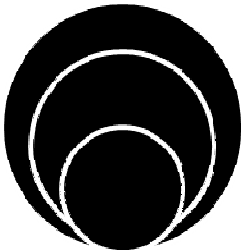
circumstances after many years of being latent could be seen as an example of this flexibility. Like the broader federal system of which it is a part, urban governance has been reasonably stable and has delivered cities which rate highly on world liveability indexes. These achievements are commendable and should not be thrown out the window. Indeed any change would not easily be achieved; we are not starting from scratch; altering the constitution is difficult; and existing institutions are likely to stand in the way of proposals that strip them of power.

On the other hand, there are compelling reasons why the time is now right to reconsider these structures, including examining whether urban governance could or should be detached from broader federal governance arrangements. These reasons include:

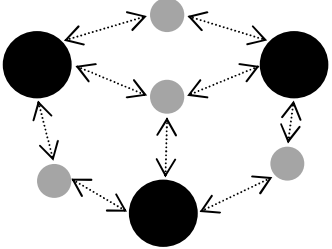

- there now being a broader range of objectives expected of cities;
- the global dimension of cities not being considered in the design of the original structures;
- a bigger governance task;
- different sorts of cities, perhaps even different cities and patterns of population dispersion into the future (Henry 2009);
- as a recognition of the challenges posed by fragmentation, poor coordination and gaps;
- to ensure that no one perspective or set of objectives becomes too dominant; and
- recognition that the urban governance dynamic has now shifted.

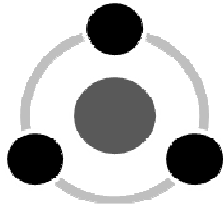
Table 2 outlines some alternative governance models which may be considered. These models could be adopted in full, or in part, in concert with other models or alone. Some of the underlying concepts will be familiar whereas others are somewhat radical. The utility of discussing them here is therefore not only as potentially adoptable models, but to help flesh out some of the issues outlined above.

**Table 2: Alternative Urban Governance Models**

<p><i>In these diagrams, the 3 darker circles represent the existing three levels of government in Australia and the lighter circles represent new institutions, organisations or mechanisms.</i></p>	
	<p><b>Integrated Hierarchical Strategic Plans</b></p> <p>This model builds on the planning criteria agreed at COAG and formalises and reinforces the hierarchical aspects of urban governance. This is the Russian-doll approach which works through the Commonwealth setting a strategic planning framework reflecting its broad-brush national and global imperatives. The state adds more detail (but within the confines set by the Commonwealth) reflecting its whole of city scope and responsibilities, and local government even more detail based on local knowledge, again within the frameworks set from above (OECD, 2007). Adherence to the plan could be encouraged through the use of tied funding and/or formalisation of roles and responsibilities through the constitution.</p> <p>The advantage of this model is that it helps to manage the range of roles expected of cities in a vertically integrated fashion (Newman and Thornley, 2004). There may be disagreements about whether the higher level of Government has overstepped its responsibilities, or the lower has mis-interpreted the plan, however as a hierarchy the views of the higher government would prevail. A danger of this model is therefore that it could over-emphasise national/global imperatives. It also fails to recognise that it is difficult to neatly segment roles and</p>



	responsibilities in urban governance, with overlapping and shared responsibilities common.
	<p><b>Formalised Independent Mediation</b></p> <p>This model treats each of the governments (and their particular perspectives) as equally legitimate and overlapping parts of a formal governance network and focuses on the primacy of the relationship between each level of government. It involves setting up independent mediating institutions or joint decision making systems (Kubler, 2007) which attempt to minimise disputes and maximise decision making coordination between the levels of governments or individual governments.</p> <p>The mediating institutions can be joint forums, independent regulator, or a courts or other arbitration mechanism (OECD, 2007). They can also take a role in engaging with community or market networks (Minnery, 2007).</p> <p>These secondary institutions can be a form of meta-governance which draws its authority from the participating institutions and not the people. Their operation therefore relies on the delegation of control or at least acceptance of their legitimacy by the primary institutions (Stewart, 2003). A risk is that they still operate in the shadow of the loose hierarchy which currently exists (Whitehead, 2002). As a result, the model requires alignment of fiscal and operational capabilities so that traditional power imbalances are not perpetuated.</p>
	<p><b>Transcendental Alliances</b></p> <p>By focussing too much on the institutions of governance, the <i>outcomes</i> sought by good urban governance may become secondary to self interest. Another way therefore to envisage urban governance focuses on what is being governed rather than by whom – that is, it transcends existing territorial boundaries (Kubler, 2007). As such, it can be characterised as moving from government to governance (Whitehead, 2002 and DiGaetano, 1999).</p> <p>This model creates alliances which ‘cut across’ all levels of government to govern a particular aspect of a city. Much like the alliancing model employed on large engineering projects, relevant governments form a partnership which then becomes an entity in its own right where each partner contributes relevant skills and is mutually interdependent (Cavallier 1998 and Newman and Thornley, 2004). It also provides scope for private sector or community organisation involvement. The organising principle can be a function, a specific area, a specific project (Salet et al. 2003) or even a whole city based partnership (a variation of the next model also called new regionalism – Kubler, 2003). The various alliances do not need to be permanent, lasting only as long as there is need for the arrangement. The existing formal institutions remain a constant governance base with the alliances providing flexibility above that. Such alliances can also operate horizontally between neighbouring local governments or states to address common issues (Bell, 2007).</p> <p>A disadvantage of the model is that a closed approach to partnerships may result in less accountability by internalising decision making (OECD 2007) and may become too technocratic, too remote from either citizens or markets (Salet et al. 2003) and too dominated by pre-existing hierarchical relationships.</p>



### Whole of City Government

Another model to consider is whole of city governments, a form of which already operates in Brisbane. Urban governance at a city level is the most economical model that can address whole of city horizontal coordination issues and still have sufficient critical mass to address macro-economic challenges (Cavallier, 1998 and Bell, 2007). While state governments are de-facto whole of city governments, they could be seen to be distracted by competing towns, cities and regions. Unitary city governments allow cities to harness the power of a visionary, single focus mayor, which Newman and Thornley (2004) note is a key element of successful city regeneration.

Whole of city governments (and their regional counterparts) can be set up to replace the role state and/or local governments (although this raises questions again of focus on the local dimension) or as an additional level of government (increasing fragmentation issues). They can also operate as a form of meta-governance institution which draws its power from below (aggregation of local governments – see Cavallier, 1998) or above (delegated from state government).

Setting boundaries can be problematic; too small and the city can grow beyond or it may not take into account broader settlements (such as Brisbane/Gold Coast/Sunshine Coast) (Salet et al. 2003). Too large and there may be disputes between city, suburban and peri urban interests within. City only governance also does not benefit from the interdependency of cities and their surrounding regional areas.

### Concluding Remarks

Exactly what will happen to our cities as a result of the governance structures and dynamics that exist today, or as a result of implementing any of the above ideas, will only be known in hindsight. And even then, it is very difficult to isolate the contribution of governance to outcomes, with many other contributing factors and lag time between cause and effect. What is clear is that a balance between local, whole of city and national objectives needs to be found. So while there may be some fear of where the increasing involvement of central government will lead, multi-level governance involving the Commonwealth appears beneficial for addressing higher scale issues. However, this means that urban governance structures will need the capacity to ensure any negative consequences of Commonwealth involvement are mitigated. Continuing community dialogue on the optimum urban governance structure is required.

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