

Putting Locals First? The role of civil society in Victorian rural and regional policy

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Abstract

The resurgence of civil society within Australian policy has resulted from something of a convergence between neoliberalism and communitarianism (O’Toole and Burdess 2004, p.434). However the notion of what civil society is, and the role that civil society performs within the broader Australian society, remains politically charged. This paper contends that civil society is positioned as a service provider within current regional policy of the Victorian state government. To illustrate this point, this paper focuses on the ‘Putting Locals First Program’, which is an element of the Regional Development Fund, launched by the Victorian state government in 2011. This paper commences by providing an analysis of the relationship between civil society and the state in modern, market oriented societies. Following this, the notion that civil society is instrumentalised by government is examined, whereby the government utilises civil society to “govern through the community” (Rose 1999, p.475). This paper will then provide a brief analysis of the funding guidelines for the ‘Putting Locals First Program’.

Civil society and the state

Civil society, occasionally referred to as the 'third sector', has been considered as organisations which exist outside of the market and the state (Powell and Geoghegan 2005, p.133; Alston 2002, p.221; Walzer 1990). Howes, Lyons and Bryant (2004) cite examples of civil society groups as being the National Farmers Federation, Oxfam, Australian Council of Churches, Amnesty and the Australian Council of Social Services. The separation between the market and civil society is questioned by Davidson and Grant (2001, p.303), who refer to Hyden (1997, p.5), who considers that "the emergence of a concept of civil society is historically connected with the rise of capitalism." Dahl and Soss (2014, pp.497-498) add that instead of creating a clear distinction between the market and the state, neoliberalism lead to a blurring of the lines between the two. Rather than being "rolled back" under neoliberalism, that state is instead "rolled out through modes of governance that fuse political and economic powers and apply market-based logics to diverse networks of governing actors" (Dahl and Soss 2014, pp.497-498). Essentially, Dahl and Soss (2014, pp.497-498) describe an apparent integration of civil society into the government. This implies that although a vision of small government may be expressed by advocates of neoliberalism; outsourcing to civil society using strictly defined funding mechanisms, may represent a means through which government can retain a strong degree of power, though under the guise of empowering civil society.

The championing of civil society by government, and focus on community development through the fostering of volunteerism, could represent a shift towards a decentralisation of power towards civil society groups and local communities. However, Van Gramberg and Bassett (2005, p.9) contend that "there is little in the way of altruism by government in this picture". Rosol (2012, p.241) argues that the outsourcing of services previously carried out by the state to civil society groups can actually represent an increase in administrative and

bureaucratic control, with civil society organisations developing a dependence upon the state. In that sense, the state attempts to steer but not row – retaining control, though without carrying the burden of responsibility (Rosol 2012, p.241). In order to understand this notion, this paper will briefly explore the Victorian Government’s Putting Locals First program, as an example of a program which does provide funding for civil society groups through a competitive application process, with funding available to those meeting tightly defined criteria.

Politicisation of volunteering

O’Toole and Burdess (2004, p.434) contend that within Australia, “policy makers have turned to a ‘community’ discourse that focuses on the use of the voluntary capacity of people to help solve their own problems.” Alston (2002, p.222) contends that this shift has been met with scepticism from non-government organisations, which perhaps arises from the belief that governments are seeking to utilise civil society to provide solutions for problems created by market failures (O’Toole and Burdess 2005, p.241). As stated by O’Toole and Burdess (2005, p.241), the focus of neo-liberals on civil society has developed from the perception that voluntarism can provide a means of filling gaps in the provision of services. This is echoed by Rosol (2012, p.241), who contends that the engagement of civil society by government is frequently less about encouraging participating from citizens, instead retains a focus on outsourcing of service provision. This shifts the understanding of civil society towards a sector which is essential for economic development in a neoliberal economy (Porter and Kilby 1996, p.32).

In addition, the voluntary sector, which may become dependent upon funding criteria and reporting guidelines which emphasise market principles, can actually be coerced into adopting measures of efficiency, rationalisation and professionalisation (Rosol 2012, p.241).

According to Argent (2005, pp.29-30), the general acceptance and use of concepts such as social capital and measuring 'triple bottom line,' by all sides of the politics, is "testament to the pervasive influence of neoliberal precepts that all but its most trenchant opponents wittingly or unwittingly reproduce the discourse of 'roll-out' neoliberalism".

Furthermore, the level of cooperation among volunteer based organisations can be reduced, as these organisations compete for the same funding (Rosol 2012, p.241; Argent 2005, pp.29-30; Beer et al. 2005, p.56). The competition between organisations for funding from government has repositioned some civil society groups, impacting their capacity for advocacy (Howes, Lyons and Bryant 2004, p.2). These challenges are highlighted by Porter and Kilby (1996, p.35), who state that "Australian NGOs acting as service providers...have experienced the conflicts that arise from ideologically maintaining a wholesale separation from the state whilst being contracted...by the state." In a sense, the state funding received by civil society groups can have a marginalising effect, which can ensure that the autonomy from the state becomes less apparent (Howes, Lyons and Bryant 2004, p.8; Porter and Kilby 1996, p.35).

Mowbray (2005, p.256) cites Craig (2003, p.2) who raised concerns about the growing interest of governments in community development, whereby the state's increased intervention into civil society could limit the autonomy of civil society groups. Citing what he believes to be a lack of genuine action to support the rhetoric of community development, Mowbray (2005, p.263) contends that the growing support for community and civil society "may just as much be a cynical and frugal means for politicians and others to obfuscate or otherwise sustain their continuing commitment to economic fundamentalism." This is echoed by Van Gramberg and Bassett (2005, p.2), who contend that the third sector has been instrumentalised by Western governments, including Australia, in order to quell dissent, while "institutionalising the neoliberal agenda".

Governing through the community

Cheshire and Lawrence (2005, p.436-437), refer to the argument of Nikolas Rose (1996; 1999) that rather than providing a genuine challenge to neoliberalism, the renewed focus on civil society constitutes a new form of government, where the community and civil society become an instrument of the state. Within this conception of community, individuals are prompted to act on the behalf of the community, in order to demonstrate their allegiance to that community (Rose 1996, pp.334-335).

In order to ensure this development, Howes, Lyons and Bryant (2004, p.8) contend that government departments create support services which are supposedly intended to increase community capacity. However, the result is that governments engage in “action at a distance” (Murdoch and Abram 1998, p.41, cited in Howes, Lyons and Bryant 2004, p.8). As stated by Howes, Lyons and Bryant (2004, p.8), a less obvious form of state control is exercised, whereby the state “subtly defines the boundaries and characteristics of civil society.” Through the strategic use of funding criteria and reporting mechanisms, “state agencies establish the boundaries for conceptualising social and environmental problems, thereby influencing the actions of civil society” (Howes, Lyons and Bryant 2004, p.8). According to Rose (1996, p.328), this represents an effort to “govern without governing society.”

In many ways, this perspective echoes conceptions of governmentality, as described by Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley (2014, pp.453-454), as once being a “process” and a “methodology”. In drawing a distinction between governmentality and the traditional understandings of government, Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley (2014, pp.453-454) cite the work of Foucault, who stated that “‘Government’ did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed ... To govern, in this sense, is to control the possible field of action

of others” (Foucault 2002, 341). As Gordon explained, Governmentality is “the conduct of conduct” (Gordon 1991, p.2, cited in Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley 2014, p.454). Ostensibly, civil society is outside the sphere of government and remains “uncoerced”, as Walzer (1990) described. However, if volunteer based associations and other civil society groups develop a dependence upon government funding for example, and this government funding is provided based upon strict criteria that is in accordance with a prevailing ideology – such as neoliberalism – then an argument could be made that government is able to exert significant influence over civil society groups (Van Gramberg and Bassett 2005, p.9).

Whether this is apparent through government funding programs such as those provided by the Victorian Government’s Regional Development Fund, cannot be adequately determined by this paper. However, this paper does refer to a significant body of work which raises concerns about how civil society can be instrumentalised – and even silenced – by government.

Programs such as Putting Locals First purport to build strong communities and encourage a form of participatory democracy; however this paper suggests that such programs require closer scrutiny.

Regional Growth Fund: Putting Locals First

Established by the Victorian State Government in 2011, the Regional Growth Fund (RGF) represents a commitment of \$1 billion to support “regional cities and country communities to create new prosperity, more opportunities and a better way of life” (Department of Planning and Community Development 2011, p.4). An element emerging from the RGF is the ‘Putting Locals First Program’, which is a commitment of \$100 million towards the goal of enabling “regional communities to devise and deliver service and infrastructure responses which reflect local priorities” (DPCD 2012a, p.3). Under the heading ‘Local Community

Initiatives’, examples of activities that this program may potentially support include (DPCD 2012a, p.5) “innovative community projects that improve skills, use volunteers and better connect people”.

As stated within the application guidelines for the Putting Locals First program, “The program recognises that local people have a role to play in addressing the challenges faced by their communities. When local people become involved in the decision-making and governance roles, these communities are able to identify and assess issues, explore local priorities and take action to get things done” (Regional Development Victoria 2011a, p.3). This statement could be construed as an attempt to empower local communities, however with a significant reliance on volunteerism, and reflects similar approaches to regional policy within Australia which have championed ‘self-reliance’ (Tonts and Haslam-Mackenzie 2005; Adams and Hess 2001), there is an indication that the Putting Locals First Program instead represents a shift in responsibility – though not necessarily control – towards local communities. In completing applications for funding, applicants are asked to identify and ascribe a dollar value to the ‘in-kind’ support that their community will contribute to the project, which is described by Regional Development Victoria as including “voluntary labour, donated goods and service” (Regional Development Victoria 2011b, p.1). This is further underscored by the section of the Putting Locals First application guidelines, entitled ‘What Will Not Be Funded’, which includes the following (Regional Development Victoria 2011a, p.6):

- “salaries and operating costs for staff or ongoing contractors
- recurrent operating costs, for example rent or utility costs, or projects establishing expectations of ongoing funding
- projects that focus on achieving political or religious outcomes”

This ensures that delivery of the programs receiving funding must be predominantly supported by voluntary labour. In small communities, where there may be a small population of residents who are involved in coordinating volunteer-based community activities, the emphasis on volunteerism may either place volunteers at risk of burnout, or may ensure that communities miss out on funding within this program due to lack of available people who are able to contribute their time. The emphasis on not funding projects with recurring costs raises concerns about the longevity of programs which receive support. This indicates that the types of programs to be funded would include events such as festivals or non-recurring events, which are not ongoing. Such events may provide a temporary boost to the local economy and well-being of the community. However, this would not address shortcomings in service provision, and would not necessarily provide any long term security to people within these communities. Literature supporting the program professes an intention to build stronger communities, yet the restrictions placed on the funding of programs indicates that the emphasis is on short term boosts to the community. Furthermore, the stipulation that programs cannot be funded to support political outcomes demonstrates that Putting Locals First funding cannot be directed towards advocacy activities which may be employed by rural and regional communities to lobby for better services or lasting government investment, for example.

The criteria outlining how proposals for funding will be assessed states that projects must adhere to “one of the program’s proposed outcome areas,” which include (DPCD 2012a, p.10):

- “improved infrastructure, facilities and services: supporting well designed infrastructure meeting local priorities
- increased business and employment opportunities: supporting local businesses for growth and development

- improved community connections: improving people's connection to resources
- communities taking action on their own behalf: improving communities' ability to respond to challenges and opportunities"

The focus of these outcome areas is on economic development and the devolution of responsibility from the state to local communities. The fourth outcome area – communities taking action on their own behalf - is interesting in relation to the projects which have been funded. Does this program allow communities to genuinely respond to the challenges that they face, or simply the challenges which can be responded to within the strict funding guidelines. For example, if lack of access to health care or education is assumed to be a “challenge” facing many rural and regional communities, then it is not clear how this program can help communities to meet such a challenge. However, if the state of disrepair evident in the local community hall is the greatest challenge facing a community, then the Putting Locals First program is well-devised to assist communities. In that sense, communities are afforded the opportunity to act upon challenges, as long as those challenges fall within the criteria and focus of the Putting Locals First Program.

Though analysis contained within this paper is brief, and by no means definitive, this paper indicates that the ‘Putting Locals First Program’ is reflective of a government program whereby responsibility has devolved from government to civil society, however power and adequate resources have not necessarily been received by civil society. As stated by Walzer (1990, p.10), to succeed, “the civil society project” requires the decentralisation of the state, socialisation of the economy and a pluralised and domesticated nationalism. For this to occur, Walzer (1990, p.10) contends that political power is needed “to redistribute resources and to underwrite and subsidise the most desirable associational activities.” This is not drastically removed from the ‘Putting Locals First Program.’ However this program, with a maintained

focus on economic development, voluntarism and the transference of responsibility to civil society (without the sufficient transference of resources), does not indicate the political will of policy makers to provide the power to civil society, that Walzer (1990, p.10) considers necessary. If, as many have claimed (Geoghegan and Powell 2009; Eikenberry and Kluver 2004; Walzer 1990), the power of civil society is in collective action which can challenge the state, then for the state to retain power, the co-option of civil society may be considered as desirable.

Conclusion

This paper has indicated that the emergence of civil society within Australian public policy has been accompanied with rhetoric from state and federal governments which emphasises the need for rural and regional communities to take responsibility for meet the challenges that they face. This policy focus reflects literature on governance which suggests that through outsourcing to civil society, or the third sector, government is not only shedding responsibility for the provision of services that may previously have been their domain, but also contains a strategic focus in co-opting civil society, and in the more extreme sense, silencing dissent that may have come from this sector. Initiatives and policy statements such as the 'Putting Locals First Program' and 'Regional Australia: Meeting the Challenges,' place an emphasis on the capacity of rural communities to find their own solutions to the problems that they experience. An intention of the program is to "build stronger communities", however the onus is placed upon local community members to address the issues that they face. How this message is received by members of rural and regional communities is a potential area of study, as is developing an understanding as to how this program has been devised to actually help communities meet the challenges that they deem to be the most

significant. This paper refers to a significant body of literature which indicates that governments have sought to instrumentalise civil society as a service provider for the state, while reducing the autonomy of civil society. Though analysis contained within this paper is shallow due to the scope of the paper, there are some indications that the Putting Locals First Program – while claiming to empower local communities – may restrict the capacity of communities to act upon challenges that they identify as being the most pressing, and limits the scope of available solutions to these challenges.

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