"IF YOU CAN'T KILL THE GURU…" SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES IN THE FACE OF BUREAUCRATIC DOMINANCE

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ABSTRACT

State governments are playing an increasing role in local community building programs in order to assist communities address the impact of globalisation. In the state of Victoria the government has established Community Capacity Building Initiatives in eleven rural towns to assist communities build capacity to address these changes. This paper reports on the dilemma state government agencies face introducing local community building programs reminiscent of the dominant approach taken by charismatic leaders in intentional communities [1]. It takes up one commentator's suggestion that local government is the obvious choice for such programs and suggests ways in which the state can overcome this impasse.

INTRODUCTION

In his study of 'intentional communities' - those ideal utopian societies originally conceived of by Thomas More (and published in *Utopia* in 1515) –Metcalf [1] noted that for these communities to survive beyond the influence of the charismatic leader who established them they needed to find ways of managing which did not ultimately depend on this leader. The strength and capacity of Australian communities to survive is an important contemporary public policy issue and the governance and management of these places is now being addressed by state governments. As Adams and Hess [2] note in their excellent review of community in contemporary public policy 'both internationally and within Australia public policy is experiencing a rush back to the idea of community.' (p. 13). This paper reports on the dilemma state government agencies face when they attempt local community building projects with a style reminiscent of the approach taken by charismatic leaders in intentional communities. These leaders base their actions on higher order principles, which Metcalf [1] identifies as 'eco-spirituality', the term he believes best captures these principles (p. 188), and initial community success is in large part determined by the leader's ability to convince others to follow these principles. Metcalf's review of ten intentional communities reveals that while each were established by charismatic leaders following these higher order principles each community also had quite different stories of success and survival. The way they survived independent of the charismatic leader is central to each story. For state governments wanting successful community outcomes universal approaches, regardless of how well based they are on principles and processes, they are unlikely to work in all places, no matter how cleverly conceived they might be. This point is not new. Bryson and Mowbray [3] challenged the 'spray-on solution' to community development over two decades ago.

In addressing the dilemma state governments face in their attempts at local community building this paper is divided into four parts. The first part reviews the Victorian Government's approach to community building, which is the case on which this paper is developed. Anecdotal evidence from other states suggests this is not a uniquely Victorian issue. The second part asks why, in the face of mixed, even uncertain results, state governments persist with this work. The third part reviews how effective these community building programs are, using a specific example based on the author's experience. In the final part we outline what state governments can do to create positive outcomes with local community building activities.

The victorian government's approach to community building

Community building is currently seen by the Victorian government as an important process to ensure the success and continuity of these places over time. The Department of Victorian Communities community building strategy:

> 'is a Victorian Government priority that seeks to develop cohesive and sustainable communities. It involves whole of government strategies to improve the ability of communities to manage their own affairs, build on their strengths and engage in partnerships with government and other sectors that result in shared social, economic, cultural and environmental benefits.' [4]

Why do state governments engage in community building?

There are many obvious and good reasons as to why governments, at all levels in the Australian federation, would want to see active community building leading to positive social, economic and environmental outcomes.

The Department of Victorian Communities [5] asks, what can community building achieve for communities? And identifies the following outcomes:

- New partnerships between community members, organisations and government that lead to reform of government services.
- Greater community capacity to address critical issues and develop action strategies.
- Greater social cohesions and participation in community activities.
- New opportunities for social, economic and environmental development.

What can state governments do for positive community building activities?

A widely held view is that local institutions should be empowered to facilitate community building and strengthening. Local government is an obvious choice [6] as it is an established institution, albeit currently with a limited focus on such work [7].

In advocating a greater role for local government Salvaris [8] questions whether there has been 'active collaboration' with local government when he claims that the 'Community Building/Strengthening program of the State government is well short of maximising this opportunity [historic control of the Upper House, popular support, a strong resource base …]. On current indications, it is simply unstainable … because it is:

- Not strategically coherent (but still a series of loosely linked pilot programs carried out at different levels);
- Seen and funded as an add-on special program and when funds run out and fashions change, it will fade away;
- Not sufficiently understood and supported in the government;
- Not built into government where it matters: across departments, into government culture, into the budget;
- Currently lacking in wider community support (though potentially it could have much more);
- Perhaps most importantly, it has no sufficiently strong and legitimate, ongoing vehicle in the Victorian community to operationalise and carry it forward as a long term, state-wide strategy.' (p. 56) [8]

Salvaris suggests that 'there is one obvious and immediate solution, again under the government's nose. This is the potential role of an enhanced local government sector as the prime vehicle to carry community building throughout the State.' (p. 56) [8].

CONCLUSION

The community building programs of the Victorian State Government are based on worthy principles, which if achieved will make communities stronger and more resilient to encounter change. The lack of local government involvement in state-wide community building initiatives like the CCBI, when it is - as Salvaris quite rightly observes - the obvious level of government to undertake such programs, suggests poor intergovernmental relations between the Victorian State Government and its system of local government. Clearly local government provides an institutional framework for the development and facilitation of community building initiatives. The challenge for the Victorian State Government is to build relations with its system of local government, to provide an ongoing revenue stream, or the ability to raise funds locally, and to show leadership in the training and development of local government employees in this field. The current arrangement suggests that the State Government's bureaucratic dominance in this field means that when they withdraw it is unlikely that the program will continue on in the community. Like Metcalf's idealists they face a frustrating dilemma.

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