

Chapter 10

Conclusion



Abstract The problem with local government is that it faces declining financial sustainability at a time of generally growing disillusionment amongst its citizens. Contemporary reforms—consolidation, fiscal institutions, and shared services—when conducted competently may arrest some of the decline in financial sustainability. However, contemporary reforms will do nothing to redress disillusionment with what is supposed to be the system of government closest to the people. In this book I have proposed, instead, a raft of radical reforms based around our Comprehensive Theory of Local Government that seeks to correct the extant imbalance between human dignity and the common good, as well as directly combat rational ignorance. At the core of my ideas is a belief that citizens are competent to make important decisions regarding their own government and lives. Indeed, my own experience working with struggling communities suggests to me that the average citizen, when appropriately informed, is much better at making decisions than their ‘political leaders’. If we truly believe this and act on the courage of our convictions, then the reforms that I have outlined will mitigate the problems of local government. If however, we continue to both deny the competency and dignity of our citizens then we can indeed expect local government to be ‘overwhelmed and crushed by almost infinite tasks and duties’ (Pius XI 1931, paragraph 78). The choice is ours—or rather it should be!

Early on in this book I sought to develop a Comprehensive Theory of Local Government, by borrowing from extant economic, political and moral theories. To my mind this was an essential task long neglected by scholars—until we can all agree on the purpose and form of local government it will be very difficult to design public policy interventions to address the many and varied perceived ills of the institution.

I restate the theory below to save my readers the hassle of turning back to what I hope is a heavily thumbed page of this short book:

The purpose of local government is to strike a balance between human dignity and the common good by either supporting smaller associations or providing goods and services when no smaller association is capable of doing so for bona fide need. Local government which is as homogenous as possible and as small as regular patterns of activity will permit (as well as responsive to the need to match winners with losers) will maximise economic welfare by engaging in co-operative arrangements when significant economies of scale are possible. Small size is presumed on the basis that it will confer greater transparency,

moral empathy, a higher stake in seeing efficacious solutions, and better tailoring of goods to the needs of the local community. Furthermore, it is recognised that informed¹ citizens are the most competent to guard against local Leviathan, protect the dignity of persons and associations from avoidable harm, and should therefore be supported by appropriate financial and political institutions which allow for effective voice and exit in an economic manner.

In sum, my proposed Comprehensive Theory of Local Government balances human dignity with the need to promote the common good and suggests the need for appropriate financial and political institutions to ensure that this remains the case.

I then proceeded to outline some common reforms—consolidation, shared services, and fiscal institutions—and explained why they are often far from successful. Moreover, I hope that I also conveyed clearly that even when these conventional reforms are carried out in a competent manner that they could only hope to address a mere fraction of the problem of local government. Specifically, these reforms might result in improvements to efficiency and financial sustainability, but I cannot see how they could be expected to do anything to address the elephant in the room—citizen disengagement and disillusionment. Without radical reform we might well end up with a local government system that has the capacity to serve people for longer—but can't reasonably expect to end up with a sector that is closer to the people, or which serves the people best. Otherwise stated, without also attending to the political and moral dimensions of local government the best we can hope for is a continuation of the illusory slogans that we now have.

Indeed, I wonder whether we have, over the last half century or so, unwittingly altered the fabric of local government such that disengagement is now a rational decision for most citizens. Even as a scholar of local government I find it difficult to summon up the motivation to examine the financial statements of Tamworth Regional Council, have never attended a council meeting, and only vote to avoid the fine for not doing so. I am disengaged and disillusioned despite the fact that my working life revolves around local government. The reason for this disengagement is that I have discovered, several times, that I am powerless to prevent rampant political capitalisation, corruption, profligate spending and ever growing and unwarranted intrusions into my life. Why bother to be engaged if it merely reinforces my sense of being at the mercy of local Leviathans?

10.1 Is There a Better Way?

From Part III onwards I sought to describe a system of local government in which citizens would no longer find themselves powerless against Local Leviathan. This system of local government would specifically set out to re-balance human dignity against the common good and would involve changes to our political institutions to

¹Informed about the difference between 'needs' and 'wants', who pays for the goods (and how much), the cost of maintenance, and the prudent use of debt. In sum, informed citizens are those who are not labouring under the Santa Claus illusion.

shift the power of supposed self-government, back to the people. To do so I proposed the use of sortition chambers to both mitigate the well-known failures in our system of majoritarian democracy as well as provide an ever-present check on the power of the political elite. I also suggested that this chamber, or perhaps a separate one, would do a much better job of supervising the fiscal institutions of local government to ensure that spending and taxing powers are exercised in a much more morally defensible fashion than they are at present.

Under my proposal, randomly selected citizens would be forced to serve on sortition bodies for a period of two years. A randomly selected body of this kind would be much more representative of the demographic and cognitive diversity of a local government area than is currently and invariably the case with elected bodies.

Forcing people to become so close to their local government that they actually become part of the institution would ensure that people like me do bother. Sure I might whinge for a bit when first selected to serve (depending on how generous the remuneration for doing so is and how much the barriers of participating are reduced through innovative use of technology), but I imagine that suddenly being transformed from a powerless victim of Leviathan to a dignified member of a self-government would quickly see me change my tune. I imagine you would almost certainly feel the same—indeed, if you have read this far into my book, I almost guarantee that you must feel the same.

10.2 Why I Believe

This year (2020) I have had the absolute honour to serve a struggling recently amalgamated rural community in New South Wales in the role of expert advisor.² This very small community (of around 10,000 souls) found itself in acute financial distress four years out from a failed forced amalgamation. It was faced with the need to raise extra revenue to continue as a going concern, as well as respond to a statutory process of review regarding its boundaries (a proposal to de-amalgamate instigated by the citizens of the smaller, and very unhappy, former local government area).

For three months I have been working with this community to educate them about their financial sustainability and the choices that now confront them. As part of this process I have made a series of information videos and written lengthy reports. I have also held public forums that were very well attended despite the fact that they occurred part way through the coronavirus panic.

Literally hundreds (430) of people came to listen to me speak for an hour or so about the reforms, and this was followed by many questions that took an additional hour or so to answer.

People Clearly are Interested in Local Government.

²Over the years I have done many similar community consultations and I am always heartened to see the active engagement of the community and the good decisions that they make when provided with clear and unbiased information.

Moreover, the standard of the questions and comments on the survey forms was very sophisticated. I met a number of people who had clearly watched hours of my information videos, read my reports, and put a lot of thought into the choices that were put before them.

People Clearly are Competent to Make Good Decisions if Provided with Appropriate Information.

Indeed, the decisions reached by this community were very logical and their suggestions for how to best implement the changes incredibly astute.

All this occurred within the current system where people don't have a real voice in the decisions that affect their lives—which is why this poor community ended up in the mess that they were in (people in Sydney decided on their amalgamation configuration, when any local could have told them it would never work).

Imagine How Much More Could Be Achieved if People were Given Some Power to Have a Binding Say in Their Government?

10.3 Our Choices

The choice we are confronted with essentially is a choice between respecting the dignity and competence of the average adult, or not. The great Robert Dahl (1970, p. 26) expressed this choice better than I ever could, so I will cite him at length:

Is the ordinary person incompetent? No judgement is more decisive for one's political philosophy. It was perhaps the single most important difference in judgement between Plato and Aristotle. If you believe, as I do, that on the whole ordinary people are more competent than anyone else to decide when and how much they shall intervene on decisions they feel are important to them, then you will surely opt for political equality and democracy. But if you believe that the ordinary person is less competent in this fundamental way than some particular person or minority, then I imagine that like Plato your vision of the best government is a government by this qualified person or elite.

As I finished this book the Great Coronavirus Panic (GCP) was in full swing. In Australia we were banned from even leaving our place of residence without a valid reason (enforced by police under threat of \$11,000 fines or six months imprisonment (obviously they didn't see the irony in the latter); Torre 2020). Food was being rationed. Businesses and livelihoods were destroyed by government edict because they were deemed to detract from the common good. Coughing on a policeman was declared an illegal act attracting up to ten years imprisonment. Gatherings of more than two were banned. Even fishing and sunbathing *alone* were deemed unlawful and the police mobilised to move people on (Zazek 2020). People were banned from being within 1.5 m of another, our phones were monitored, and surveillance undertaken by drones to ensure that we complied with the latest edicts (Sky News 2020). These were the decisions of our political elite, elected to do a very different job, but believing it reasonable to coerce all citizens to do what *they* deemed best for us, putatively to save *our* lives.

Despite the hysteria whipped up by the media few out my way thought the government response was measured or logical. Most saw very quickly that it was a serious situation which required serious measures to save lives. But equally most people could see that the obvious course of action was to lock down those who were at risk—the sick and elderly—but allow the rest of the economy to function more or less as normal (using sensible precautions like hand sanitizer and temperature-taking) so that we would have the economic and physical resources to support those who needed to self-isolate.

I am pretty sure I know what would have happened in March 2020 had the ordinary person been deemed competent to make decisions on matters important to their own lives—indeed matters of life or death. People would have chosen to keep their human dignity, but freely offer *subsidiium* to anyone who had *bona fide* need (the elderly or the sick). Life would have gone on more or less as usual for most, with people taking sensible precautions to protect their health and the health of their loved ones.

Would as many lives have been saved? Perhaps. Would the economy have been devastated and the ability of many to contribute towards the common good been abruptly curtailed? Definitely not. Maybe these decisions might not have proven to be the best course to take, but they would have been decisions made and owned by competent adults about matters fundamental to their own existential ends.

My point here is not to rubbish the draconian and panicked policies of my federal government. Their intent (at least initially) was laudable—to save lives. Moreover, I have great sympathy for all of those who lost loved ones and made sacrifices for the common good. All I seek to point out is that this was a notable example of government failing to abide by the Principle of Subsidiarity (and the Principle of Double Effect for that matter)—intruding far too far into the lives of people, and destroying associations of all kinds, in a myopic quest to promote the common good. I think we will be poorer as a society (morally, politically, and certainly economically) as a result of our failure to balance human dignity against the common good. I also believe on the basis of a number of conversations that I have had, that had a representative sample of people in say Moonbi been given a binding voice on the greatest intrusion that has ever occurred in their lives, then a different course would have been taken.

Messner (1952) warned us of the grave dangers that result from a failure to balance human dignity against the common good. He knew the dangers well because he had lived through them. I imagine at the end of the GCP we will similarly have first-hand knowledge of the dangers of a myopic pursuit of the common good to the exclusion of human dignity.

Now, in the normal course of events, local government probably doesn't have the same potential to devastate lives when it fails to reach a middle path between the two extremes of excessive individualism, and excessive pursuit of the common good. But it is still important.

It is important because it is a learning ground for our society and potentially a template for how we might ultimately conduct all affairs of government.

Indeed, it is a choice about whether or not people really should be close to their government and have their government serve *them* best.

A choice we should be allowed to make if we are deemed to be competent adults who know what is best for our lives.

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Moonbi, Australia.

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