

Leadership and the governance of rural communities



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A B S T R A C T

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Globally researchers are paying increasing attention to questions of local leadership and the governance of rural communities. However, the two bodies of scholarship have largely developed in isolation from each other and there has been a subsequent dearth of research into the relationship between leadership and governance in rural communities. Drawing upon the local leadership and governmentality literatures, this paper seeks to shed light on the leadership of places through an examination of the experience of a small town in South Australia. The paper argues there is a strong interaction between governance and leadership, with leaders sometimes taking an oppositional role to government and in other instances serving to mediate relations across spatial scales. The paper brings into question the nature of leadership in rural communities in advanced economies, the ways in which leaders interpret their roles and their relationship with the processes of governmentality.

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There is growing recognition that local or regional leadership is an important contributor to the growth of places, with institutions such as the OECD (2010, 2012), consultants (McKinsey and Co, 1994) and academic commentators alike (Stimson et al., 2009) paying explicit attention to the contribution of leadership to growth. Research into local leadership has become increasingly sophisticated, with authors such as Collinge and Gibney (2010) focussed upon the relationship between leadership and place, while other authors have considered leadership in the context of peripheral economies (Kroehn et al., 2010); the restructuring of regions (Bailey et al., 2010) and the contribution leadership can make to the achievement of environmental sustainability (Sotarauta et al., 2012). Other authors have recognised different styles of leadership, with Badaracco (2002) discussing ‘quiet’ leadership, Peters (2012) examining the part played by social embedded leaders within community settings, while Sorenson and Epps (1996) considered a number of leadership structures in their study of four towns in the central part of one of Australian state Queensland (see Fig. 1), including consensus models of leadership, single dominant leaders, inherited leaders and collective leadership. Despite a growing body of scholarship internationally, local leadership deserves greater attention from researchers examining rural and regional processes. Rodriguez-Pose (2013) suggests that leadership may be an important component within a set of institutional arrangements that constitute the ‘missing link’ in our understanding of regional growth processes. Leadership also raises

questions about social dynamics within rural communities (Herbert-Cheshire, 2003), their integration with the global economy and, perhaps most fundamentally, the relationship between these communities and governments (Argent, 2005).

This paper sets out to advance our understanding of leadership in rural communities by examining the ways in which local leaders respond to government processes that have the potential to marginalise them and their region. This paper examines how persons in a number of different positions within a region understand and constitute their role as leaders in one Australian region, the Riverland of South Australia. The paper considers contemporary perspectives on regional leadership before moving on to explore the governance of Australia’s regions. The paper then examines the accounts of leaders from the case study region and the interaction between the system of governance and local leadership. The paper highlights that in Australia and other nations local leadership is often subversive of the agendas of central governments and that through both contestation and more subtle resistance, regional leaders commonly seek to reposition themselves and their region. These roles are important, it is argued, because they may be the only way local residents can influence policy outcomes and, in the longer term, the persistence of local leaders may overcome the apparently powerful, but ephemeral, interests of the centralised state.

1. Leadership, regions and communities

There is a well-developed body of writing focussed on leadership and its relationship with the development and wellbeing of particular places (Collinge and Gibney, 2010; Stough, 2003; Stimson

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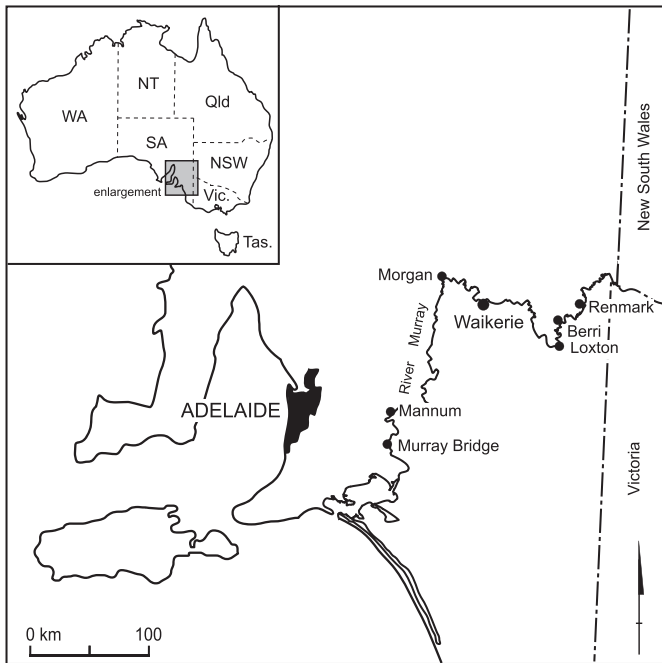


Fig. 1. South Australia and the Riverland.

et al., 2009). Much of the European work in this area reflects ongoing debates within the European Union around territorial development and related issues (Lyons, 2007). Leadership, in this context, has been explicitly linked to the now mature debates around 'joined up' government and the development of integrated approaches to the apparently intractable problems confronting some cities and regions. Researchers based in North America have also made important contributions to our understanding of place-based or local leadership, with Stimson et al. (2009) examining leadership as part of a broader project focussed on the development of endogenous growth models. Other North American researchers have considered the ways in which leadership is expressed at the city or community scale (McCann, 2013). Indeed it could be argued that many well-known contributions to regional analysis – including Stone's (1989) urban regime theory and Logan and Molotch's (1987) growth machines – are fundamentally concerned with leadership dynamics within communities.

The lens of local leadership has been applied in a large number of nations and to a wide range of questions. Bailey et al. (2010) examined local leadership in facilitating economic restructuring in Italy's Prato district and the English West Midlands; MacNeill and Steiner (2010) considered the role of leadership in advancing industry clusters in Styria, Austria; while, Collinge and Gibney (2010) discussed the limitations of leadership in the Oresund region that spans Denmark and Sweden. The examination of local leadership has not been restricted to the evaluation of economic outcomes, with Sotarauta et al. (2012) producing a volume on the part played by local leaders in achieving environmental sustainability. The leadership literature recognises complexity in the ways leadership is expressed and enacted. There is, for example, both a 'leadership of the led' and a 'leadership of the governing', there are synergies between the concept of 'network' governance and place leadership; and, as Sotarauta (2010) has argued, there are new ways of understanding leadership as a process, rather than as an outcome, that acknowledges and privileges the role of public service professionals and managers in ways that conflict with more conventional accounts of leadership.

Stough et al. (2001, p. 177) contend that place-based or local leadership is

... the tendency of the community to collaborate across sectors in a sustained, purposeful manner to enhance the economic performance or economic environment of its region.

While Stimson et al. (2002, p. 279) proposed

... leadership for regional economic development will not be based on traditional hierarchical relationships; rather it will be a collaborative relationship between institutional actors encompassing the public, private and community sectors – and it will be based on mutual trust and co-operation.

Critically, for Stimson et al. (2002) leadership within communities or regions targets the goal of achieving economic – and potentially other – outcomes; it tends to be collaborative rather than hierarchical – that is, it involves co-operation across a number of institutions, individuals and firms; and it has a distinctive long-term time horizon. Stimson et al. (2009, p. 34) identified three pivotal contributors to local leadership: it should involve the sharing of power; it should be flexible and it should be rooted in entrepreneurialism. Research and writing on local leadership is often explicitly concerned with *transformational leadership*, rather than transactional leadership (Bass, 1985). The former emphasises the processes that transcend organisational, environmental and human limitations in order to guide a process of change, while transactional leadership is seen to be a 'top down', process with a specific management orientation (Davies, 2009). Transactional leadership is also seen to have a limited focus, often targeted to the realisation of a limited number of specific objectives, whereas transformational leadership is broad ranging and strategic.

Other Australian research examining the role of leaders in rural communities has suggested that effective local leadership builds community resilience and can help secure an economic future for a region or community. A study by Smailes (2002a; 2002b) in South Australia found leaders had a pivotal role in providing ideas and a vision for the future, and thus provided a focus around which community identity and belonging could be fostered (Smailes, 2002a, 2002b). Four rural communities in Queensland were included in a study of leadership by Sorenson and Epps (1996) and this research found four key qualities of effective rural leadership:

- the formulation of a realistic vision of the community's economic and social development;
- the achievement of a high level of community approval of, if not active commitment to, that vision;
- motivating key persons and groups to achieve the vision; and finally,
- leading by example.

Kroehn et al. (2010) examined two instances of regional leadership in Australia's rural periphery – the Wheatbelt of Western Australia and in Port Lincoln on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula. In the former instance, leadership was associated with the emergence of a potential new industry – the commercialisation of products from oil mallee trees – with a number of public sector actors playing an important role in fostering the emergence of this new industry. In the case of Port Lincoln, Southern Bluefin Tuna harvesting was reborn as an aquaculture industry through the efforts of a small group of local charismatic industry leaders linked to overseas interests. Importantly, Kroehn et al. (2010) concluded that while the oil mallee industry was ultimately unsuccessful because of its failure to alter key government policies, the latter

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