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Regional coordination in Queensland

by Kenneth Wiltshire

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REGIONAL COORDINATION IN QUEENSLAND

KENNETH WILTSHIRE

On December 2nd 1971, legislation from the Queensland Parliament, *The State and Regional Planning and Development, Public Works Organization and Environmental Control Act*, 1971, received Assent. The Act replaced former legislation which had been the *modus operandi* of Queensland's Department of the Coordinator General of Public Works, but it also added some significant new features, including provisions for environmental coordination and the subject matter of this article—regional coordination.

Geographically, socially and politically Queensland is admirably suited to the advent of regionalism and past Government activity has tended further to entrench the natural patterns of decentralized activities.¹ During the twentieth century there have been a number of attempts to establish various political institutions on a regional basis, some of them parochial efforts and others in concert with nationwide reforms.² However here we shall be concerned solely to describe the inception and fundamental characteristics of the recent scheme of regional coordination, to analyze its progress over these early years of its operation, and make a few suggestions as to the manner in which it might best proceed if indeed it is to remain a permanent feature after the 1976 triennial local government elections in Queensland.

Queensland's public service has always been scattered around the state, more so in some fields than in others. Education, health, police, main roads, railways and primary industries are the major departments which are heavily represented outside Brisbane. However they have all operated on the basis of different regional boundaries based in turn on distinct criteria, ranging from the appropriate number of miles for a railway guard to ride in one shift, to the distance a district court judge could travel on a donkey in a day. Also few departments had respected local government boundaries in constructing their regional or district boundaries. More importantly state public servants outside Brisbane have tended to be located in the one building in each city or town (frequently the courthouse). These regional headquarters for the district have usually been captained by a titular head of the office, normally the most senior man whatever his department, but his responsibility has extended only to the

¹For details of the political and historical background of Queensland see S.R. Davis (ed.), *The Government of the Australian States*, Sydney, Longmans, 1960; D.J. Murphy *et al.* (eds), *Prelude to Power*, Brisbane, Jacaranda, 1970; Clem Lack, *Three Decades of Queensland Political History 1929-1960*, Brisbane, Government Printer; John Rorke (ed.), *Politics at State Level—Australia*, Sydney, University of Sydney Press, 1970; C.A. Hughes, *Images and Issues*, Canberra, A.N.U. Press, 1969; D.J. Murphy *et al.* (eds) *Labor in Power*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1976.

The Bureau of Statistics divided Queensland into various regions based on aggregation of local authority areas. The willingness of the Bureau of Statistics to accept the new regions proposed under the Regional Coordination Scheme of 1971 was a major factor in its widespread acceptance in administrative circles.

²The background to the establishment of regional development bureaux and the establishment of the Queensland Department of Industrial Development is given in Kenneth Wiltshire, *Portuguese Navy: The Establishment of the Queensland Department of Industrial Development*, R.I.P.A., Brisbane, 1973. For a polemical treatment of the question of Queensland's industrialization see Marion Gough *et al.* *Queensland Industrial Enigma*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1964.

nuts and bolts of office administration and the showing of the flag in the area. The officers of each department stationed in these districts maintain strong vertical links to their own headquarters in Brisbane. Moreover such officers have little personal contact with Brisbane. Departmental or divisional heads in Brisbane generally set out each year, or at even longer intervals, on a grand tour around their principalities, always giving adequate warning for the regional administrator to polish the brass, clean up the files, and line up a spot of indigenous recreation to make the whole visit bearable and if possible to enhance promotion prospects. It has been rare for departments to accept the need to bring in top provincial men to Brisbane for frequent briefing. The district man has largely been his own master, servant and conscience.

The Coordinator General's Department had always enjoyed an eminent position in the bureaucratic structure because of its coordination of the whole State works program i.e. the capital expenditure of all state instrumentalities and local government. Queensland is the only Australian state where this task is not performed primarily by the Treasury. Moreover this Department is under the Premier's tutelage which gives it clout in cabinet and muscle in relation to other departments. Add to this the fact that the Coordinator General himself has always been a personage of considerable prestige since the days of Sir John Kemp, and has always been an engineer—a hallowed profession in the state which enjoys the cream of the public service salary scales.

In the late 1960's the C.O.G. Department began to divest itself of its purely constructional activities and deliberately built up a team of 'young turks', most of them engineers but with a multidisciplinary record of study behind or ahead of them. Parallel developments included a growing awareness by the government of the need to placate demands for government action on environmental matters, and strong pressure from professional groups within and without the state government for a regional framework to implement the powers of the existing Act. For the 1971 Queensland election all parties—including the government's coalition parties—promised major administrative innovations in relation to various aspects of regional planning.

Enter Regional Coordination

The 1971 legislation provided a framework for regionalization and regional coordination.³ In summary, provision was made for (i) the declaration of regions, (ii) the appointment of regional coordinators, and (iii) the establishment of Regional Coordination Councils (R.C.C.).

(i) Declaration of Regions

The Bill did not specify how these regions were to be delineated but a new planning division established within the Department set to work on the task of defining criteria to be used for delineation of regional boundaries. These criteria subsequently came to include existing boundaries, homogeneity of industry, economic viability, urban foci, regional population, flows and linkages, physical

³Official accounts of the initiation of the scheme and detailed description of its operation are given in a number of well written official publications produced by the Coordinator General's Department itself including: *Annual Report 1972, Regional Planning and Regional Coordination, State of Regional Planning, Public Works Organization and Environmental Control in Queensland*.

characteristics, provincial city status, size and number of regions, and administrative boundaries. Unfortunately the Department has never spelt out how each of these criteria was weighted in terms of its contribution towards the final regional framework, since it is clear that a number of them would produce conflicting answers in terms of regional groupings. In any event, after a great deal of research the Department late in 1972 published the proposed boundaries for eleven regions and requested local authorities to comment on them and on the Act in general. Only about 40 of the 131 local authorities bothered to comment. About four shires on the boundary of their region wanted to be in the adjacent region. Two regions were proposed for the Wide Bay-Burnett area but after a good deal of argument by the local authorities so encapsulated, it was decided to include them all in the one region. Eventually on 6th October 1973, ten regions were declared as follows:

Region	Area (sq. miles) (a)	Percentage of State Land Area	Population 1971 Census (b)	Density (pers/sq. mile)	Percentage of State Population (c)
South-West	124,513	18.67	30,620	.25	1.68
Darling Downs	34,783	5.21	148,795	4.28	8.14
Moreton	8,198	1.23	1,032,722	125.97	56.52
Wide Bay- Burnett	20,457	3.07	137,898	6.74	7.55
Fitzroy	47,171	7.08	115,159	2.44	6.32
Central-West	143,040	21.48	15,197	0.10	0.83
Mackay	26,435	3.96	65,523	2.48	3.59
Northern	38,972	5.84	125,550	3.22	6.87
North-West	119,905	18.00	40,200	0.33	2.20
Far-North	102,561	15.40	111,740	1.08	6.13
Queensland Total	666,035	99.94 (d)	1,823,404	2.74	

Notes:

(a) Excludes Unincorporated Area of 972 square miles.

(Total Area of Queensland: 667,007 square miles).

(b) Excludes Migratory Population 3,665.

(Total Population of Queensland: 1,827,069).

(c) Migration accounts for 0.2% of the Queensland Population.

(d) Rounding error.

(ii) *Appointment of Regional Coordinators*

For students of public administration this is the most interesting part of the venture. The legislation had little to say about the appointment of regional coordinators except that they would be under the Public Service Act and that they could be appointed one for each region or one for two or more regions and would have such powers, functions and duties as were delegated or assigned to them by the Coordinator General. However it was decided within the Department that there would be three regional coordinators, one based in Townsville to look after the three North Queensland regions (North West, Far North, and Northern), one in Rockhampton to cover the three Central Queensland regions (Central West, Mackay and Fitzroy) and the third in Brisbane for the four South Queensland regions (South West, Darling Downs, Wide Bay-Burnett and Moreton).

The positions were created at a very high level within the Queensland Public Service Administrative Scale (1-19 or 20) and were non-appealable for promotion appeal purposes. The job descriptions called for graduates in either engineering, economics, architecture or a similar discipline, although additional study either in another discipline or field related to the initial discipline was

regarded as desirable. During 1972/73 three engineers (predictably) were appointed to the posts, but all had multidisciplinary qualifications. Their similar backgrounds included a stint in the State Main Roads Department (which also once employed the Coordinator General and his Deputy). All are middle-aged but their personalities and style of operation are completely different as may be seen in the way in which they have handled their tasks. One important aspect of these tasks, which is rare in Australian public administration, is that although they were in effect to be field officers they were appointed at a level equal to their divisional counterparts in the Department's head office, and at the level of their appointment were certainly superior in salary and status to the vast majority of State public servants in the Brisbane offices of other departments.⁴ This has been highly important for the success of the scheme.

(iii) *Formation of Regional Coordination Councils*

In many respects this proved to be the most controversial aspect of the scheme. Under the legislation there could be a Council for the whole of a declared region or part of that region, or the whole of one or more declared regions. Initially it was considered that these Coordination Councils would comprise local government elected representatives (i.e. aldermen and shire councillors), government officials (Commonwealth and State), academics, and some citizens. It was made clear at a later stage by the Coordinator General that the local government representatives would always be in the majority. For certain rural regions it was thought that the R.C.C. might cover only the major urban area and a few contiguous local authorities and so only a few members would be needed. The actual wording was as follows:

'40. (3) A Regional Coordination Council shall consist of a chairman, who, in each case, shall be the Coordinator General or his delegate, and four or more other members who shall be appointed by the Governor in Council on the recommendation of the Minister, by notification published in the Gazette.

In making his recommendation to the Governor in Council the Minister shall have regard to the circumstances or requirements of the region or part in respect of which the appointment is to be made'.⁵

The membership aspect became a highly controversial issue and the State Government eventually bowed to the demands of local government which were, in effect, that local government only should be represented on the R.C.C. save for the chairman who had to be the Regional Coordinator. (Local government has a significant political influence over the Queensland government for a number of reasons, including the fact that the majority of aldermen and councillors are members of the National Country party, although they do not stand on a party ticket. A number of state members of parliament and ministers were or are aldermen or councillors. There is also the brotherhood of lack of finance which enables all local governments to speak with one pressure group voice). The change in composition of the R.C.C. was extremely significant and altered the whole concept of the scheme. The legislation nevertheless, still provided that sub-committees should be appointed by the R.C.C. to examine

⁴The Regional Coordinator (Southern) is one grade above the other two because of his additional responsibilities and the greater complexity of his regions.

⁵*State and Regional Planning and Development, Public Works Organization and Environmental Control Act 1971*, sec. 40(3).

specific issues and these could include a cross representation of officials and citizens other than from local government.

The members of each R.C.C. were to be appointed for three years, with eligibility for reappointment. Meeting times were to be flexible; secretarial and professional services were to be provided by the Coordinator General's Department, and most importantly the R.C.C. members were to be paid a reasonably generous meeting and mileage allowance. The functions of the Councils were stated to be:

- '47. (a) promote the coordination of the objectives, policies, organizations and operations of all departments of the Government of the State and all local bodies in their respective fields of activity concerned with planned development,
 - (b) continuously review the state of development,
 - (c) review and investigate submissions made to it or referred to it concerning planned development,
 - (d) recommend to the Co-ordinator-General concerning—
 - (i) planned regional development;
 - (ii) submissions relating to regional development;
 - (iii) research projects pertinent to the affairs of the council;
 - (iv) matters referred to the council by the Minister;
 - (v) matters relevant to the state of the environment for submission to the Environmental Control Council,
 - (e) collect, and disseminate within departments of the Government of the State, local bodies and at large information concerning all aspects of planned regional development,
- in respect of the area for which it is established.'⁶

It should be noted that the Councils were to have no executive powers but to be purely advisory bodies to the Coordinator General.

By December 1973 a Coordination Council had been established in each Region of the State. The membership comprised one elected representative from each Local Authority in the Region plus the Regional Coordinator as Chairman. Members were appointed to June 30th 1976 (the year of Queensland local government elections) and future Coordination Councils will be appointed from July 1st following the local government election to June 30th following the ensuing election.

The Scheme in Action

The formal initiation of the scheme was accompanied by much pomp and ceremony at the inaugural meeting of the Northern Region based on Townsville, the first Region to be declared. The first of the Central Queensland meetings was not as auspicious an event because the Regional Coordinator, not having yet taken up residence in Rockhampton, decided to fly north for the occasion on the morning of the meeting only to find Brisbane airport fogbound. A band of restless and cynical local government representatives waited around for many hours until he eventually arrived. It was a seemingly insignificant matter, but nonetheless one taken seriously in a Queensland provincial area.

⁶*Ibid.*, sec. 47.

Over the past three years all ten R.C.C.s have met. Those in far-flung areas of the State tend to meet less frequently often due to their lesser incidence of regional problems and also because of climatic conditions. It has generally been the Chairman of the Shire or the Mayor/ Lord Mayor who has been the local government representative, if not initially at least subsequently. Amendments to the legislation were introduced in 1973 ratifying the changes in concept since the inception of the scheme, namely fixing the life of the Councils and introducing the possibility of an R.C.C. appointing executive or advisory committees whose membership would not have to be restricted to existing Council members. Further provision was also made for the appointment of Project Boards.⁷ There was also amending legislation in 1974, the effect of which was that each local authority had the right to be represented; a local authority could change its member during the term of the Council; and the appointment of any other person could only take place at the request of the local authority representative of the Council.⁸ In the event a few local authorities did change their representatives because of poor performance or because formerly sceptical Shire Chairmen or Mayors now wanted to be part of the scheme. It was also now made mandatory that all local authorities in a region be members, not just some as in the initial 1971 legislation.

Regulations were promulgated under the Act dealing mostly with machinery for declaration of a region, following town planning procedures in the main, but with the appeal being to Caesar from Caesar. Some very cumbersome meeting procedures were also laid down based generally on meeting procedures in local government. One important regulation states that in the event of an equality of votes on a matter the chairman (Regional Coordinator) has a second or casting vote. The meetings in some regions have been much more formally conducted than in others, depending largely on the different styles of the Coordinators. It is not an enviable task for a public servant to chair a meeting of politicians and have a casting vote as well. In most regions the local government representatives are accompanied by their Shire or Town Clerk and occasionally the Shire Engineer, who sit behind them after the style of Premiers' Conferences at the ready to offer advice ('might as well fill up the car', some of them declared). The press and public are invited to all meetings and a press statement is issued by the chairman at the end of the meeting. The Coordinators have been reasonably pleased with the press coverage, the only complaints relating to inaccuracy rather than bias.

Party politics has rarely entered into the debate in the meetings. Some Councils obviously operate more harmoniously than others reflecting the degree of homogeneity of the region and often the size of the Council (one has 22 members). It must be remembered that these meetings represent the only formal occasion when representatives of all such local authorities would meet each other in any connection so it is an event of social significance as well as one which allows them to compare notes on their treatment by State and Commonwealth

⁷*An Act to Amend the State and Regional Planning and Development, Public Works Organization and Environmental Control Act 1971 in Certain Particulars.* No. 26 of 1973. Assented to 19th April 1973.

⁸*An Act to Amend the State and Regional Planning and Development, Public Works Organization and Environmental Control Act 1971-1973 in Certain Particulars.* No. 60 of 1974. Assented to 27th September 1974.

governments. The only other occasion when a meeting of these politicians occurs is through their Local Government Association but its districts do not correspond to these regions.

There has developed some kudos for participants in this scheme. The local authority representative goes back to his Shire, Town, or City Council, bearing superior knowledge to his or her counterparts and often plays upon the prestige so gained. Most of them report very poorly on the events of the R.C.C. at their own council meeting but then most of the other councillors or aldermen have been singularly apathetic about what goes on beyond their council boundaries, or in some cases the boundaries of their own ward or finance division in those many local authorities of Queensland where the anachronistic practice of retaining such further subdivisions takes place. Local government administrators also have given the scheme tepid acceptance. It irks them to have their chairmen better informed because this automatically reduces their own status and leverage. Many of them also feel uncomfortable at having a State public servant appraise and compare their performances so closely.

The R.C.C. meetings have without a doubt become a clearing house. The Regional Coordinator as chairman acts as a two-way channel disseminating information to members about State and Commonwealth government activity but at the same time gathering all the complaints of members about the other two levels of government and passing them upwards to his head in Brisbane for appropriate heavy or lightweight action. It is the author's belief that this Janus-like role is the underpinning of the whole scheme. The Regional Coordinator is the best informed person in the region and so he can rest on his expertise rather than having to revert solely to his formal status to retain command. He is aided substantially in this role by very regular flights to Brisbane for briefings, conferences and brainstorming with his colleagues. The success of the scheme to date has been due in no small part to the willingness of the Coordinator General to involve his regional men to the fullest in the Department's policy making and policy implementation. This keeps them well in the picture since the Coordinator General's Department is at the hub of state government affairs, especially with the Premier as its minister. It also tends to give the Regional Coordinator some leverage over his other state government colleagues in his own regions.

Naturally it is difficult for a Regional Coordinator to take complaints from members about his sister departments but this has been a pronounced feature of the debate in the Councils, especially with respect to the Main Roads Department for whom the local governments often act as construction consultants. The Coordinators are in effect acting as regional ombudsmen, a role they do not relish because of the diplomacy involved and the danger that other state government departments will accuse them of pot boiling. Interestingly enough the local authority representatives tend not to criticize the State Department of Local Government at these meetings to any significant extent which may be because they regard that department as 'theirs' anyway.

The Regional Coordinator does not in any sense have a prefectorial role as some writers had predicted could eventuate.⁹ He has no authority over other

⁹See, for example, R.L. Wettenthal and J.M. Power, "Regionalisation and Public Administration in Australia" in R.L. Mathews (ed.), *Responsibility Sharing in a Federal System*, Research Monograph No. 8, Centre for Research on Federal Financial Relations, A.N.U., Canberra, 1975, p.204.

government officials in his region and lines of authority in the Queensland Public Service remain strongly vertical rather than horizontal. Indeed the Regional Coordinators have located their modern offices well away from existing state departments. (Their offices are also used as the focal point for visits of the Premier or other senior State politicians to the area). The Central and North Queensland Regional Coordinators have had to overcome the problem of not being 'locals' in their regions, although they do now live in the region of course and in one case already have an interest in just about every social and business organization in the city. Queensland's country folk tend to be suspicious of outsiders, often for at least two generations, and it will take time for them to determine where the loyalties of these men really lie. This will not be easy since their outlook must be an ambivalent one, living in the region but representing a statewide viewpoint.

In Queensland there is often no love lost between contiguous local government areas and to date the Regional Coordinators have managed to prevent old antagonisms from flaring. In this respect even the seating arrangements at the meeting of the Coordination Council can be important. Since the meetings are only advisory and there are no resources to be divided, the mediatory role of the Coordinators is facilitated but they have nevertheless been firm in their actions to date, often seeking recourse to the letter of their legislation, regulations and meeting procedures.

One of the Regional Coordinators has observed that, in the regions which are large in area, the members of the R.C.C. have found it difficult to see their role because regional problems tend to be in those functions handled by government departments. They then become cynical because they do not believe the government departments will take any notice of their recommendations. In the Moreton region, however, the problems are not ones handled by departments or statutory bodies. Rapid development is occurring and the Mayors and Chairmen have to spend a lot of time at the council office and become more expert. They prefer the advisory nature of the R.C.C. because its recommendations will not be binding on the local authorities.¹⁰

The Federal Impact

Naturally the change of government at the Commonwealth level in December 1972 had consequences for Queensland regionalism. The new national Labor government with its strong commitment to 'regionalism' inspected the Queensland scheme which had fortuitously been established twelve months before. Despite some initial misgivings about the Moreton region the Labor government accepted the state regions for its own purposes and generally found favour with the whole concept.¹¹ However there was considerable confusion within local government in Queensland especially when the Department of Urban and Regional Development took it upon itself to act as the vanguard of the new Grants Commission local government exercise. Local government was extremely suspicious and, ironically, turned to the state

¹⁰D.G. Young, *Regional Planning in Queensland*, Brisbane, Coordinator General's Department, 3rd November 1975.

¹¹In fact the Commonwealth Government was more willing to adopt the regional boundaries than many of Queensland's own government departments, some of which have still refused to alter their own district structure to conform with the new pattern.

government and the Regional Coordinators for assistance to sort out the maze.¹² Then followed a Gilbertian situation with State Government Regional Coordinators helping some local governments to prepare their cases for the Commonwealth Grants Commission. The comic opera became even further involved when a fairly standard practice was adopted that the R.C.C. would meet in the morning, the Regional Coordinator would vacate the chair at the conclusion of proceedings, and all the other members would then remain seated, change hats, appoint one of their number as Chairman and continue as the Grants Commission regional body.

Space does not permit a full description of the Commonwealth/State impact in respect of regionalism. It is highly significant, however, that money under the Commonwealth Government's Area Improvement and National Estate programs was channeled to local government through the Queensland Government's R.C.C.s. In other words they actually accepted bulk amounts for the region, devised their own distribution formulae and then divided the regional amounts among themselves, mostly on a population and area basis. However Grants Commission funds went directly to each qualifying local government (through the State Treasury of course) and Australian Assistance Plan money also went straight to local governments directly, bypassing the State Government altogether, an apparently constitutional procedure. Money under the national government's Regional Employment Scheme (R.E.D.) was also distributed outside the Regional Coordination framework but through the Queensland Treasury.

It is apparent that the existence of the Regional Coordination scheme did allow the State Government to eavesdrop on conversations between Commonwealth and local governments from 1972 to 1975. At the meetings local government representatives would inevitably compare notes publicly, and in any event for there to be sensible debate on some agenda items a declaration of Commonwealth Government plans was necessary. So despite the fact that many federal programs were not directed through the State scheme, the Regional Coordinators, and thus their government, were kept well informed of national government intentions.

It has escaped the attention of most political commentators that when, in 1975, the Queensland Government decided of its own volition to give an additional \$5 million to local government and set up its own style of Grants Commission for this purpose the R.C.C.s were not involved in any way. Admittedly this was money for current and not capital expenditure but the regional framework could still have been utilised for its distribution. Nor has the Coordinator General's Department's own public works program for the State been compiled on a regional basis or been given to the R.C.C.s for comment or participation.

Local Councillors as well as State and Commonwealth members of parliament have generally shown superficial interest in this scheme. They are always sent agenda and minutes of the meetings but rarely attend. However this only reflects their general apathy with anything not spatially directed at their

¹²One region, Wide Bay, became fiercely anti-federal government to such an extent that it refused to appoint a regional spokesman for the Grants Commission exercise, claiming that no single person was capable of speaking on behalf of the whole region.

electorates and in any event the State and Commonwealth electorates do not correspond with the boundaries of any of the regions.

REACTIONS TO THE SCHEME

General Reaction

As might well have been expected there was a great deal of suspicion aroused by the introduction of this scheme. Queensland has a mass of provincial newspapers, many of them dailies, highly organized with a central secretariat in Brisbane to gather news of provincial interest. The progress of this scheme was to provide top copy for a long time. In the initial stages many country editors took the opportunity to lampoon the State Government for past ineffective attempts at promoting decentralization but then sceptically accepted the new scheme as having some potential. Most newspapers alerted their readers to the fact that some centre would have to be the focal point of each region and suggested it ought to be their own. Two papers went so far as to tell State members in an editorial that they should make sure that their city did not miss out on any action that was going.¹³ Most of the reporting was critical arising in the main from interviews with local councillors or aldermen. The criticisms expressed included the possibility of a fourth tier of government, election window dressing, 'usurping the role of local government', and public servants running things with too much power concentrated in the Coordinator General. One specific argument which emanated from all parts of the State was the lack of representation of local government on the Regional Councils as of right.

However the fiercest attack on the legislation arose from fears about the powers of control the Coordinator General would possess over local government. For the most part this was an outcome of debate on the bill in the State parliament where the leader of the opposition stated that under the legislation, 'State cabinet could tell local authorities which major works they should do and the authorities have to find the necessary money whether they liked it or not ... if local authorities refused to carry out the required work the Coordinator General would have it done and hit the [local] authority with the bill'.¹⁴ Elsewhere the emotive opinions were expressed that the word 'local' had been taken out of 'local government' and now there was nothing left. Moreover the bill would lead to 'bureaucracy at its very worst'.

Official Local Government Reaction

These sporadic views from local government were but slingshots compared with the broadside directed at the bill by the Queensland Local Government Association, the body of elected local government members which employs a secretariat/research unit in Brisbane. The Research Officer of the Association

¹³ *Warwick Daily News*, 4.11.1971 and *Maryborough Chronicle*, 29.10.1971.

¹⁴ No detailed description need be given of debate in the Queensland Parliament concerning this legislation. The standard of the debate was extremely low save for one or two constructive suggestions made by the leader of the opposition in the committee stages. There was a great deal of participation in the debate from both sides of the House but the nature of the legislation provided an excellent opportunity for parish pumping. Queenslanders again had cause to be thankful for the absence of an Upper Chamber. The opposition was given only 48 hours to peruse the Bill, it was debated in depth in committee at first reading—a practice peculiar to Queensland and not a very helpful one, and the key phase of the debate continued until 4a.m. in the morning. Debate on later amendments in 1973 and 1974 reached a higher standard.

prepared a paper dealing with the implications of the legislation for local government in Queensland.¹⁵ The tone of the whole paper can be captured from the first page. 'The Act', the paper said, was 'possibly the most iniquitous and lamentable legislation ever enacted by a modern western style government against the institution of an independent local government and is therefore rivaled only by the now historical destruction of local government in those countries where central governments have acted against local governments to consolidate central government power as for example, in Italy, when Mussolini came to power'. However he believed that if certain amendments were made, notably the ones he was suggesting, the legislation could provide the basis for the most 'forward looking progressive and balanced development of Queensland imaginable'. The standard of the paper did not really improve after this lamentable beginning but its arguments were important because local governments throughout the state used them as ammunition to pepper the State Government. The paper contended, *inter alia*, that (a) the Act had the effect of concentrating attention on the powers and functions of the Coordinator General *vis-à-vis* local authorities; (b) it emphasized a trend becoming evident in most English based legislative systems away from recognition of local authority autonomy and responsibility; (c) there was a possibility of the Coordinator General having a pecuniary interest in a construction company and then forcing the local government to carry out certain work using that company thereby also breaking the convention of public service neutrality; (d) there was a danger in allowing the Coordinator General to take action of his own volition especially regarding the enforcement of tasks upon local government; (e) Town and Shire Councils could be made under threat of fine to follow the orders of the Coordinator General and lay open confidential Council records to him; (f) no appeal mechanism existed for any local government body outside of the Coordinator General himself; (g) there was a possibility of the Coordinator General interfering with efforts by local government candidates to implement the policies on issues upon which they had been elected; (h) the removal of a section of the old legislation which spoke of the need to ensure a balanced and equitable program of works to ensure full employment across the State, and its replacement with attention to potential as the important criteria for whether a region should be pushed along, was wrong (the author complained, without giving reasons, that 'those areas of the State with the greatest potential will have priority for development schemes' and so he was, *ipso facto*, advancing the proposition that a region with no potential should still receive assistance); (i) the Act gave no automatic right of representation or consultation to local government on the R.C.C.; (j) there was a danger in allowing the Coordinator General to override the town plans of local government and this would cause duplication with the functions of the Department of Local Government; (k) the Local Government Association's own regional organization should have been used for the new scheme.

The general theme of the paper was that regional coordination or regional planning should not be achieved by legislative coercion of local government. The paper was a call to arms.

¹⁵Graham J. Segal, *State and Regional Planning and Development, Public Works Organization and Environmental Control Act—1971, An Analysis of its Implications for Local Government in Queensland*, Brisbane, Queensland Local Government Association, 1972.

'It is therefore patently obvious that local government if it is to develop into a stronger grass roots democratic institution has to take a firm stand against the provisions as now enacted in this Act. The very future of local government as Queensland now knows it, depends on this. For what future has local government when every decision made can be overruled administratively by a public servant who in turn can then dictate to the local authority what is to be done by it and the priority with which it is to be done'.¹⁶

The strong voice of local government resulted, as outlined, in membership of the R.C.C. being confined to representatives of local government as well as in a few amendments which superficially at least seemed to soften the possibility of any blows being inflicted upon local government. However for all their criticism local government has taken the scheme seriously and has gained a great deal of attention from it. As each local authority appointed its representative to the appropriate R.C.C., masses of attendant publicity followed and there has been a pronounced tendency for the provincial media, especially newspapers, to report the expressed view of its representative largely to the exclusion of what everyone else said at the meetings. The general public has been apathetic about the scheme and the federal/state confusion has not helped.

Surveyed Opinion

For the whole duration of the scheme the author has conducted a widespread personal survey of attitudes to this scheme across the state. The following are the specific viewpoints put forward at first hand by local government politicians.

All members seem to appreciate the wider perspective given them by these meetings. Implicitly, a regional outlook, for all of them, is a good thing. Again all of them admit that this was lacking before the foundation of the scheme, and they all want it to continue (even those on record publicly as favouring its abolition). Without question the major and universal complaint is that the R.C.C.s are too tame. This is ironical given all the early fears of local government about the possibility of too much power being given to these Councils. 'It couldn't hurt anyone', said one shire councillor, 'All studies and no action', said another, 'No guts to it', exclaimed a third. All respondents wanted the R.C.C. to have executive powers although suggestions ranged from their being employers of consultancy groups, to their being the basis for development corporations, project boards, and utility authorities. Clearly the fact that the R.C.C.s are only advisory is a source of singular frustration. While they resent any power being exerted on them, they have a compelling desire for more power over state and commonwealth governments.

The issue raised above came to light most in respect of water. Indeed water is the key issue for almost all of them—the testing issue for the scheme. However views are by no means uniform. In one case the mayor of a large Queensland provincial city said that the R.C.C. should do something about water but he would not be forced in any way to sell water from 'his barrage' to surrounding shires. In the Moreton region the possibility of a water authority has been a touchy issue. Brisbane's Lord Mayor Alderman Clem Jones was a great advocate of executive powers being given to the R.C.C. and saw no reason why the

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p.11.

Moreton R.C.C. could not be the water authority for the region. He received a lot of support, especially from smaller shires who saw regionalism as their only hope of having a say in water supply. But the Mayor of the Gold Coast felt that only those local authorities sharing the water should comprise such a water authority and he extended this principle to every utility.

The R.C.C.s were not tackling the important questions, said some members. The real issue at stake, they felt, was the power of local government over State and Commonwealth governments especially in areas such as pollution and noise control, and rate exemption. Then there was the problem that Commonwealth and State governments never consulted local authorities about their intentions, especially in relation to state schools.

How do members see their role? Though they are appointed as individuals and are there as regional men all, and though one Regional Coordinator deliberately arranges their seats at the meeting alphabetically by order of surname to stress this fact, it is evident that they act as representatives of their local authorities, as representing the interests of the citizens (or ratepayers) of their shires, towns, or cities.

While the smaller shires were in favour of equal representation for all local authorities, quite a few mayors favoured a per capita basis for obvious reasons but did not want to press the point. Some smaller shires complained of domination of the meetings by larger ones but this was not a widespread feeling and is not borne out by actual observation of the meetings in action. However in many cases the friction between urban areas and contiguous shires was most evident. Many complained that it was simply not possible to get a community of interest although the polarization was generally coastal vs. inland. Most were happy about boundary movement for local authorities but were against amalgamation of local government units. A few mayors and the Lord Mayor of Brisbane were strongly in favour of amalgamation and at least twenty per cent of the shire chairmen thought some amalgamations were necessary but could not say so publicly.

Party politics had not intruded into the affairs of the R.C.C.s but many felt that their recommendations would depend on party machinations once they were transmitted to the Premier. Regarding the administration of the scheme, all local authority members felt that public servants had been given too much power. Most thought it wrong for a public servant to chair a meeting of politicians, even though different tiers of government were involved. There was no personal ill-will towards the Regional Coordinator but one of them was described as "too theoretical" and another as "too slow". Everyone interviewed was unhappy about the strict formality of the conduct of the meeting and the 20-page rule book for meeting procedure (despite the fact that it was modelled on local government meeting procedures). A majority believed that the Regional Coordinator should not be allowed a vote in the meeting.

Reaction from Regional Industry

It is difficult at the best of times to obtain a conglomerate of opinion from the private sector, but in this case the task is facilitated by virtue of the existence of Regional Development Boards or Bureaux whose members are predominately local businessmen. Their views have also been analyzed as the

scheme has progressed. Clearly their major grievance is that they have been denied membership of the R.C.C.s. "We were not wanted", they say and add that with the Government's poor track record on decentralization there is no reason why private industry should be excluded. The policy of having only local government representatives is, they believe, undesirable, retrogressive and non-productive. This issue was exacerbated in one case where an R.C.C. voted to allow a Development Bureau as a member but the motion was subsequently disallowed by the chairman at the next meeting. However Development Boards have been used as consulting bodies in projects undertaken by R.C.C.s.

The regional industrial organizations claim that ministers have used the Councils to defer decision making. With power only to recommend, they are "toothless tigers" and have achieved nothing except some studies on which no action has been taken, it was claimed. Moreover in the opinion of one of the larger regional boards these new bodies had the ability to frustrate and delay development proposals, like a third arm 'not much use but always getting in the road'. It must be kept in mind that a great deal of this criticism is a flow-on from the poor opinion of local government which many of these boards possess. As one Board put it, "... in many local authorities elected representatives are often semi-retired people, who are not necessarily the most skilled in what is becoming a very demanding field. When a new 'regional' concept is dropped in their lap, therefore, there is a lack of young ideas and push, so that there is a real danger of stagnation".

Most of these regional industrial bodies believed that there were far too many federal and state regional organizations and rather simplistically they cannot see why one body is not enough for all tasks. They were impressed with the Grants Commission local government exercise because of its professionalism, its thoroughness, and because funds were actually to be deployed. They were all unhappy about public servants chairing or guiding the meetings of the R.C.C.s, and thought this to be a conflict of roles and an invidious position for the gentlemen concerned.

However not all of their reaction was negative. Most agreed that the scheme had given people far more of a regional consciousness. It was suggested that meetings should be more frequent, the role of the Councils be oriented more towards development, a data bank might be established in each region and, of course, that membership could be widened. Without exception they believed the scheme possessed a great deal of potential. This was best expressed in the following reply—

"Briefly it is considered that the role of the Regional Coordination Councils has not as yet reached full potential. This has been brought about by factors which include the confusion due to the creation of Federal Government Regional Organizations for Grants Commission purposes, the fear of Regionalism as a concept, the apparent reluctance of local authority members to look at regional planning and coordination in its correct perspective, amid parochialism and the lack of guidance from Regional Coordinators. This latter factor is no doubt brought about by the desire of the Regional Coordinators to operate a self-help organization and to act in the role of Chairman only. Finance and the research staffing situation could also inhibit the activities of the Councils and the desires of Regional Coordinators to introduce new fields of endeavour.

The Regional Coordination Councils were established, not for overnight reform, but for the progressive and objective planning of all activities carried out by Federal,

State, Local, and semi-governmental bodies in the region with the assistance, as required, of business and community organizations".

Potential of the Scheme

The Regional Coordination scheme in Queensland is not regional planning despite the fact that the Premier and the "sponsoring" minister have spoken of it in such terms on every occasion of parliamentary debate.¹⁷ There are no state resources given to any R.C.C. and they have certainly not been asked to draw up any projections of public revenue or expenditure. Any actions they have taken regarding land use planning, such as the commissioning of studies, has produced guidelines or recommendations but nothing involving a commitment to the future. The scheme is also not regional government as was feared by so many at the outset. In this respect the fretfulness clearly arose from the strong wording of the legislation and the past ignorance of all Queenslanders as to the powers the Coordinator General has always possessed. In practice this State Department has always operated very diplomatically.

The scheme has been successful on a number of counts. It has certainly created a greater level of regional consciousness. It has broken down some of the parochialism of local government. There has been a defusing of many items of contention between contiguous local authorities. It has given citizens a better means of appraising local government performance. There has been a better flow of communication between state and local government, because of the scheme, to the benefit of both levels. A healthy sharing of the interests of urban and country residents has been initiated and the coastal and inland people have begun to recognize the importance of their interdependence. The administration of the scheme has proceeded smoothly because it was well formulated and carefully amended in the light of reaction. Men of a high calibre were chosen with a broad outlook and were well supported by their permanent head and properly financed, housed and staffed. The Regional Coordinators have forced the members to do the necessary thinking and discussing and this has been therapeutic for a group of people who are used simply to passing motions at Council meetings and having an administrator perform all the leg work.

There is ample opportunity now for a number of further steps to be taken including the following suggestions. Regionalization of the state works program could be implemented with little difficulty. All local government annual capital expenditure could well be compiled on a regional basis as well as on a sectoral basis as at present. The R.C.C.s could discuss and make recommendations on the regional works program. The works funding, when it is to hand from the Loan Council, could be distributed to each R.C.C. which would allocate it on the basis of original submission. If membership of the R.C.C. is ever extended to state government departments and instrumentalities then works programs could also be so formulated, appraised, and distributed.¹⁸ The examples of the Area

¹⁷All of the official publications relating to the scheme speak of it as a regional planning scheme. Although the Premier introduced and concluded debate on all of the legislation a Liberal backbencher (now Cabinet Minister) with an interest in surveying and town and regional planning was clearly responsible for the drafting of the legislation and answered most of the questions and criticism raised in the committee stages. Hence the continuous reference in the debate to 'the Premier and his shadow'.

¹⁸The whole thrust of the government's share of debate on the legislation was founded on this theory that coordination plus public works formulation would equal regional planning but to date this has not eventuated. See *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 27th October 1971, pp.1498-1499.

Improvement program and National Estate program provide evidence that the scheme can handle this task. It must be strongly realized by Australians that there can never be regional planning without state and national planning, in the public sector at least, mainly because of the need to consider spatial equity. The public works program provides the ideal starting place. With the advent of new federal financial arrangements in Australia, which will provide much more scope for states to determine their own priorities, there arises enormous scope for involvement of the R.C.C.s. For any particular program which the states wish to initiate, these bodies could become the focal point for preparation of bids, and distribution of funds. If local government is given access to a fixed proportion of income tax and a state government style of grants commission is used for fund disbursement, this scheme again could afford the ideal distribution mechanism.

It would be advisable for many reasons for the membership of the R.C.C.s to be broadened to include at least senior state officials in the region, especially representatives from the Main Roads Department and the Irrigation and Water Supply Commission. Such membership should not exceed numerically the local government membership and should be allowed a vote for a trial period at least. This arrangement, however, will be satisfactory only while these Councils possess advisory powers. There would seem to be no possibility of 'instituting' a full prefectural system in Queensland but more formal and informal collaboration between public servants in the field is definitely needed. The time is also long overdue for the permanent heads of Queensland Government departments to decentralize more of their decision-making to the regional level. The idea of including representation of State and Commonwealth M.P.s on the councils has merit but whether they should be given a vote is doubtful.

The R.C.C.s should become the boards for all state utility bodies. This could best be achieved by having the board of each functional utility, e.g. harbour board or electricity authority, as a sub-committee of the R.C.C. which would accept or reject the recommendations of such sub-committees. It is appreciated that this will mean giving them executive powers for the first time.

The question of local government reform must be considered in any regional developments. Some experimentation with boundary movement could be initiated as agenda items for R.C.C.s, but the day of reckoning must come in Queensland when amalgamations eventuate, and amalgamation is a subject which could be handled at the regional level. There needs to be a de-emphasis on town planning and land use planning in this regional approach and introduction of broader viewpoints on deployment of *all* regional resources. For this purpose it would be sensible if there were closer relationships with the State Department of Local Government. Reforms are also needed to streamline distribution of public funds from the state government to the regions and hence to local government. In this respect the R.C.C. could take on some of the County Council characteristics. A start could then be made on matters of some importance to local authorities such as producing uniform by-laws. The possibility of a small regional administration to service the R.C.C. arises and this could provide a useful interchange of local government officials to give them wider experience, perhaps on a rotation basis.¹⁹

¹⁹A similar but much stronger proposal for a regional public service in Queensland is advanced in K.W. Knight and G.H. France, 'The Administrator and Regional Development' in *Regional Development—Its Effect on Urban Growth*, Brisbane, R.I.P.A., September 1972.

Some of these suggestions will appear radical for Queensland, which is a state where reforms take a long time to be accepted. The Coordinator General's Department has been wise in hastening slowly. The R.C.C.s are now a valuable talking place and sounding board, but unless they become more than this interest in them will wane and the old style of parochialism will reappear. Nonetheless they are a valuable part of the framework of government in this state and should be retained. As in the history of local government in Australia, all the initiative so far has been downward. The time is ripe to put regionalism to the test at the grass-roots level but even grass-roots have never been respecters of boundaries, especially in Queensland.

