

## **Lyndon Megarrity: Report on first trip to Canberra 1-14 September 2010**

My APMC Fellowship project involves a comparison between the regional planning schemes of the Chifley and Whitlam Labor Governments. Both local government and regional development were elements of these planning schemes.

My first trip to Canberra largely involved studying government files in the National Archives of Australia and private papers in the National Library of Australia. A key source for me was the 1943-49 records of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction (DPWR). It is clear that during the 1940s, the key advocates of regional planning were DPWR bureaucrats; both Curtin and Chifley made public statements in support of the goal of regional planning, but it does not appear to have been a major priority for either Prime Minister. This is in sharp contrast to the 1970s, where Whitlam's policy input and personal interventions were vital in securing long-lasting outcomes for local government.

The Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction called for local government authorities to inform the Commonwealth about the necessary projects which needed to be done during the post-war era in local areas. Perhaps inadvertently, this information gathering scheme encouraged local governments to believe that federal subsidies for local government projects might be on the agenda. Local government, it should be remembered, is not mentioned in the Australian Constitution, and is created by state legislation. Until the Whitlam era, federal governments were very cautious about funding 'state matters' such as local government.

Documents from Chifley as Post-War Reconstruction Minister and his departmental staff indicate a willingness to keep the option of federal subsidies for local authorities on the table between 1943 and 1944. This was perhaps inspired by the fact that the circumstances of the war had led to greater Commonwealth powers. Furthermore, a 1944 referendum proposed to substantially increase these powers in the post-war period (the referendum proposal was subsequently defeated).

As it turned out, the post-war Chifley Government expended a great deal of administrative energy on regional planning, but not, it would seem, a great deal of cash. After the war, the states reasserted themselves and naturally wanted to make the substantial development decisions with regard to their resources. Nevertheless, tentative intergovernmental co-operation occurred in the following ways:

1. The Federal Government encouraged the states to survey regional areas in the post-war years. Some states organised regional development committees with state and local representatives; the Department of Post-War Reconstruction kept itself informed of development proposals and initiatives across the continent.
2. At the request of some local government authorities, the Department of Post-War Reconstruction undertook surveys of local areas as a means of suggesting

improvements in civic and community life. These reports were sometimes more impassioned than the standard official report of the time. Writing in a commissioned report for the City of Heidelberg, an official asks a pointed question about the locality: ‘Artists have painted its beauty for a century – what have you done to safeguard it?’<sup>1</sup>

3. The North Australia Development Committee, comprising the Commonwealth, Queensland and Western Australia was established circa 1945-46 for the purpose of developing the North. An interesting reason for the formation of the committee was that South East Asia in the post-war era could become a lucrative market for the industries of Northern Australia.

At first glance, these various committees and initiatives give the impression of having limited capacity to effect change. However, it may be that future research will uncover more substantial or indirect achievements as a result of these official activities.

The Whitlam era of local government policy and regional planning is easier to study: there is a wealth of material, and Whitlam as Prime Minister was much more involved in such schemes than his predecessors. Whitlam massively increased federal funding of local government and developed regional funding arrangements and programs that were later dismantled by the Fraser Government.

I concentrated mostly on the post-war era during my first Canberra trip, and anticipate doing more research on Whitlam during my second research trip, especially in Sydney, where there are many papers relating to Whitlam in the Sydney branch of the National Archives of Australia.

One aspect of my research I am interested in exploring further is the tension between the concepts of ‘regionalism’ and ‘localism’, even though they are often combined in Commonwealth and State policy. Local government was seen by many policy-makers in the 1940s and 1970s as a key component in a flourishing Australian democracy. Whitlam once said ‘A nation’s democracy is no stronger than its system of municipal government.’<sup>2</sup> However, local government concerns have often got lost in periodic Commonwealth enthusiasm for regionalism. A collection of regions is easier to generalise about than a local community, whose priorities may be at odds with the regional policies promoted by the Central authority.

It was a great privilege to spend time at the National Archives of Australia and the National Library of Australia, going through the papers of officials and Prime Ministers. In the hype surrounding the digitisation of archives, it is sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> “A Community Survey Report of the City of Heidelberg, Victoria ca. November 1945, in *Lloyd Ross Papers*, Series 10 folder 7, MS 3939.

<sup>2</sup> Future of Australian Federalism, speech by Whitlam to the Academy of Social Sciences ANU seminar on intergovernmental relations, 8 November 1971, *Richard Hall Papers*, Series 15 Folder 20, MS 8725, National Library of Australia.

forgotten how enjoyable it can be to see and read original documents.<sup>3</sup> Going to an archive also focuses the mind on the task, freeing you from the distractions of email, the web and other features of modern life. I am very grateful to the Australian Prime Ministers Centre for giving me the opportunity to travel and study in Canberra.

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<sup>3</sup> I have discussed the value of non-digital archives in Lyndon Megarrity, 'Manuscripts, private papers, government files', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Vol. 12, 2010, pp. 223-226.