

Communities and Local Government

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Community is a much-abused word. Politicians and others in Australia seeking support for their causes are particularly prone to use the word as a proxy for the people of an area. The areas in question may be as large as a state, a country or even the whole globe.

In a sociological sense a *community* is a group within a population whose interactions reflect definable, common interests or values that are important to the group. As it is rare to find all the people in a place sharing definable interests or values talk of a population as a community can be quite misleading.

Hence the terms *community* and *locality* should not be used interchangeably. Once in an age when travel was limited it may have been appropriate to use the terms thus. Today in an age when many people travel and communicate globally a locality may contain people who have more to do with sometimes global networks than with each other.

However, a central ambition of community-building must be to improve networking at a local level in order to enable the people in a place to belong and to work together for a common good.

With the casual misuse of the term community in mind I raise some questions that have been troubling me about the concept of community-building: How large can a population become before the concept of community building ceases to have meaning? How should local government and communities be linked? And, can relationships between local government and communities be improved?

How large can a community be?

In regard to the size of a community, it is obvious that the larger a community becomes the less will be held in common amongst its members. Is it appropriate to talk about the people of a country or state as a 'community' when the *only* thing held in common by these people is that they live within the same place? Is it reasonable to talk of the people in a more localised area as a community where not all of these people have opportunities for some sort of inter-personal interaction, whether face-to-face or via communication media?

Because opportunities for inter-personal interaction vary considerably according to things such as social make-up and access to transport and communication infrastructure it is not possible to prescribe how large a group might be before it ceases to be able to function as a community. However, when communities are of people who interact regularly for things such as shopping and social activities, Canberra academic Chris Aulich has suggested that the optimal size for a community to function effectively is one with around 10,000 people.

Communities and local governments

This takes me to the question of relationships between local government and communities. In New South Wales, where half of the state's population lives in the 20 local government areas which have populations of over 100,000, while 24 other local government areas account for half of the state's area, it is difficult to find much correspondence between the areas embraced by many local government areas and the locuses of communities.

This lack of correspondence is of concern because community-building cannot take place without the involvement of governments, particularly *local* governments because these are the ones closest to people. Community-building must be a bottom-up process because *ipso facto* it involves people but it must also be a top-down process to the extent that it requires the moral and tangible support of the formal governments *of* those people.

Local government in New South Wales

Currently there is a strong push for the enlargement of local government areas in the hope that local councils might become more *efficient*. Setting aside here questions as to whether local councils universally are inefficient - including the question as to whether the efficiency of councils will necessarily be improved by their serving very large populations or areas - I wonder whether enlargement of local government areas will improve the *effectiveness* of local government. This is a question that is fundamental for community-building.

Local government in New South Wales has developed in what might be described as an 'English' tradition in which power is held very tightly by central governments. In this historical tradition, central governments have been reluctant to devolve power - particularly resources - to local governments, with the result in New South Wales (and Australia generally) that local government has a relatively narrow range of functions and local councils are few in comparison with other jurisdictions. This means that some local councils serve very large populations indeed.

I am not going to suggest here that our present model of local government is necessarily worse (or better) than local government in other jurisdictions. But, we should not reject the possibility that local government in other jurisdictions gets closer to the Lincolnshire ideal of government in a participatory democracy: that it is 'of the people, by the people and for the people' than it does in New South Wales. If this is the case then we may have something to learn about how other jurisdictions go about community-building.

As a starting point, we might consider the structure of government in other jurisdictions as suggested in the tables that follow in the Appendix to this paper.

In my rather casual exploration of this data, I have been surprised to discover that in many European and North American countries local governments appear to serve smaller populations than in New South Wales, often through more than one layer of local government.

In many cases local governments have wider ranges of functions that enable governments responsible for quite small populations and areas to achieve the critical masses necessary for them to achieve acceptable levels of efficiency.

Interestingly from the perspective of community-building many of these countries describe their local government in terms of people (eg *communes*) rather than area (eg *shire*).

Obviously, the data in these tables is dated and says little about the size-distributions of local and regional councils and nothing much about the functions of local governments at different levels or about their efficiency and effectiveness. But I invite the analytically inclined to update and explore these tables and see what conclusions - and questions also - they arrive at about possible relationships between communities and their local governments.

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APPENDIX: Local Government Systems in OECD countries

1 OECD: Effective Middle Tier and Local Territorial Governments, mid-1990s

Country	Pop'n ¹	Middle Tier Governments ²	Local Governments ^{2,3,4}
Australia	18,338	8 States/Territories	660 various local governments ⁵
Austria	7,861	9 Länder (provinces)	Communes (Cities/Villages)
Belgium	10,031	3 Regions ⇒ 10 Provinces	Arondissements ⇒ < 600 Communes (Cities/Town Districts)
Canada	28,537	13 Provinces/Territories	> 4,600 various local governments ⁶
Czech Republic	10,483	7 Kraje (regions)	75 Districts ⇒ Communities
Denmark	5,192	16 City/Borough/Counties	275 Municipalities/Districts
Finland	5,046	12 Läänit (provinces)	Communes
France	58,027	22 Regions ⇒ 96 Départements	Arondissements/Cantons ⁷ ⇒ >36,500 Municipalities/Communes
Germany	81,264	16 Länder (states)	City Länder/Administrative Districts ⇒ Counties/Municipalities/Communes
Greece	10,565 ⁸	13 Regions ⁷ ⇒ 51 Departments	Municipalities/Communes
Hungary	10,471	20 Megyék (counties)	Districts (Cities/Towns/Villages)
Iceland	260 ⁹	8 Regions ⁷	201 Communes (Towns/Rural Communities)
Ireland (Republic)	3,469	4 Provinces ⁷	32 Counties /County Boroughs ⇒ Boroughs/Urban Districts/Towns
Italy	57,910	20 Regions ⇒ 94 Provinces	> 8,000 Communes
Japan	125,879	47 Prefectures	Municipalities (Cities/City Wards/Towns)
Korea (South)	45,182	15 City/Provinces	Counties/Cities ⇒ Wards ⇒ Precincts ⁶
Luxembourg	386	12 Cantons	Communes
Mexico	93,670	32 District/States	Municipalities
Netherlands	15,499	12 Provinces	650 Municipalities
New Zealand	3,552	16 Regions/Unitary Authorities ¹¹	74 Cities/Districts ¹¹ ⇒ Communities
Norway	4,357	19 Fylker (counties)	Municipalities
Poland	38,736	49 Provinces	2460 Towns/Communes
Portugal	9,860 ¹⁰	20 Districts/Regions	305 Municipalities ⇒ 4,000 Parishes ⁶
Spain	39,276	17 Regions ⇒ 50 Provinces	> 8,000 Municipalities
Sweden	8,773	24 län (counties)	286 Municipalities (cities/towns/districts)
Switzerland	6,955	26 Cantons/half Cantons	some Districts ⇒ 3,000 Communes
Turkey	62,032	76 Provinces	Municipalities ⇒ Districts/Sub Districts
United Kingdom	58,093	3 (Scotland/Wales/N Ireland) ^{2,12}	
England	46,170 ⁹	46 Metropolises/Counties ¹²	332 Districts ⇒ 10,000 Parishes ^{6,13}
Scotland	4,958 ⁹	Nation ⇒ 12 Regions/Islands	53 Districts ⇒ Communities ¹³
Wales	2,798 ⁹	Principality ⇒ 8 Counties	37 Districts ⇒ Communities ¹³
N Ireland	1,610 ¹⁰	Province ⁷	26 Districts
United States	263,473	52 District/States/Commnwlth ²	> 200 metropolitan councils and 3,128 Counties/cities/boroughs/parishes ⇒ 19,296 Municipalities ⇒ Towns/Townships ^{2,3,4}

¹ estimated 1995 populations unless shown otherwise (000s omitted)

² excludes minor territorial (eg small island) governments

³ may not be a complete enumeration of territorial authorities

⁴ excludes special purpose authorities (the United States has 47,710 school and other such authorities)

⁵ source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (various)

⁶ source: *Encyclopaedia Britannica CD (1994-9)*

⁷ no elected government for this tier

⁸ 1994; ⁹ 1991; ¹⁰ 1992

¹¹ 4 Unitary Authorities are District Councils

¹² England does not have its own middle tier government!

¹³ *Pears Cyclopaedia (1986/79)*. This source lists 9,140 parish councils for England; source in note 6 states 'about 8,000'

principal source: Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia (1997)

2 CANADA: Elected Local Territorial Governments, mid-1990s

Province/Territory	Pop'n ¹	Area ²	Local Governments
Newfoundland/Labrador	569	406	291 Cities/Towns/Communities ³
Prince Edward Island	130	6	82 Towns/Municipalities
Nova Scotia	900	55	55 Regional Municipalities/Towns/Municipalities
New Brunswick	724	73	Municipalities (Cities/Towns/Villages)/Service Districts
Quebec	6,896	1,541	95 Regional Municipalities ⇒ Local Municipalities (Cities/Towns/Rural Municipalities)
Ontario Municipalities	10,085	1,069	Municipalities/District Municipalities/Regional ⇒ Cities/Towns/Townships/Villages
Manitoba	1,092	650	Communities ³
Saskatchewan	989	652	816 Municipalities (Cities/Towns/Villages) ³
Alberta	2,546	661	Cities/Towns/Villages/Counties/Municipal Districts/Improvement Districts ³
British Columbia	3,282	948	28 Regional Districts ⇒ 148 Incorporated Areas (Cities/Municipalities/Towns/Villages/Districts) ³
Yukon	31	2,483	none ⁴
NW Territories	38	2,754	none ⁴
Nunavut	20	772	none ⁴
TOTAL	27,297	9,971⁵	> 4,600 various⁶

¹ 1991 (000s omitted)

² square kilometres (000s omitted)

³ excludes large areas which are unincorporated

⁴ unincorporated

⁵ includes inland waters

⁶ source: *Encyclopaedia Britannica CD (1994-9)*

principal source: Microsoft Encarta Encyclopaedia (1997)

3 AUSTRALIA: Elected Local Territorial Governments, 1997

State/Territory	Pop'n ¹	Area ²	Local Governments ^{3,4}
NSW	6,274	802	177 Cities/Municipalities/Shires ^{3,4}
Victoria	4,605	228	78 Cities/Municipalities
Queensland	3,401	1,727	125 Cities/Towns/Shires
South Australia	1,480	984	71 Cities/Municipalities/Districts ⁴
Western Australia	1,796	2,526	142 Cities/Towns/Shires ⁴
Tasmania	474	68	29 Cities/Municipalities
Northern Territory	187	1,346	38 City/Towns/Communities ⁴
Australia Capital Territory	310	2	none
TOTAL	18,532	7,682	660 various^{3,4}

¹ estimated residential population (000s omitted)

² square kilometres (000s omitted)

³ excludes special purpose local authorities

⁴ excludes areas which are unincorporated

source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

4 OECD: Mean Populations in lowest ‘effective’ local government units¹, selected countries², mid 1990s

Popn ³	Country	Unit	Popn ³	Country	Unit
1.3	Iceland	Commune	16.7	Belgium	Commune
1.6	France	Commune, etc	18.9	Denmark	Municipality
2.3	Switzerland	Commune	23.8	Netherlands	Municipality
2.5	Portugal	Parish	27.8	Australia	various
4.9	Spain	Municipality	30.7	Sweden	Municipality
6.2	Canada	various	32.2	Luxembourg	Canton
7.2	Italy	Commune	48.0	New Zealand	District
13.7	United States	Municipality	129.7	U Kingdom	District
15.7	Poland	Commune, etc	139.8	Czech Republic	District

¹ ie having paid staff and executive functions

² selection limited to available data

³ in thousands

Sources: as above

5 Mean Populations in lowest ‘effective’ local government units¹ Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and selected parts of Canada², mid 1990s

Popn ³	Part	Unit	Popn ³	Part	Unit
1.2	S’katch’wan	Municipality	35.4	New Sth Wales	various
1.6	P.E.I	Municipality, etc	59.0	Victoria	various
1.9	Newf’ndland	Community, etc	61.9	N Ireland	District
4.9	N Territory	Community, etc	75.6	Wales	District
12.6	W Australia	various	93.5	Scotland	District
16.3	Tasmania	various	139.1	England	District
16.4	Nova Scotia	Municipality	28.1	Australia	various
20.8	S Australia	various	5.9	Canada	various
22.2	Br Columbia	Incorp Area	48.0	New Zealand	District
27.2	Queensland	various	129.7	U Kingdom	District

Notes and sources as for Table 4

6 Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and selected parts of Canada¹: Mean Areas in lowest 'effective' local government units²

Area ³	Part	Unit	Area ³	Part	Unit
0.1	P.E.I.	Municipality, etc	4.5	New South Wales	various
0.4	England	District	6.4	Br Columbia	Incorp Area
0.5	N Ireland	District	13.8	Queensland	various
0.6	Wales	District	13.9	S Australia	various
0.8	S'katc'wan	Municipality	17.8	W Australia	various
1.0	Nova Scotia	Municipality	35.4	N Territory	various
1.4	Newf'ndland	Community, etc	11.6	Australia	various
1.5	Scotland	District	2.2	Canada	various
2.3	Tasmania	various	3.6	New Zealand	District
2.9	Victoria	various	0.5	U Kingdom	District

Notes and sources as for Table 4

7 Local Government Management Functions: selected examples from English speaking countries outside Australia^{1,2}, mid 1990s

General Administration

Police: British counties; some Canadian local authorities

Civil Defence (Emergency Services): New Zealand regional councils

Prisons: some United States municipalities and counties

Public meetings: some United States towns/townships

Physical development

Subdivision and development: some British districts

Public transport: some British counties

Development applications: British counties (with input from some parishes), New Zealand districts (with input from community boards),

Infrastructure

Port facilities: New Zealand districts²

Airports: some Canadian and New Zealand local authorities

Electricity generation/supply: some New Zealand districts²

Water and sewerage: some British counties²

Waste management: British counties; New Zealand regional authorities

Social Development

General Hospitals: some Scottish counties [in 2002]

Public Housing: British districts

Public Schools: British counties; Canadian municipalities

Community health: British districts; New Zealand districts

Cultural facilities/events: British counties; New Zealand districts

Economic Development

Industrial estates: some British districts

Environmental management

Catchment Management: New Zealand regional councils

Pest (plant & animal) control: New Zealand districts

¹ Functions for which local governments are agents for central government are not included

² In recent years (as at 2000) many of these functions formerly managed by local governments (eg electricity, public transport) have been devolved upwards, corporatized, or privatised, and the exact roles of local governments have become confused

Sources: as above