



Book Review

Local Government in New Zealand: Challenges and Choices

Edited by Jean Drage and Christine Cheyne

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Remarkably, very little has been published in book format on this important and much under-rated topic, that of local government in New Zealand. Local government, often viewed as the 'poor country cousin' of central government, has changed considerably, since the only significant previous text on the subject, Graham Bush's *Local Government and Politics in New Zealand*, was published in 1980.

Is this new book needed? The answer has to be 'yes'. In the twenty odd years since the 1995 update of Bush's treatise, much has changed in the New Zealand socio-political and biophysical environment. Challenges for local government arise from matters as diverse as Treaty Settlements, the reforms instituted by a three-term National government, the 2010-11 Canterbury earthquake sequence, the ongoing issues of water management and the legacy of the Global Financial Crisis.

In compiling the book, the co-editors have drawn together a group of experts in politics, media, planning and policy, a mix of academics and current or former local government practitioners.

The text touches upon, with a whiff of nostalgia, the days prior to the massive changes of the 1989 local body reorganisation when many electors knew their representatives personally. Nowadays, especially in larger urban centres, the average person in the street might know who the mayor is but would struggle to name a local councillor or community board member.

Jean Drage, co-editor and contributor, summarises in a nutshell what local government is about: '*[...] [it] is much more than a set of services, it's a legitimate and accountable form of local democracy within our communities*' (p.11). While our wider society might take the existence of local government for granted, this book highlights the precarious nature of local democratic institutions. It is often said that local government is a 'creature' of central government. Although it is highly unlikely, at the whim of the government of the day, local government as we know it could disappear overnight with a majority vote.

In the Introduction, Jean Drage (who also contributes to three chapters) describes four major threats to local government: continual change (reorganisation), threats to autonomy ('creeping centralisation'), funding and erosion of the 'community voice'. The chapter authors overlay these themes throughout a book broken into seven further parts and 19 chapters, examining the altering global context, Māori, local democracy, funding, governance and management, Auckland, and planning and legislation.

Chapters of note in Part 2 include Mike Reid's¹ look at local government in rapidly changing times (pp. 22-35), highlighting technologies (e.g. Councils responding to real-time info provided by citizens through apps), climate change (also covered in more detail by

¹ Mike Reid is a Principal Policy Analyst for Local Government New Zealand and one of the few active practitioners contributing to the text

Prue Taylor, pp. 36-59), globalisation, demographic changes, diversity and inequality.

Three chapters are devoted to Māori issues in Part 3. Here, the inclusion of a younger contributor with growing public commentator profile such as Morgan Godfery adds punch to the content and range of topics this text covers. He notes the shift away from *'ethnic representation to 'tangata whenua' representation [...] local authorities are in a relationship with 'local' Māori'* (p.76).

Part 4 covers local democracy - where the heart of the text lies – over six chapters. The co-editors weigh in with their own contributions on key interrelated topics (Ch. 9: Public participation; Ch. 10: Local government elections), of on-going importance (and concern) to machinations of local government. Co-editor Christine Cheyne identifies areas of concern which suggest *'that the future of local political participation in New Zealand is not positive'*, in particular noting the electorate's general dissatisfaction with politicians and bureaucrats plus the structures and processes which are *'frequently viewed as being self-serving, alienating, remote and unaccountable'* (p. 114).

The theme of Part 5 (with a single chapter) is funding. How local government is funded is an ever-present issue for citizens, annual rate rises seemingly 'out of control' with the level of rating not necessarily matching the quality of service. Being a local government practitioner myself, it is hard to escape a common topic of conversation about costs imposed on local government by central government which each new piece of legislation appears to bring with it. Christine Cheyne argues that critical is the need for genuine partnership *'[...] so that costs imposed [...] are fully understood and appropriately shared'*. Rather than sit by itself, this chapter would have been better located in Part 2, tying in with funding issues facing local government in a changing world, for example, the costs and liabilities for local government of tackling climate change mitigation and adaptation raised in Chapters 3 and 4.

Part 6 examines governance and management. Karen Johnston looks at the rise of influence of local governance decision-

making, providing historical context with a case study of the attempted revitalisation of Christchurch's central business district (prior to the 2010/11 earthquakes) outlining the subtleties of power-plays between the then Mayor, Councillors, staff and key stakeholders.

Auckland not surprisingly gets its own section (Part 7) with two authors looking at progress since the unitary model was introduced and aspects such as the role and influence of Auckland's Local Boards.

The final chapters in Part 8 look at the planning and legislative environment, examining collaborative planning and the tensions between central and local government over processes and resources. These two chapters would have benefited with some enhanced content in the light of what has unfolded in Canterbury since 2010, including specific Canterbury rebuild legislation, government commissioner appointment to the Canterbury Regional Council and the Christchurch District Plan review. An additional chapter would have been useful here to address some vexing regional issues such as water management and transport.

As for Auckland, space should similarly have been devoted to Canterbury in its own right, a region which has been a 'target' for central government since 2008 in terms of the ECan takeover in 2010 and the 'Wellington' exertion of regulatory clout and dominance of local decision-making (e.g. through the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Act) during the post-quake rebuild and regeneration phases.

Importantly, the text is peppered with references to historical developments and some insightful case studies such as the story of the 2015 Mayoral by-election in Palmerston North (Ch. 14). There is also reference to the Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy Forum however it would have been nice to see this important local initiative fleshed out in a dedicated chapter.

More contributions from 'coal face' practitioners would also have been welcome. For example, it might have been useful to have a chapter dedicated to the nuances of community boards which in some parts of the country have considerable local influence and

delegated decision-making authority. Similarly, regional councils get less coverage (mainly in Ch. 21) than they merit throughout than territorial authorities.

So, is this new book needed? Yes, it is. By and large, it adds considerable depth and basis to the understanding of the challenges and choices faced by local government in the current age, particularly around the 'nitty gritty' of local, territorial, government – its democratic processes, governance and management. Overall though, it is less effective around regional local government and associated biophysical challenges.

During the process of reviewing this book, a new coalition government has been elected, bringing with it determined ambition and intent to alter policy direction around big topics such as climate change, immigration and housing. Given the rate of local and global change anticipated, I imagine a second edition will be required within ten years to again take stock.

Audience? Thoroughly researched, referenced and written, the text is probably of greater relevance to a post-graduate student contemplating embarking on a professional career in planning or policy analysis and needing to get a grasp on the intricacies of local government than to seasoned local government professionals.

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