

Foreword

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How do we explain Australia's governance to itself, let alone to others? Why is it that the constitutional settlement between the Commonwealth and states and territories remains intact even though it is regularly breached and fails to acknowledge the key institution of local government? How can Australia's system of governance be sustained in the face of structural funding inequities, such as vertical fiscal imbalance? And what are we to make of a coordinating instrument – Council of Australian Governments (COAG) – that is more impressive the further away from it you are?

Not everyone will agree with the above critique, but even the most ardent defender of Australia's institutions and their power to adapt and survive must acknowledge that Australia's system of governance is operating sub-optimally. There are trade-offs in any system, even the most unitary, between democracy and efficiency. But Australia's present condition appears to be making the best of neither. Citizens are frustrated with the performance of politics and politicians and are less inclined than they were to consider Australia's democratic framework as able to solve the nation's most pressing problems. Likewise, the business of administering governance is regularly critiqued as policy innovations fail to overcome powerful lobby groups, programs suffer poor implementation because of insufficient expertise or overreaching governments, and reforms do not provide hoped-for returns.

There may be some comfort in the fact that governments all over the world are experiencing a loss of public confidence and trust in their ability to govern effectively. While this creates opportunities for mutual learning, it also suggests that governments have limited time in which to restore confidence. While this is not an easy task in any country, the Australian context adds some particular difficulty. A combination of historical,

geographical, demographic, political, economic and cultural factors make Australia's present and future governance internally complicated – the failure to reach a satisfactory governance settlement that affords appropriate recognition to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the clearest example of this, and externally difficult – such as accounting for the growing power of neighbours with different governing histories, traditions and practices.

Such circumstances lend themselves to different approaches and radically new ways of thinking. This volume takes up the challenge by exploring the possibilities offered by re-imagining Australia through the lens of multi-level governance (MLG).

As is typical of many useful social science concepts, MLG can be defined or interpreted in a variety of ways. This elasticity is both confounding and liberating because it opens up the possibility that governing Australia can be understood in multiple ways, which overlap and are contingent upon the conditions of different policy and political pasts as well as actors' agency in specific time and space.

The volume offers a unique insight into the various understandings of MLG and how these interact with or confront different Australian contexts and norms. It also provides an encyclopaedic interrogation of the application of MLG ideas to different policy issues and questions.

Throughout the volume, it is possible to discern at least four different meta-level perspectives on MLG. For some, it is an outcome: a normative end state that promises a more effective and sustainable (if not simple) system of governance. Here the job is to design the institutions and tools to secure this future state. Elsewhere, MLG is used as a container to hold a range of linked, but distinct, conceptual and empirical developments including collaboration, networks and polycentrism. In this case, the task is to figure out what works in a particular context and to find ways of enabling the different processes to function together. Another version sees MLG as a description of the rather fragmented and dysfunctional institutions, policy tools and levers and processes that have emerged over time. The task here is to make the parts work better together. Finally there is MLG as an analytical lens, a way of looking at the Australian condition to explore its workings from a variety of perspectives and positions.

Each of these meta-level perspectives is illuminating and the chapters in which they are considered allow the reader to think about them in different policy, community and political settings.

There is always more to say on a topic like this and this volume provides policymakers, scholars and practitioners with the foundations and tools for informed future conversations.

This text is taken from *Multi-level Governance: Conceptual challenges and case studies from Australia*, edited by Katherine A. Daniell and Adrian Kay, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.