Preface

Networked governance and collaboration to improve outcomes

In introducing this monograph, I would like to begin by emphasising the importance of collaboration to better governance. This involves collaboration within and across government and between government and the community. These are the central relationships we explore here.

It is clear today that governments across the developed world are preaching the gospel of collaboration, cooperation and coordination, and are realising that their objectives cannot be achieved without collaboration with others. The big question is: is the rhetoric matched by the reality or are governments merely mouthing platitudes? Do they really mean what they profess; do governments talk of collaboration genuinely and meaningfully or do they do so partially and largely with their own interests at heart? Do their actions indicate that they are serious and, if so, what cultural changes are necessary, what changes are under way and what changes will be required in the future? Questions of motivation and integrity are fundamental to the process of collaboration.

We also need to consider how we can translate collaborative engagement (inter-agency relations, community engagement, collaborative ‘experiments’) into more effective outcomes, better public policy and a better use of community and government resources. This raises questions such as how and when do we choose to collaborate? On what topics or issues? Are there policy matters on which we should not collaborate or on which it would be preferable not to do so? In short, how do we determine on what matters to collaborate?

These questions in turn raise the issue of the capacity to collaborate across the various sectors. Are the stakeholders and players prepared for the effort required, the investment in time and resources, the consequences of going down such a path and the ‘loss of control’ or shared control in most instances? Are governments geared up to collaborate and do they have real ‘connections’ with the community, or have the arm’s-length cultures of contract management severed relations with providers and community representatives? Are community bodies themselves geared up to collaborate with government and with each other?

While it is imperative to find effective ways to engage with the community, it is not always clear ‘who’ represents the community. Governments often find themselves dealing with surrogates for the community: self-appointed, organised groups who profess to represent community interests as they see them. Some of these bodies could be doing useful work in the community, but does that mean they ‘speak’ for the community? The question, then, is with whom should we deal and why? How far can faith or charitable groups represent end users, ‘real’
consumers or ordinary citizens? Whose voice counts and who gets a say? How do we engage with those who do not really want us to engage with them or with those who have other priorities?

Governments tend to think that all forms of collaboration need to be effectively managed, but how do we effectively manage collaboration—as government officials or as community representatives? How do we establish meaningful processes, maintain enthusiasm and involvement, sustain the decision-making process and deliver better outcomes for society and the public interest? How do we manage collaboration between sovereign governments?

Finally, public collaborations need to be accountable—meaning the collaborative partners will have to find ways to deal with the changing accountabilities involved in collaborative government. For governments, this will involve fewer ‘siloi authoritative structures and more shared accountabilities. Some might want to think of this in Mark Moore’s terms as moving to an ‘authorising-regime’ notion of shared accountability in collaborative public-policy endeavours. What, however, would this mean in practice and how would things unravel if something went wrong?

In many ways, collaborative governance takes us beyond notions of responsible government and ministerial accountability. It takes us into the world of networked governance and governing by networks, in which collaboration becomes the dominant organisational culture and policymaking is by consensus and agreement. This is a world in which the skills of diplomacy are required: promoting dialogue, shared appreciations, participatory engagement and deliberative democracy. We will need new theoretical models of public policy and new understandings of how governance is going to work—not just by the active participants, but by parliament, by review committees, by auditors and evaluation teams and by the media and the general public.

Collaboration between governments could herald a new phase of federalism. If ‘cooperative federalism’ is about microeconomic reform and structural efficiencies, ‘collaborative federalism’ is about sharing intent, sharing goals and agreeing on delivery responsibilities. This new phase of federalism is likely to focus on social policies, national security and bio-security, the environment, infrastructure and communication. Above all, it is likely to dispense with the notion that ‘government knows best’, replacing it not just with intergovernmental agreements, but with community involvement in policy design and delivery. It could be more messy, but also more realistic and more results-based.

This monograph, Collaborative Governance: A new era of public policy in Australia?, draws from the best papers presented to the June 2007 conference on collaborative government held in Canberra. We invited senior executives from the public and non-government sectors to share their experiences of collaboration—and, in particular, to provide examples of what works, what
does not work and why. We asked them to assess how we might be able to better achieve public-policy outcomes through collaborative arrangements. We asked them to provide a practical focus but also to raise theoretical issues to assist our thinking and policy frameworks.

I would like to thank Peter Shergold, the former secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), for suggesting the topic and for his involvement in the planning of this Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) event. I also thank Professor John Wanna and his staff at The Australian National University and ANZSOG staff in Melbourne for organising and hosting the conference. Special thanks must also be given to the following for supporting the conference and identifying and suggesting speakers: the ANZSOG board, the New Zealand Government, and New Zealand State Services Commission, and Isi Unikowski and staff at PM&C. Finally, I thank Professor John Wanna, Dr Janine O’Flynn and John Butcher for their efforts in compiling this book.

ANZSOG’s 2007 conference followed the successful 2006 conference on Improving Implementation: Program management and organisational change, which was subsequently published by ANU E Press in the highly successful ANZSOG monograph series. I recommend this series to all policymakers and those with an interest in public policy. The present publication provides a useful contribution to our continuing understanding about how to better deliver policy to the Australian community. I look forward to the further debates that will ensue.

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