

Changing The Way Government Works

The goal is to encourage greater cooperation, partnerships with other Departments and levels of Government, greater local decision-making and public accountability. Bracks 2005. Yehudi Blacher



Yehudi Blacher

INTRODUCTION

In my presentation today, I would like to cover three issues:

- a) Firstly, some reflections on the reasons why we are facing some significant challenges as public administrators in engaging with communities
- b) Secondly, I want to make some comments about the growing recognition of the importance of investing in communities as a field of public policy; and
- c) Thirdly, I want to demonstrate the significance of ‘joining up’—that is changing the way government works—as an essential element of community strengthening.

I intend to address these issues through a reference to the reasons for the establishment of the Department for Victorian Communities and the work we have done to date.

CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

While public administration systems have been around in various forms for thousands of years, the forms of our current system—Departments of State organised around specific functions such as health, education, or social security—are relatively recent phenomena; their development being given particular impetus during the inter-war years of the New Deal in the United States and the post World War II challenges of reconstruction in the UK, and to a lesser extent, Australia.

Certainly, from the end of the War until today (despite all the many changes in the intervening years) the dominant paradigm of public administration in Australia has been very much focussed on the noun ‘administration’ rather than the adjective ‘public’.

This is a rules-based, process-oriented hierarchical model of bureaucracy embedded in a view that policy is easily separated from administration with politicians making the former and public servants doing the latter.

Seen from the perspective of the recipients of government funding or the subjects of government processes—be they individuals or organisations—this way of doing government is: highly centralised; remote, opaque and slow to respond; often rigid and inflexible; and difficult to ‘navigate’, with government agencies often unable or unwilling to engage, except through the narrow prism of a particular Department or program.

In parallel to these experiences (and perhaps as a reaction to them) there has been a marked decline in people’s trust in government.

In Australia, the number of people who felt that government was ‘usually or sometimes trustworthy’ declined from 46 per cent to 37 per cent over the past three decades (Goot 2002). In the UK the decline was even more significant, falling from 39 per cent to 21 per cent over the past twenty five years (UK Strategy Unit 2005).

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Much of the push for better engagement with communities has come from a convergence of political imperative (elected officials needing to address the ‘trust’ issue) with the management imperative (public sector managers needing to improve the service delivery capacity of their organisations).

In Australia, the number of people who felt that government was ‘usually or sometimes trustworthy’ declined from 46 per cent to 37 per cent over the past three decades (Goot 2002).

In addition, governments everywhere—both national and regional—are needing to respond to an increasingly well-informed and articulate public seeking greater access to and involvement in decisions affecting their lives, and in particular the communities in which they live—be they communities of place or of interest.

It is therefore becoming clear that in those parts of public administration which relate to the funding and provision of services to people in their communities, the hierarchical model of bureaucracy needs to change.

Rather than the command and control procedures, narrow work restrictions and siloed cultures and operating systems of the traditional bureaucratic model, what is emerging is a new model characterised by complex networks of multi-organisational, multi-governmental and multi-sectoral partnerships which:

- recognise the importance of distributed leadership;
- focus first on people and places—not just on programs and outputs;
- have an eye to sustainability of strategies—and therefore often have an economic angle;
- Value local information and networks; and
- Encourage local priority setting and resource allocation.

For public sector executives this emerging network governance model will require us to broaden our core responsibilities from managing people and programs to also providing leadership in coordinating resources that deliver public value.

A RENEWED INTEREST IN COMMUNITIES

There is a further dimension underpinning governments’ renewed interest in communities—that as a response to the uncertainties created by rapid economic, social and technological change (especially over the past three decades), people are increasingly looking inwards to their local communities for a sense of identity, well-being and security.

In Australia, this trend has resulted in both sides of politics at national and state levels recognising the importance of investing in local communities.

Indeed (as an aside), the potency of this trend for marketing has not been lost on the private sector, with banks, utilities, service industries and transport companies to name a few, all badging themselves with the ‘community’ label.

These brief observations provide the context for the establishment of the Department for Victorian Communities.

The Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) was created in December 2002 by amalgamating a broad range of government portfolio’s that had previously been based either in central government or line departments. DVC supports eight Ministers across its portfolio areas, with the Deputy Premier, John Thwaites as Minister for Victorian Communities being the coordinating Minister for the Department. The portfolio areas include: Local Government; Sport and Recreation (including the Commonwealth Games); Youth Affairs; Multicultural Affairs; Women’s Affairs; Aboriginal Affairs; Employment Programs; Victorian Communities; Volunteering; Older people; and funding programs associated with the Community Support Fund.

At first look, the Department could be seen as an eclectic mix of portfolios that no one knows what to do with.

In Australia, this trend has resulted in both sides of politics at national and state levels recognising the importance of investing in local communities.

In fact, the logic behind the selection of portfolios was to consolidate in one Department, portfolios relating to the two dimensions of community—people and place. Indeed the focus on people and place is the basis on which the Department has been internally structured and through which it projects itself externally. As a Department of State, DVC is relatively unique in that it has been established not around functions (such as health or education) but around three core ideas:

- a) the importance of community strengthening to achieve public policy outcomes;
- b) that this is best done by focussing on local communities; and
- c) recognising that delivery on these objectives will require the public sector to re-think the way it operates; to move from a traditional hierarchical model to one characterised by multi-sectoral partnerships through which local communities have an enhanced capacity to shape directions, set priorities and even control resources.

COMMUNITY STRENGTHENING AND WELLBEING

So what is community strengthening? There are many definitions and descriptions.

The one I use is that community strengthening is about creating sustained networks through local-level partnerships involving key stakeholders and community representatives to achieve agreed policy and service delivery objectives or outcomes.

There is now emerging evidence through work undertaken by Professor Tony Vinson (Vinson 2004), VicHealth (VicHealth 2003) and the Victorian Public Health Survey (DHS 2004) that successful community strengthening strategies correlate strongly to the creation of stronger social and civic institutions, improved well-being (lower imprisonment rates, higher levels of school completion) and increased social and economic opportunities.

There are some important policy implications from this research.

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If community strengthening activities can contribute to buffering the impact of poverty and disadvantage for many—then it's particularly interesting that some of the strategies needed to achieve improved outcomes may not be very complex; involving things like encouraging volunteering, investing in social infrastructure, sport, recreation and community arts facilities and even improved street-scaping and attention to local amenities.

What this research is beginning to suggest (and notice that I referred to correlations rather than cause and effect) is that investing in communities is really no more (or less) than an approach to prevention or early intervention with the potential (over time) to be a factor in reducing the rate of increase in the demand on some of the most resource intensive services provided by State governments.

DVC recently released a report tracking a range of community strengthening indicators across each of the seventy nine local government areas in Victoria (DVC 2005).

What was particularly striking was the variation of these indicators from one local government area to another.

For example:

- the percentage of the population that feel safe on the street alone after dark ranges from 50% to 89%;
- those who feel there are opportunities to have a real say on issues ranges from 41% to 71% of the adult population;
- parental participation in schools ranges from 44% to 81%; and
- Volunteering on a regular basis ranges from 23% to 64%.

These data, a first for any jurisdiction in Australia, will provide a basis over time for tracking change and making community strength more visible as part of a more comprehensive approach to a common set of state-wide indicators of well-being of communities.

They can also provide a guide for government as to where to direct its investments.

STRUCTURAL REFORM

Successful community strengthening strategies require us to rethink the way in which government works with local communities.

If we return to the comments I made earlier about community perceptions of our way of doing business—and consider how one would rethink the way that Government operates to address these issues from a community strengthening perspective—then I would suggest that we should work using the following six design principles:

- Viewing the world through the lens of the clients, be they individuals, families or communities (*client focussed principle*);
- Developing a simpler or single face of government locally (*principle of place*);
- Shifting from government controlling and directing the delivery of services to government playing the role of facilitator and enabler (*principle of enabling*);
- Devolution of service planning and delivery to the local level (*principle of subsidiarity*);
- Developing cross sectoral approaches to addressing social opportunities and problems through partnerships between Governments, community agencies and the corporate sector (*principle of partnership*); and
- Harnessing the capacity of local leaders and entrepreneurs (*principle of local capacity and ownership*). Not just the usual suspects, but hearing the voices of people in addition to the peak bodies and organisations which governments usually deal with.

FROM THESE PRINCIPLES A SET OF CONCEPTS START TO PLAY OUT IN PRACTICE

Now these principles are fine and indeed important in thinking at a conceptual level about the role of government in the emerging environment.

But as public administrators our job is to give practical effect to the theory. This is a more difficult task.

Put simply, the question is: How can we reorganise our structural and operational arrangements to give effect to these principles?

I can suggest the following measures, all of which would require action either by state agencies working together, by state government working with local government and both working with community stakeholders.

How can we reorganise our structural and operational arrangements to give effect to these principles?

- The greater use of team based approaches to planning, funding and delivery of services—which could bring together locally (often literally in terms of co-location) officers from various government (state, local and perhaps commonwealth) agencies working on similar objectives—if not a single face of government then at least a simpler face of government.
- A move towards more flexible funding focussing on the delivery of outcomes—which allows for resources to be coordinated between funders, or pooled and allocated in ways that better reflect local priorities.
- An enhanced role for area and regional managers of state departments working in conjunction with senior local government officers as key brokers between local communities and central government.
- Alignment of Departmental regional boundaries and consistent use by all levels of government (but particularly state and local government) of similar local area data in service planning.
- A move towards an integrated approach to infrastructure planning and delivery—both to ensure better use of existing facilities and to better coordinate new infrastructure especially in new growth areas.
- Long term investment by both state and local government in the capacity, skills and sustainability of local agencies through funding leadership training, promoting community enterprises

In April this year the Victorian Government announced a new social policy framework (DPC 2005) which included commitments to the implementation of a number of these measures. These included:

- The alignment of regional boundaries of State Departments into eight administrative regions;
- The establishment of regional management forums involving State regional managers and local government Chief Executive Officers – each led by a Departmental secretary;
- A commitment to the greater use of team-based approaches to deliver policies and activities requiring involvement of more than one department or sector; and
- Funding to councils for the purchase of skills, software and hardware needed for a consistent state-wide platform for the development of local-area planning.

A central element of these changes is a recognition of the critical role played by local government in the planning and delivery of services in their communities.

For my Department, these commitments provide clear evidence that the Victorian Government is now confident enough to begin to translate the theory underpinning the establishment of the Department into practical measures that will apply across government.

But this is not just an issue for DVC. As the Premier said in a speech to the Institute of Public Administration this year when reflecting on the emerging working environment for the VPS:

The goal is to encourage greater co-operation, partnerships with other Departments and levels of Government, greater local decision-making and public accountability (Bracks 2005).

Although the measures announced by government are significant, it's important to note that we are only at the beginning of the journey by taking the first tentative steps in giving government-wide structural form to a new way of the public service relating to local government and community agencies.

Critical to the next steps will be the need to change the skills and culture of the public service so that it is able to operate in this new environment.

As I indicated earlier, increasingly there will need to be a reliance on partnerships and shared intelligence across government as well as between government and other sectors.

As such, co-ordination will be more highly valued than control and alliance-building will be more valued than giving directions.

And there will be more joint approaches to delivering outcomes which have regard to the multiplicity of stakeholders which have an interest in contributing to the well-being of their communities.

This is a profound challenge for the public sector, and it is crucial that we get this right so that our capabilities keep pace with the demands being placed upon us.

CONCLUSION

In reflecting over the past thirty months since DVC was established these lessons come through:

Firstly, it is critically important to understand the context in which you operate.

For DVC this meant spending considerable time engaging agencies and sectors both inside and outside government, slowly but relentlessly building an understanding of the concepts and objectives underpinning the Department and making strategic decisions about where to invest our energies.

These strategic decisions need to be underpinned by sound evidence about what works, and practical assessments of what can be delivered within a time-frame which reflects a realistic understanding of how long it takes new ideas to get traction.

Secondly, it is important to challenge the paradigm in which you operate.

This requires in-depth thinking about the intellectual framework within which the organisation is to operate.

The six design principles I outlined earlier roll off the tongue fairly easily. However to apply them to the way government does business is enormously difficult and can only be done systematically by a measured but sustained pursuit of specific initiatives endorsed at the highest political levels.

Thirdly, community strengthening requires a joined-up approach to be effective. When we first established the DVC the joining up and governance issues were seen to be peripheral to the debate but they are actually at the centre. Strong communities need active local leadership; robust accountable local institutions; sustainable resourcing strategies; integrated local service delivery; listening and empathetic public servants and communities directly engaged in making choices about their futures and having the wherewithal to do so.

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But it is also clear that doing business as usual will not deliver the outcomes that the community rightly demands across all levels of Government.

Today I have simply sketched out some of the building blocks a different way of working - not (to be sure) for all of government but for those parts of government involved in the planning, funding and delivery of services in local communities.

Those of us in leadership roles in the public sector therefore need to lead not only the development of the ideas but also the translation of those ideas into new structures, new instruments, new skills and most important new behaviours.

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