

Local democracy in metropolitan regions and big cities

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Two-thirds of Australians live in the seven metropolitan regions surrounding the national and state capitals, which include 10 individual cities (local government areas) with populations of more than 250,000 – our criterion here for ‘big city’ status. A further 9 per cent live in other ‘big cities’, making 19.3 million people in all (three-quarters of Australia’s total). So, what is the character and quality of their local democracy?

What does democracy require of metropolitan and big city governance?

- ◆ Inclusive, equitable and purposeful elected representation of local and (sub)regional communities at all levels of government.
- ◆ Appropriate democratic oversight of planning, environmental management, infrastructure provision and service delivery at both local- and metro-scale.
- ◆ Forums for informed public debate on metropolitan and big city management.
- ◆ Meaningful devolution of authority for local and sub-regional planning, infrastructure and service delivery to local governments, along with necessary funding and/or powers to raise revenue.
- ◆ Respect for and responsiveness to local communities’ identity, sense of place, needs and aspirations, including arrangements for ongoing engagement and ‘neighbourhood’ democracy.
- ◆ An absence of unwarranted interventions by state governments into the processes of local democracy and decision-making.
- ◆ Effective mechanisms for inter-government cooperation, both vertical and horizontal.

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The chapter begins by covering some recent developments and then considers the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) in Australia's metropolitan regions and big city governance. After the SWOT analysis we review four areas of concern in more detail.

Recent developments

The urban governance of Australia's metropolitan regions has been heavily dominated by the states, with local government and, in different ways, the Commonwealth playing essentially supporting roles (Sansom and Dawkins, 2013). Figure 25.1 shows that Australia's capital-city metropolitan regions account for between 42 and 79 per cent of their respective state's populations. Because they have constitutional authority for local government, and the populations of capital-city regions are so salient in state politics, state ministers and agencies typically control all the key elements of metropolitan management and planning – including urban transport, main roads, water, sewerage and drainage, pollution control, major open spaces, cultural and sporting facilities, and the approval of most major development proposals. Elsewhere in the world several or all of these key functions for managing city development would be the responsibility of local government.

Figure 25.1: Australia's 'big cities' in 2021

Metro-regions and larger cities (State: % of state population)	Local areas included	Population (000s)	Component areas with over 250,000 people
Greater Sydney (NSW: 66%)	34	5,367	Canterbury-Bankstown, Blacktown, Central Coast, Northern Beaches, Parramatta
Greater Melbourne (VIC: 79%)	31	5,159	Casey, Wyndham
Greater Brisbane (QLD: 49%)	9	2,561	Brisbane (1.2 million), Moreton Bay, Logan
Greater Perth (WA: 77%)	31	2,125	
Greater Adelaide (SA: 76%)	19	1,377	
Gold Coast (QLD: 12%)	1	606	
Lower Hunter (NSW: 6%)	4	515	
Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	1	431	
Sunshine Coast (QLD: 6%)	1	320	
Wollongong-Shellharbour (NSW: 4%)	2	288	
Geelong (VIC: 4%)	1	252	
Greater Hobart (TAS: 42%)	4	239	

Source: Compiled from data in [Australian Bureau of Statistics \(2023\)](#) 'Latest release – Regional population'.

Note: State capitals = green rows. Populations in 2021. City of Sydney population 214,800. City of Melbourne population 169,000. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT/Canberra) is effectively a city-state (see Chapter 24).

The picture has been somewhat different in South East Queensland (Greater Brisbane plus the Sunshine and Gold Coasts), where 95 per cent of the metropolitan region's 3.5 million people live in just seven municipalities, including five with populations in excess of 300,000. The City of Brisbane alone houses 46 per cent of the metro-region's population: it has an annual budget of around A\$4 billion and is a key provider of metropolitan infrastructure and services, including some highways and parts of the public transport system. Also, the conurbation has an influential, region-wide Council of Mayors. Even there, however, the last two decades have witnessed a marked shift towards state control. Outside the state capital regions, local government has been able to play a more prominent role in big cities, although in most cases its functions remain limited to 'lower order' municipal services and infrastructure.

Potentially, the Commonwealth (federal) government is also a significant player by virtue of its constitutional powers over immigration (a major driver of city growth), transport and communications, and some aspects of environmental management. Federal financial strength has been a key factor, given the needs of both state and local governments for funding support – especially for major infrastructure projects. For the most part, however, federal involvement in big city governance has been cautious, patchy and arms-length. Even when there has been the political will to do more, the federal bureaucracy may have lacked the skills for effective, closer engagement.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
All metropolitan/big-city local governments have had a power of general competence or its equivalent (to work for the good of their population). They have been required to undertake increasingly sophisticated strategic planning in consultation with their communities.	Local governments have suffered from a persistent compliance and 'poor cousin' culture, due to the unfettered powers of states, a heavy regulatory burden and constraints on their own-source revenues. Community consultation, especially by state agencies, has often appeared tokenistic or ultimately ineffectual.
There are guarantees of democratic local government in some state constitutions, and in several jurisdictions voting is compulsory in local government elections. State-level independent electoral commissions monitor the integrity of local elections (see Chapter 26).	There is no constitutional protection for local democracy in New South Wales (NSW), nor nationally. State governments can intervene in local affairs as they see fit and may shape or 'engineer' local elections. Voting for local government remains voluntary in some states, with lower turnouts despite the growth of mail-in voting in some areas (see Chapter 26).
Mayors have a substantial presence in all the capital city regions. They are popularly elected in all South East Queensland, Adelaide and Tasmanian councils, plus Newcastle, Wollongong and some large metropolitan councils in Sydney and Perth.	Other big city councils in Greater Sydney and Melbourne, as well as Geelong, have had only weaker, indirectly elected mayors.

<p>The Australia-wide Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM) has advocated on some big city issues, and the Council of Mayors for South East Queensland (COMSEQ) has played a regional leadership role (for example, over the 2032 Olympics and City Deal negotiations with the federal government).</p>	<p>No body similar to COMSEQ has existed in other metropolitan regions. The governance of connected metro-regions has been constrained by widespread resistance to creating upper-tier municipalities and statutory sub-regional groupings, other than for specific functions (for example, waste management) or for 'special projects'.</p>
<p>Some big-city councils have demonstrated excellence in neighbourhood planning, place-based management and community engagement. Some have used deliberative democracy techniques (for example, citizen juries and online panels).</p>	<p>There has been no legislative provision for elected sub-municipal councils (akin to the community boards in New Zealand) even in very large and populous local government areas. The concept has been explicitly rejected on several occasions by both state and local governments, and partly as a result the quality of community engagement has remained patchy.</p>
<p>Very large municipalities have shown a potential to expand services to meet their community's needs, to protect their sense of place and to advocate forcefully to state and federal governments.</p>	<p>States can and have used their constitutional powers to override local preferences as they see fit. Municipalities' authority to plan and control has been progressively reduced in most states. States have often outsourced major service/infrastructure provision to private companies. Alternatively, they have established commercialised entities with minimal democratic oversight. Big municipalities have lacked any additional status or powers compared to smaller towns or shires. The high fragmentation of local government areas in most of the country has fostered a 'lowest common denominator' approach to local policy and relationships.</p>
<p>There has been longstanding federal government support for local government in terms of both policy and financial assistance.</p>	<p>The Local Government Ministers Council was abolished in 2011. And after almost 30 years as a member of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) the Australian Local Government Association was largely excluded from the 'National Cabinet' that replaced COAG in 2020. It has been assured of participation in only one out of four or five meetings annually that were continued by the Labor federal government from 2022.</p>
<p>There have been some positive examples of inter-government partnerships (for example, in South East Queensland and Greater Hobart). Local government has also been included to varying degrees in federal-state 'City Deals' launched in 2016.</p>	<p>The prevailing pattern of increasing state domination of big-city governance, planning and service delivery has not changed. Thus far, City Deals have simply funded projects and failed to advance devolution. (The federal Labor government elected in May 2022 promised 'genuine partnerships' but in practice the City Deals have largely lapsed.)</p>
<p>Melbourne's Metropolitan Partnerships have brought together appointed members from communities and business with municipal CEOs to advise the state government on key issues.</p>	<p>No similar arrangement has existed elsewhere, except to some extent Hobart. The Melbourne Partnerships have been purely advisory and often lacked close links with key state agencies and decision-making processes.</p>

<p>Compulsory voting and high turnout in all state and federal elections have meant that popular preferences in big cities and metropolitan regions strongly affected election outcomes and have been closely monitored. These areas are typically represented by multiple state and federal parliamentarians, providing varied channels of influence. Local party members and MPs could potentially exercise effective democratic oversight of metropolitan and local governance and decision-making by state authorities and councils.</p>	<p>At both the state and federal levels the dominance of executive governments over parliaments has meant that individual MPs tend to focus on defined constituencies and interest groups, rather than the identity of localities. Parliamentary oversight committees deal primarily with functions, ministries, or ad hoc issues, rather than ‘whole-of-government’ or regional coordination.</p>
<p>Future opportunities</p>	<p>Future threats</p>
<p>The return of an Australian Labor Party (ALP) government in 2022 might bring renewed federal interest in cities and support for local government and civil society to play a stronger role (see ALP, 2019). However, this is yet to materialise.</p>	<p>There has been a trend towards increasing state dominance during the COVID-19 epidemic that may well continue. Municipalities’ role could potentially be reduced to that of a ‘line manager’ for state agencies. Revenue constraints (for example, rate-capping) and competition with state taxes and charges (for example, stamp duty/land tax/special levies) may intensify as states struggle to balance budgets.</p>
<p>There may be scope to promote the democratisation of metropolitan planning and development agencies by including local government and community representatives on their boards. Enhanced democratic oversight of metro regions by state parliaments could also be possible.</p>	<p>Democratic oversight could be further reduced as more state-controlled functions and key assets are outsourced or privatised (for example, private certification of development approvals, toll roads and parts of the public transport network).</p>
<p>Local government could enhance its status and influence by collectively pursuing a broad-based localism agenda for big cities that combines four elements – a focus on place management; closer community engagement (with a view to strengthening local support); expanded inter-municipal cooperation at sub-regional and metropolitan levels; and effective policy development and advocacy nationally.</p>	<p>The local government voice has been at risk because of ongoing divisions within local government itself – a plethora of different associations, alliances and professional institutes. Cooperation has often been resisted due to local political or place rivalries and fears of ‘amalgamation by stealth’. The national association has been weak, and state associations have tended to focus heavily on local-state tensions rather than federal opportunities. The policy space has also been dominated by urban growth pressures and the development lobby at the expense of local interests and democracy.</p>
<p>More popularly elected and/or authoritative mayors could give local government greater political clout, a clearer mandate to pursue policy agendas, and boost local willingness to collaborate (sub) regionally and nationally.</p>	<p>Local government may well continue down the recent path of neoliberal managerialism with weak mayors and insufficient numbers of councillors to provide effective community representation.</p>

The rest of the chapter focuses on a number of significant concerns about the quality of big-city democracy and urban planning and management, including the weak structural position of municipalities within federalism. Some recent proposals for reform are considered.

Deficiencies in elected representation

A strong argument has been made that Australia's big cities have suffered from a significant democratic deficit ([Nicholls and Spiller, 2020](#)), and seem fated to continue to do so, because:

- ✦ there are no elected (directly or indirectly) multi-functional metropolitan authorities, and special-purpose agencies rarely have formal local government and/or community representation on their boards. Nor are there any upper-tier, sub-metropolitan local governments (as will be seen shortly)
- ✦ by international standards, Australian municipalities have very small numbers of councillors, and most have 'weak' mayors without the authority or mandate to provide necessary political leadership and advocate effectively on behalf of their communities
- ✦ due to their broader responsibilities and associated political demands, state and federal governments typically lack a consistent focus on metropolitan and big-city issues, and their major ministries are defined by function, not place
- ✦ the effectiveness of state and federal MPs representing big-city electorates has been constrained by broader policy and party-political considerations, and by limited opportunities for parliamentary oversight (particularly at state level) of the key ministries and agencies that manage metropolitan and regional planning and infrastructure.

The City of Brisbane has 27 councillors, but all the other big-city municipalities across Australia are limited to no more than 15 – and most have fewer than that. The ratio of councillors to population in big cities can be 1:20,000 or more. Even with 26 councillors (plus the popularly elected Lord Mayor), Brisbane's ratio has risen to about 1:46,000 people; and with only 15 councillors Gold Coast's ratio has become 1:40,000. Moreover, in all jurisdictions except Queensland councillors and mayors are nominally part-time and lack adequate, dedicated staff support (often they have none).

The small numbers of councillors have made it difficult for urban councils to reflect the demographic, cultural and socioeconomic diversity of big-city society. Moreover, diverse place-based representation may suffer from an evident trend away from multi-councillor wards and towards holding local elections 'at large'. This has been linked to the 'board of directors' concept and a view (associated with new public management thinking) that ward councillors' interests get in the way of strategic management. In large cities this stance runs the risk of sidelining truly local democracy along with place-based planning and governance.

Councils are elected by a universal residential franchise, but in addition all the states except Queensland have retained some form of property based voting rights for non-resident owners. This appears to have at most a marginal impact on the outcome of elections, but it does flag the importance that state governments have historically attached to property and business interests in terms of the economic base of big cities – and hence of the state. In the central city councils of Melbourne and Sydney this perspective led to businesses being given two votes each as a means of strengthening recognition of their interests in central business districts, although in the case of Sydney that provision was recently repealed.

Local government Acts describe mayors as civic leaders and may assign them significant additional responsibilities compared to other councillors. Yet in most cases their ability to 'steer the ship' has been tightly constrained. The City of Brisbane, Queensland municipalities in general and, to a lesser extent, other central capital city councils, are exceptions to this rule.

Other metropolitan regions and big cities have been characterised by ‘weak’ mayors with limited statutory authority and few if any personal staff. Often, they are elected indirectly by their fellow councillors (rather than by the populace) and must be re-elected every one or two years. Unless they enjoy the support of a united and consistent majority on the floor of council, are trusted by their colleagues to provide strong leadership, and are perhaps given significant delegated powers, mayors usually find it difficult to achieve the stature and community support required to deal effectively with state ministers and agencies and in inter-government forums.

In 2013, the NSW Independent Local Government Review Panel (2013) proposed that all mayors of larger municipalities should be popularly elected, but that proposal was rejected following strong opposition from local government itself. However, in Western Australia a similar proposal was implemented through an amendment to the local government Act in 2023 (Wikipedia, 2023).

Municipal structures and roles

The quality of local democracy in metropolitan regions and big cities depends heavily on the ability of municipalities to advance and advocate community interests. Local government Acts now grant municipalities a ‘power of general competence’ or its equivalent – the authority to take whatever lawful action may be necessary to ensure the good governance and wellbeing of their communities (if they can fund it). Big cities with considerable resources may use this power to great effect in both practical and democratic terms. However, their authority has commonly been circumscribed in various ways: implicitly by limits on revenue-raising and by ministerial oversight of municipal performance; and explicitly by the provisions of other legislation, as well as the over-riding functions and capacity of state and federal agencies in providing services and infrastructure (as will be seen shortly).

Another key factor limiting local government’s role and effectiveness in metropolitan governance has been its continued fragmentation into numerous separate and ‘on a par’ municipalities (see Figure 25.1). Greater Sydney, for example, has 34 local government areas for a total population of about 5.4 million, Greater Melbourne 31 for 5.2 million, and Greater Perth 31 for just 2.1 million. Even very large metropolitan municipalities have no greater legal status or authority than their smaller counterparts. Yet local governments generally resist any differentiation of their roles according to scale and capacity, municipal mergers and mandatory cooperative entities at (sub) regional level. Despite enabling or supportive provisions in local government Acts, inter-municipal cooperation has tended to be tentative, patchy and intermittent (Sansom, 2019a). No multi-purpose ‘upper tier’ municipalities have been created, nor any directly elected regional or special-purpose bodies. Only South East Queensland has a dedicated regional Council of Mayors with the capacity to lobby effectively and partner with state and federal governments – as it did recently to secure the 2032 Olympics for Brisbane and its region.

Typically, municipalities have prioritised protecting their individual autonomy, regardless of any negative impacts on the status of local government as a whole and despite the way their individualism has enabled state and federal governments to ‘divide and rule’, often with negative consequences for local democracy. Moreover, while all municipalities have the power to establish locality based committees with delegated authority to undertake aspects of planning and service delivery, few have done so. Almost all have continued to resist the concept of creating ‘lower-tier’ bodies along the lines of Britain’s parish, community and town councils, or New Zealand’s community boards (Sansom, 2019b).

The effectiveness of big-city local government has also been constrained by state-imposed limits on revenue-raising and the spectre of ministerial oversight and intervention. NSW has had a system of ‘rate-pegging’ for more than four decades, under which annual increases in property tax (‘rates’) may not exceed a set limit without special approval from the state’s pricing authority. Victoria introduced a similar system in 2015. South Australia attempted to do so in 2018 – the bill was defeated in the upper house of parliament – but settled instead on a form of statutory oversight of councils’ long-term financial (and hence rating) strategies. This includes public reports by the state’s pricing authority on whether those strategies were considered appropriate, which may well have a similar impact to rate-capping given councillors’ sensitivity to ratepayer complaints. State governments have also placed limits on various fees and charges levied by municipalities, notably developer contributions (see below under ‘Housing Supply’).

Intervention by state governments has taken many forms, including wholesale re-drawing of big city boundaries, as occurred in Greater Melbourne and Geelong in the mid-1990s, Queensland in 2007 and Greater Sydney in 2016. Suspension and dismissal of elected councils have been a regular occurrence. For example, in late 2020 the NSW minister for local government suspended the councillors of the Central Coast municipality – one of the state’s largest with a population of around 340,000 and a budget of some A\$800 million per annum – and installed a single administrator with absolute control over the municipality’s affairs. The minister followed up by convening a public inquiry, thus enabling the period of suspension to continue at least until late 2024. Under the NSW local government Act the minister may take such steps totally at their discretion, without parliamentary scrutiny, and without being obliged to follow the recommendations of the inquiry, after which they may simply dismiss the councillors and call a fresh election – the eventual outcome at Central Coast. Moreover, the Central Coast administrator proposed holding a referendum at the next election to reduce the number of councillors from 15 to 9, possibly without wards. This would increase the councillor–population ratio from 1:23,000 now to well over 1:40,000 if implemented ([Sansom, 2021](#)).

Urban planning and management

Recent trends in how urban development has been planned, regulated and managed have been perhaps the greatest threat to local democracy in Australia’s big cities. Governments at all levels are under pressure to promote economic and population growth, as well as to ensure related provision of housing and infrastructure. Sometimes this has been self-inflicted by state and local leaders, anxious to gain political benefits from growth or to prevent investment going elsewhere. High rates of growth over many decades have meant that property development and the construction sector have become critical elements of state and big-city political economies, especially around housing. The advent of ‘mega-projects’ has underlined this trend.

Housing supply

Population growth, the reduced average size of households, competition for homes in more accessible and attractive locations, and rapidly rising house and apartment prices fuelled in part by the low interest rates of recent decades, have combined to generate demands for major increases in housing supply. Meanwhile, there has often been strong community and local government resistance to higher density redevelopment. This stance has been portrayed by

powerful lobbies as an intolerable obstacle to achieving more housing, and state governments have responded to unrelenting pressure from the housing and property development sector with severe reductions in local planning autonomy and discretion ([Sydney Morning Herald, 2021a](#)). At the same time, councils' ability to levy developers to fund the new local infrastructure and services needed has been closely regulated and constrained in the guise of reducing housing costs – further limiting the resources and choices available to local communities and decision-makers.

Planning approvals

More broadly, the planning and approvals processes for all forms of urban development, especially larger projects deemed to be of 'state significance', have been centralised in state agencies and ministers' offices. The involvement of elected councillors, and hence their constituents, in local planning and decision-making processes has been progressively pared back by transferring some or all of their authority to appointed planning panels; by the imposition of blanket state or regional policies and codes; and by ministers or state agencies using their powers to 'call-in' and determine proposals themselves ([Clark, 2021](#)).

A related issue has been the limited role of municipalities in metropolitan planning agencies. In the mid-20th century local government was a dominant player in Melbourne's Metropolitan Board of Works and Sydney's Cumberland County Council. Both were replaced by state departments or agencies with boards appointed by ministers. In mid-2023, Melbourne had no dedicated metropolitan planning organisation and the project- and precinct-oriented Victorian Planning Authority did not include representatives of local government or civil society organisations as such, although some of the board members had considerable relevant experience. The same applied to the Greater Sydney (by then renamed 'Cities') Commission (which was abolished shortly after, and its responsibilities centralised in the state planning department). In Western Australia 2 of the 16 members of the Planning Commission were explicit local government representatives; while in South Australia, one of five Planning Commission members had extensive local government experience but there was no legislative requirement for this. Only in Queensland and Tasmania were there specific arrangements for local governments to play a strong role in strategic metropolitan planning – as opposed to simply being consulted about strategies and then required to 'fill in the detail' (see below).

Mega-projects

As big cities have grown bigger, federal and state governments have become increasingly preoccupied with multi-billion-dollar urban development and/or infrastructure schemes, usually undertaken with commercial partners ([Terrill, Emslie and Moran, 2020](#)). These were commonly touted as generating vitally important economic growth, jobs, housing, improvements to transport networks, and in some cases government revenues. Examples have included development precincts (such as Sydney's harbourside Barangaroo, East Perth and Melbourne's Docklands); new freeways (commonly privately operated tollways); metro and light rail systems; and the new Western Sydney airport with its associated rail link and 'Aerotropolis' development. Invariably, these 'mega-projects' have proceeded under special legislation and/or commercial-in-confidence provisions, leaving little or no scope for effective municipal, public or even parliamentary scrutiny – notwithstanding some form of community consultation at the outset. An exception has been when a well-resourced municipality becomes a partner in the project, such as light rail in the cities of Gold Coast and Sydney.

Intergovernment relations and City Deals

Local democracy in big cities needs to be reinforced by robust and productive intergovernment relations, both vertical and horizontal. Without such arrangements the ability of municipalities to function as part of the broader system of government, and to advocate on behalf of their constituents, has been and remains greatly diminished. Most states have had an intergovernmental agreement of some sort with the local government association, but these were usually couched in very general terms around regular high-level consultations on matters of mutual concern.

Other than City Deals (discussed next) only two arrangements have dealt specifically with intergovernment relations at a metropolitan or big-city scale. The first of these was the *Greater Hobart Act 2019*, which set out strategic objectives for a metropolitan region comprising the central city of Hobart and three other municipalities, and established a Greater Hobart Committee, whose members are the four mayors and four state ministers (those for economic development, infrastructure, housing, and community development). The committee has been supported by an advisory group of senior local and state government officials.

The second body was the South East Queensland (SEQ) Regional Planning Committee, which around 2000 demonstrated a close partnership (more or less of equals) between the state government and the then SEQ Regional Organisation of Councils (resourced and forcefully led by the City of Brisbane). However, recent years have seen a strengthening of state control. A Regional Planning Committee still exists, chaired by the Deputy Premier and comprising 5 ministers and 12 mayors, but this appears to be a significantly weaker form of partnership. On the other hand, and as noted earlier, the parallel Council of Mayors, led by the dominant City of Brisbane, has been an effective advocate for collective local and regional interests.

In 2016, the then federal government launched a program of City Deals based loosely on the British model of devolved metropolitan governance, but without the element of ongoing additional resources and powers for local government – since only the states can confer the latter. Instead, Australia's City Deals focused on identifying and implementing agreed packages of projects via a series of 10–20 year federal-state agreements. However, there were provisions for – and in some instances guarantees of – robust partnerships with local governments and non-government organisations, such as universities ([Burton, 2018](#)).

Nine City Deals have been signed to date. Reflecting political priorities, three were for regional cities with populations below the threshold of 250,000 adopted for this chapter. There has appeared to be strong local government involvement in five of the others (Adelaide, Geelong, Hobart, Perth and SEQ). However, federal interest in the Western Sydney deal has focused on the mega-projects of the airport and associated transport links, and the key processes there are dominated by the state government, with municipalities in at best a supporting role ([Australian Government, no date](#)). More broadly, the Labor federal government elected in 2022 has failed to act on its promise to transform City Deals into 'real partnerships', and is allowing them to lapse without any evident replacement.

Community engagement

In all big cities, Australian municipalities are subject to various pieces of legislation that mandate community consultation on most aspects of their activities, notably strategic, corporate and land-use planning, environmental management, public works and service delivery (**Christensen, 2018**). Several states have required municipalities to prepare community engagement policies or strategies setting out the scope and methods of consultation they will adopt. In Victoria, that extended to requiring the use where appropriate of ‘deliberative’ engagement techniques such as online panels and citizens’ juries (**Savini and Grant, 2020**).

So, while performance in this respect has remained patchy, there remains considerable scope to strengthen local democracy in big cities, if municipalities individually and collectively take their engagement responsibilities seriously, especially by supporting community advocacy. Recent research has shown how local governments can enhance the flow of information, opportunities for participation and the quality of community deliberation about major development and transport projects. This can advance inclusivity, fairness and legitimacy in decision-making processes (**de Vries, 2021**).

Community consultation and engagement by state and federal agencies has appeared on occasion to be improving but also to have remained, perhaps necessarily, more arms-length. Opinions differ on the extent to which agencies have taken community views seriously. For example, mounting complaints by owners of smallholdings around the Western Sydney airport and the associated ‘Aerotropolis’ development that their interests had been ignored, led to the appointment of an Independent Community Commissioner whose report (**2023**) identified inadequate communication and engagement. By contrast, in 2016 the Victorian government commissioned a lengthy citizens’ jury process to determine the future of local government in Geelong, following the council’s dismissal on the grounds that it had become dysfunctional.

Also, in 2017 the Victorian government established ‘Metropolitan Partnerships’ for each of six sub-regions in Greater Melbourne (**Victoria State Government, 2023**). These comprised 10 appointed local citizens together with the chief executives of each municipality in the sub-region, plus a deputy secretary from a relevant state department. The concept was to ‘bring together experts and leaders from all levels of government, business and the community to identify and progress issues that matter in their region of Melbourne [and to] inform the delivery of projects, programs and services to better meet the specific needs of their communities’ (**Victoria State Government, 2023**). In 2021 the Partnerships were renewed for another four years, and it appeared that their advice was at least being given serious consideration. On the other hand, their existence reflected the fact that the state government saw itself as the critical metropolitan manager, and it could be argued that the role of the Partnerships has the potential to diminish the standing of elected local government and community democracy in metropolitan affairs.

Proposals for reform

In recent years a range of proposals have been put forward that would address some elements of the democratic deficit in metropolitan and big-city governance.

- ✦ The central-city councils of both Melbourne ([CBD News, 2021](#)) and Sydney ([Sydney Morning Herald, 2021b](#)) have argued strongly (and, as noted earlier, successfully in the case of Sydney) for the removal of the ‘double vote’ for businesses. Research into the City of Melbourne’s broader property franchise ([Ng et al., 2017](#)) found that ‘no persuasive case has been made for corporations, groups who own rateable land and non-resident occupiers being able to vote ... local government could enhance democracy through more participative and innovative mechanisms’. The City of Brisbane and other big-city councils in south-east Queensland have no property franchise but have appeared nonetheless responsive to business interests.
- ✦ The Committee for Sydney, a business-based advocacy group, has championed ‘a greater role for local government because cities need strong and vocal advocates at a local level’. It noted that municipalities ‘still don’t have a secure or growing revenue base to support their work nor the financial autonomy needed to be accountable to their citizens. Most importantly, they still don’t receive the respect or the responsibilities the Committee believes will deliver a better city for residents’. The Committee similarly advocated an expanded role for local councils in ‘shaping’ Greater Sydney and called for a metropolitan Council of Mayors. It specifically noted the lack of any democratic process in appointing the members of the then Greater Sydney Commission ([Committee for Sydney, 2018](#)).
- ✦ Similarly, the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue ([2018](#)), also a business-based body, has called for ‘real’ reform and strengthening of local government, including popularly elected mayors with increased authority. It also (unsuccessfully) proposed moves to improve and expand the remit of the Western Sydney City Deal by addressing governance issues, including:

the unevenness of power between the three levels of government ... throughout the Western Sydney City Deal process, with very little information being made public when it comes to the criteria applied to priority projects (and how they were evaluated).

- ✦ Several commentators have proposed introducing some form of metropolitan government, on the basis that due to their broader responsibilities and constituencies the states and the Commonwealth cannot focus sufficiently on complex, place-based metropolitan issues. Summarising this case, Marcus Spiller ([Tomlinson and Spiller, 2018](#)) argued:

... the third prerequisite for genuine metropolitan governance, after clarity of functional mandate and fiscal autonomy, is democratic accountability ... A minimalist approach in an Australian context would involve an electoral college in which groups of constituent local governments covering logical segments of the metropolis select, by ballot, one or more of their pooled councillors to sit in the metropolitan governing body. This could operate with or without direct popular election of a metropolitan mayor. Such a model was in place in the last iteration of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works before it was disbanded as a proto-metropolitan government ... in 1985. (p.238)

However, there have been no signs of any state moving in that direction.

Conclusion

Across several Australian metropolitan regions and other big cities local government's potential as a force for place-based democracy has been undermined by state governments making heavy-handed and persistent interventions in municipal affairs. This trend has been compounded by the sector's own failings – parochialism, resistance to necessary change and a preoccupation with municipalities' corporate and political standing, rather than making wholehearted efforts to strengthen local democracy and more effectively represent community concerns and aspirations.

State and federal governments have appeared largely unconcerned about the quality of local democracy. Their focus has been on economic growth, 'mega' infrastructure projects, housing supply and winning parliamentary seats. This may sometimes translate into place-based action and genuinely engaging with municipalities and communities, but as a general rule wholly on the upper tiers' terms. Meanwhile, local MPs have very limited opportunities to scrutinise ministerial decisions and the actions of state or Commonwealth agencies in metropolitan planning and management.

Intriguingly, some of the most cogent arguments for bolstering local democracy – or at least the role of local government, which is not necessarily the same thing – come from business groups (other than the development and construction lobbies). They are perhaps particularly conscious of the failure of central governments to address place-based issues and to balance top-down directives with local policies and initiatives that underpin and advance the economic prospects of cities and regions. Notably, business sees value in more authoritative, popularly elected mayors who can lead locally and also work together at a metropolitan scale.

State governments determined to run big cities themselves – directly or by decree – seem unlikely to change course. Meaningful devolution to local areas has simply not been on the table. The election of a federal Labor government in May 2022 may herald some renewed Commonwealth interest in improving civic affairs and support for municipalities to play a more influential role. But for now, democratic improvements are most likely to depend on local governments themselves making greater use of their power of general competence and taking steps to enhance the quality of democracy and community engagement within their own realm (and to their own advantage). Several mechanisms could advance their cause and that of their constituents – more popularly elected mayors with real authority, better representation of neighbourhoods below the municipal level, expanded inter-municipal cooperation, and even the establishment of upper-tier entities with potentially greater power and political clout. Without changes like these that might act as a circuit breaker on recent trends, the future for many big-city communities looks distinctly more authoritarian, dominated by the power of states and the influence of corporations with a vested interest in large-scale urban growth.

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