



Unions and regional governance: the case of North West Tasmania, Australia

Peter Fairbrother, Matthew Walker & Richard Phillips

To cite this article: Peter Fairbrother, Matthew Walker & Richard Phillips (2018) Unions and regional governance: the case of North West Tasmania, Australia, *Regional Studies*, 52:11, 1502-1511, DOI: [10.1080/00343404.2017.1407026](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1407026)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1407026>



Published online: 18 Dec 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 230



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Unions and regional governance: the case of North West Tasmania, Australia

Peter Fairbrother^a , Matthew Walker^b  and Richard Phillips^c 

ABSTRACT

Unions have a distanced relationship from the practice of regional governance. Studies of regional governance tend to focus on the role of the state in combination with politically and economically dominant interest groups. In these analyses, and in practice, unions and their members are at best marginal and often absent. The argument presented in this study is that to understand the relative absence of unions, it is necessary to consider the forms and processes of regional governance and the capacities of unions to engage. These themes are addressed with reference to the North West Tasmania region in Australia.

KEYWORDS

regional governance; trade unions; union purpose; employers; state

JEL J51, R11, R58

HISTORY Received 30 May 2017; in revised form 1 November 2017

INTRODUCTION

Regional governance is a debated concept (Macleod & Jones, 2007). One recent theme in the literature focuses on the engagement and participation of local actors, usually the economic and political elite within the region (Beer & Clower, 2014; Pape, Fairbrother, & Snell, 2016). These elites tend to be drawn from a relatively narrow base, although in principle other actors could play a part: unions, campaigning groups (such as climate-change networks) and other civic actors. The aim here is to extend and refocus these analyses to investigate how and why unions might play a part in these processes. This study addresses this theme via an in-depth case study analysis of North West Tasmania (NWT), Australia, a region where there is a formal regional governance structure in relation to economic development: the Cradle Coast Authority (CCA).

The argument is that for unions to play an active part in the processes of regional change and development, accessible regional governance structures are a necessary condition. It is in relation to such structures that unions can organize and engage in the processes of formulating appropriate policies and practices. Two relevant literatures address these themes: firstly, it is argued that political devolution opens up institutional spaces in which

organized labour can participate (O'Brien, Pike, & Tomaney, 2004); and secondly, it is claimed that there are possibilities for participative leadership (Beer & Clower, 2014), which, in principle, could involve unions as the voice of labour. By bringing these two sets of literature together, it is possible to add a further aspect to the argument: that governance practices, involving the state and capital, should be assessed in relation to the capacities of unions to act as purposeful regional agents rather than as marginalized actors.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the debates, noting that unions face challenges with respect to the institutional and ideological relations that define regional engagement. The third section has an outline of the approach and methods. The fourth section begins with an overview of the formal arrangements for regional governance in NWT, which is followed by an analysis of governance in the region. The fifth section presents an analysis of the capacities of unions to address regional governance practices and policies in the region. In the sixth section, the assessment develops an approach that acknowledges place-based relations in regional governance and decision-making. The final section concludes and identifies further research themes.

CONTACT

^a  peter.fairbrother@rmit.edu.au

Centre for People, Organisation and Work (CPOW), School of Management, RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

^b **(Corresponding author)**  matthew.walker@rmit.edu.au

Centre for People, Organisation and Work (CPOW), School of Management, RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

^c  richard.phillips@rmit.edu.au

Centre for People, Organisation and Work (CPOW), School of Management, RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

DEBATES

There are long-standing debates about the region, its definition, constituent features and parameters. These debates have been distilled into questions relating to the multidimensionality of a region (Jessop, Brenner, & Jones, 2008). Recent contributions, moreover, identify questions relating to territoriality, scalarity and network-connectedness (Macleod & Jones, 2007; see also Goodwin, 2013; Morgan, 2014). In the argument presented here, the focus is, firstly, on the ways in which territorial and topological perspectives can be deployed to analyse internal relations within a 'region' (cf. Macleod & Jones, 2007, p. 1185, who point to the importance of trans-territoriality and connectivity) and, secondly, on the relational processes of scalar structuration (p. 1186). There are other dimensions to consider, not least the 'provisional nature of political power' (p. 1187, original emphasis), and this aspect is alluded to in this analysis via an exploration of the place of labour in regional governance.

These debates provide a focus for the analysis. Territory refers to spatiality, while the relational dimension addresses their connectivity (Goodwin, 2013, p. 1182). Interaction between the territorial and relational dimensions produces regions whose spatial boundaries may be unclear (Massey, 2004, p. 3). Hence, the first task is to explain both 'the scalar and territorial dimensions of particular political practices' (Goodwin, 2013, p. 1189). While regional governance often appears institutionally bounded, it can be porous and impermanent (Morgan, 2007, 2014). It is this instability that allows diverse actors to contribute to strategic regional economic and social agenda (Mackinnon, 2011). As a result, the scalar politics that surround the establishment of regional institutions and policies may involve social and material interests that are both wide-ranging and fluid. The second task is to explore who is involved in these processes and who is not, and why. Thus, the under-determined institutional location of regions and their politics in countries such as Australia can mask the precise nature of political relations (Morgan, 2014). These themes will be explored by considering the ways regional governance arrangements can favour select sets of actors.

The recent explanation of place-based leadership recognizes the importance of 'purposive agency' (Beer & Clower, 2014; Sotarauta, 2014; Sotarauta & Beer, 2017). There appear to be two possibilities. First, place-based leadership may comprise narrow sets of interests, usually regional economic and political elites (Pape et al., 2016). Second, to broaden the base of regional governance, such leadership may engage in coalition-building. This circumstance draws attention to the relevance of place-based leadership and its composition, including antagonistic partners, such as labour and capital. Taking steps to build such alliances means there are circumstances where regional or place-based interests should prevail in relation to class divisions (Bailey, Bentley, De Ruyter, & Hall, 2014). Further, it means there may be a necessity to renew place-based leadership arrangements in emerging regional situations

(Bailey, Bellandi, Caloffi, & De Propris, 2010), although the conditions for cross-class alliances tend to be overlooked.

In Australia, the dominant regional policy agenda involves state intervention to support market-based ends (Thomas, Beer, & Bailey, 2008). One aspect of this approach is that the maturation of neoliberal policies (foregrounding market relations with state support) involves government, together with local political and economic actors in decision-making and policy formulation (Jacobs, 2007). Nevertheless, compared with other countries, particularly those in the European Union, the scale of state intervention by Australian governments (with the exception of the Gough Whitlam period, 1972–75) is limited (Collits, 2015). Hence, when employers leave an area or reduce their operations, it has largely been left to those in the region somehow to determine future economic directions (Barton & Fairbrother, 2014). In this respect, interventions in relation to place-based leadership are important and draw attention to purposeful collaborative leadership (e.g., Beer & Clower, 2014; Eversole, 2016; Sotarauta & Beer, 2017). Moreover, consideration must also be given to how leadership articulation may require network arrangements to stimulate and locate place-based leadership (Eversole & McCall, 2014; theorized by Jessop et al., 2008).

What is notable in these reflections is that labour is absent. Labour (as worker) has been viewed as an object of regional-development strategies, focusing on skilling, deployment and utilization. This conceptualization of labour leads to partial outcomes and disengaged workers (and households), with possible challenging ethical, material and political outcomes (e.g., Ford & Goodwin, 2014). For labour, the means to give voice to their interests may be by unions and related organizations, such as sectoral interest groups (e.g., health advocacy bodies). While commentators draw attention to the decline in membership coverage and the seeming intractability of the challenges faced by unions, unions remain one of the ways that workers can give expression to their collective rather than their individual interests. Even so, unions as a voice of labour are seldom evident in considerations about regional socioeconomic development.

One exception to this neglect proposes that public policy is best able to meet local and regional concerns if shaped by local and regional actors, including unions and community groups (O'Brien et al., 2004). In this particular case, the driver is the way that political devolution in the UK created a circumstantial shift in the power relations from the previously unitary political system. Unions were able to utilize the institutional space that opened up. The challenge is to populate such 'space'. In a development of this thesis, Pike, Marlow, McCarthy, O'Brien, and Tomaney (2015) show that such institutional space, even when formalized, as in Britain, remains 'contingent and conditional' (p. 202).

To give content to these observations, it is necessary to consider the ongoing 'interplay between institutional forms and political forces' (Macleod & Goodwin, 1999, p. 523; see also Macleod & Jones, 2007), in relation to regional

socioeconomic change and development. Such a perspective allows a focus on actors, often expressing different socio-spatial interests and resulting in forms of regulation in relation to these dimensions. Two aspects should be considered. First, there may be occasions when a recombination and rescaling of governance is necessary to provide opportunities for non-engaged actors, such as unions. Second, to realize the opportunities provided by a recombination of regional governance, unions, for example, must be willing to play a part in these processes. The question is how and under what circumstances can trade unions engage about their members' futures in the places where they live and work.

As noted elsewhere, when unions face their futures, they are often caught in tensions between the immediate and the long term (Snell & Fairbrother, 2011). On the one hand, union strategies are shaped by the processes of economic and social change, institutional arrangements, and the bargaining situation in which they find themselves. On the other hand, unions can exercise agency and can open up new agendas, framing issues in distinctive ways that constitute a challenge to prevailing relations, as some of the recent actions by unions and their confederations have done in relation to 'green' jobs (Snell & Fairbrother, 2010). The ways these operational logics are resolved in practice can be decisive for the prospects of more inclusive forms of regional governance. Moreover, unions may not have the capacities to secure such inclusion.

The argument here is that there are two dimensions to these logics. First, unions as collective organizations are historically and institutionally circumscribed, leading to restricted foci associated with past practice. There appears to be a narrowing of union purpose, which raises questions about what constitutes legitimate and acceptable objectives in relation to regional change. Second, unions organize in multiple contexts, in the workplace, industry, with reference to the state and across global production networks. Their success depends in part on their capacities as collective organizations at a regional level. These dimensions will be examined in a study of one relatively remote region where there appears to be an opportunity for unions to engage in regional policy-making and change.

THE REGION AND THE APPROACH

Tasmania is an island state south-east of the Australian mainland. North West Tasmania (NWT) comprises nine local government areas (LGAs), with a combined population of 113,834 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2016). The LGA populations range from 1500 to 25,500 people. The spatial spread of the region is just over 20,000 km² and includes King Island, 212 kilometres off the north-west coast. The population and industrial centres are concentrated along the north coast, mainly between the port cities of Devonport (population around 25,500) and Burnie (population around 20,000).

The NWT region has undergone industrialization, deindustrialization and a process of uneven regeneration. In the early 20th century, the Tasmanian government

embarked on a strategy of hydro-industrialisation to attract heavy industry with the promise of cheap electricity. The region saw growth in resource-based (timber, agriculture and minerals) and manufacturing industries. A pulp and paper mill, for example, commenced operations in Burnie in 1936 and the town grew from 3000 people to 10,000 in 1945 and to 20,000 by 1988. However, the changing industry structure and ageing plant saw the mill enter a 20-year period of decline, closing in 2010 (GHD, 2010). Other major towns also experienced industry closures.

The period of overall industrial decline saw unionized large-scale manufacturing and processing businesses down-scaled and/or closed, as have some mining operations. Regional employment loss and restructuring was accompanied by out-migration (McDonald, Kirk-Brown, Frost, Van Dijk, & Rainnie, 2013). Meanwhile, the core economy has shifted to niche and value-added produce (dairy, agriculture, aquaculture), advanced manufacturing, and service provision (healthcare and social assistance, retail, education, tourism) (Walker & Fairbrother, 2015). Successful businesses have tended to produce more specialized goods and rely on highly trained and skilled employees (Economic Policy Branch, 2013). It is also important to note that within the NWT several functional economic areas have been identified (Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE), 2008; Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources (DIER), 2013). These localized economies and their relatively discrete labour markets connote both divisions and interdependencies at the sub-regional level, distinct from administrative boundaries.

The region has a history of union representation. In 2015, there were 23 recognized unions in Tasmania affiliated with the state union confederation, Unions Tasmania. Five unions also had offices in the region: the Australian Education Union (AEU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU), the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU), the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and the National Union of Workers (NUW). Focused on manufacturing and processing plants as well as resource extraction, unions played an active part in the development of the economy in the region (Barton & Fairbrother, 2014).

The region is the focus of party-political contention. It comprises the state electoral division of Braddon, with five members, and the commonwealth constituency of Braddon, with one member. After the 2014 election, the state division shifted to the Liberals (conservative) with only one Labor representative remaining and no representation from the Greens. In the 2013 federal election, the long-term Labor member (2007–13) lost to a Liberal.

The research was based on documentary analysis of public sources (newspapers, official reports) and 92 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups with union leaders conducted in 2014–16 in NWT. Prior to 2014, preliminary research was carried out involving 25 interviews with key respondents. This stage identified the marginalization of labour as a key theme for further consideration. Interviewees for the current analysis included

representatives from state and local government, businesses, unions, and community groups. Due to convenience and the geographical spread of participants, 18 interviews were conducted by telephone, while the remaining interviews were conducted face to face. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Transcripts were analysed through repeated reading by two members of the research team. A coding framework was developed, identifying key themes. This coding framework and illustrative quotes were checked by other research team members for coherence and reliability. The transcripts were coded using NVivo software. They were analysed using a thematic framework based on governance and union capacities. The practice for quotation selection is that the quotation is illustrative of a cluster of respondents, at least four in any single category, such as union leaders, unless otherwise noted.

GOVERNANCE AND ITS CHALLENGES

In Australia, much regional development policy references regional-scale governance and place-based solutions, identifying local institutions, networks and social capital (Eversole, 2016; McDonald et al., 2013). Mention is also made of coordination and cooperation between the three tiers of government and the resourcing of regional agencies (Beer, Clower, Haughtow, & Maude, 2005). In practice, there has been a 'general unwillingness of central governments (either State or Commonwealth) to devolve substantive responsibility for regional development to regions themselves' (Collits, 2015, p. 31).

Governance

In 2000, the nine NWT councils established the Cradle Coast Authority (CCA) to coordinate economic development across the north-west. These councils decided they needed a 'stronger voice in the region ... we need an economic driver' (Burnie Council official, October 2011) (CCA, 2012a). The CCA was successful in securing development funding and promoting industrial redevelopment in the region. It was governed through a two-tier structure comprising representatives from each council as well as from industry, tourism, and education and training (CCA, 2012b). Its programmes were supported by funding from the Tasmanian government's Partnerships Agreement Program and the Commonwealth Government's Sustainable Regions Program (McDonald et al., 2013). For nearly a decade, the CCA was able to promote partnership governance. Nonetheless, as noted by McDonald et al. (2013), the CCA faced structural constraints, specifically in relation to state and commonwealth government requirements, as well as relative invisibility within the region and no 'direct democratic accountability' (p. 354).

In the mid-2010s, the CCA faced criticism from several of its council sponsors (Dingwall, 2015; Langenberg, 2015). Subsequently, the CCA refocused its activity and began a process of revising its strategic plan to address regional economic development more specifically. The West Coast Economic Working Group, in partnership

with the CCA and the Institute of Regional Development, University of Tasmania, drafted an economic development plan. Four councils (Circular Head, King Island, Waratah-Wynyard and West Coast) commissioned consultants to devise a 25-year community plan (Sayer, 2015). Additionally, the Devonport LGA developed the Devonport City Council Strategic Plan 2009–2030 (Devonport City Council, 2014).

The CCA comprised a specific 'interplay between institutional forms and political forces' (Macleod & Goodwin, 1999, p. 523). It was structured with the objective of fostering an economic development perspective that complemented the economic approaches of each council. Moreover, it was and remains a limited form of regional governance, especially when compared with the regional development agencies that were a feature of economic development initiatives in the UK (Bailey et al., 2014). Overall, this was a fluid and contested form of limited regional governance.

While the aspiration was to be inclusive, there was no evidence of seeking to consult unions as economically based actors, or indeed other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from civil society. In part, this seemed to derive from a sentiment that unions, for example, are concerned with 'industrial relations' and thus would only have a limited role to play:

[G]reater linkages between industry and training. ... That's where unions can potentially be an advocate or at least a facilitator for that information; in those types of relationships where what services or what skills do we need in the future and then aligning the training to go with that.

(CCA, February 2015)

Thus, unions might have a subject specific role in such discussions and planning but little more.

Nonetheless, the CCA had close working relations with local economic leaders, government agents as well as with the University of Tasmania. In 2016, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed by the Department of State Growth, Burnie City Council, University of Tasmania, TasTAFE (Tasmanian Technical and Further Education) and the CCA (MOU, 2016). As stated by one leading local corporate actor when asked who should promote the development and redevelopment of the skills profile in the region:

There's got to be a business input to it and there is a business responsibility, I believe, but then there's also ... a government responsibility ... to facilitate growth in this area, what sort of skills do we need and what sort of support can we provide the local training organisations.

(Local Corporate Leader, September 2014)

Such sentiments were widespread amongst both the business and the government personnel in the area.

Thus, in relation to socioeconomic change and development, this regional form of governance was both institutionally fragmented, horizontally (between councils),

complemented by the regional organization of the state agencies (Regional Development Tasmania, Regional Development Australia, Tasmania and departments, state and federal) and vertically (councils and the CCA). Within this 'space' regional actors articulated functionally socio-spatial interests, as well as expressing these interests via the integrating forum of the CCA.

UNIONS AND GOVERNANCE

Of note, these regional governance arrangements were forged out of the recent history of the councils and state agencies, and the concerns of the local business leadership. However, unions did not seek to play a part in the process. In considering this, it is necessary to understand the way unions organize in the region, including past experiences.

The history of North West Tasmania

Tasmanian unions have a long and at times contentious history (Clarke, 1984). The state has the highest union membership in Australia with 22% of eligible workers members of their trade union (ABS, 2016). At the end of the 2000s there were 32 recognized unions in Tasmania and seven employer associations (Unions Tasmania, 2011). Of these 32 unions, six had offices in NWT, mainly in Devonport. With the closure of the paper mill in 2010, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Pulp and Paper closed its office in Burnie. At that time, and still the case in 2015, seven other unions had offices in Launceston and two other unions had offices elsewhere in North East Tasmania. Most of these unions also had offices in Hobart (the state capital). Altogether 22 unions had offices in Hobart, usually the head office. Five unions had their offices in other states, Victoria and New South Wales.

These arrangements did not make for easy union politics. Often there has been rivalry between state branches in Tasmania, usually based in Hobart and with sub-branches located in the north of the state (Hess, 2011; Quinlan & Lindley, 2006). These tensions were beset by the left-right ideological divide that marked Australian unions from the 1950s into the 1990s (Dowling, 2010), particularly in connection to the role of the National Civic Council and its anti-left politics (Clarke, 1984, p. 22). Moreover, union stances on environmental matters often have been reactive and defensive. In 2004, for example, Tasmanian forestry workers, loggers working in the 'old growth' forests, clashed with environmentalists under banners such as 'Tasmanian timber creates Tasmanian jobs', 'Greens tell lies' and 'my dad needs a job' (Kingsworth, 2004). These 2000 union members gave the then conservative and anti-union prime minister a standing ovation when he promised their jobs would be safe if he were re-elected.

The history of trade unionism in Tasmania is characterized by a number of regional union centres, with no overarching confederation. In 1883, the Trades and Labor Council of Hobart was established, and in 1917 it became known as the Hobart Trades Hall Council. In the north, the Launceston Trades and Labor Council was established

in March 1922 (*Daily Telegraph*, 1922), although there are reports of the Launceston Trades Council as early as 1889. Subsequently, trades and labour councils were set up in Burnie in July 1939 (Burnie Trades and Labor Council, 1946) and Devonport in September 1944 ('Devonport Trades', 1945). The Hobart Trades Hall Council again changed its name in 1968 to the Tasmanian Trades and Labor Council (TLC), following a contested merger with the trades and labour councils in Devonport and Launceston (Quinlan & Lindley, 2006).

In 1968, this re-established council (under the control of an anti-left secretary general) was registered under the federal government's industrial legislation. Nonetheless, the Burnie Trades and Labor Council, under an effective militant leadership, disaffiliated from the TLC (Clarke, 1984, p. 22), and remained active into the 1990s. The TLC became the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), and as such the governing body of trade unions in Tasmania, renamed Unions Tasmania on 25 November 2010. However, the confederation had limited capacities, with few personnel (seven staff) and scarce financial resources (Unions Tasmania, 2015). Of note, a renewed Unions Tasmania leadership in 2015 and 2016 had begun to focus on some of the challenges faced by unions in the north-west (fieldwork observation, 2014–16).

Solidaristic actions have been pursued by NWT trade unions. Two recent examples of event-stimulated activity involved the main food-processing union, the AMWU, and the seafarers union, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). In the first case, in 2009 the Canadian-based multinational McCain announced the closure of a vegetable-processing plant. In response, the AMWU sought to negotiate a settlement, secured government support and attempted to reverse the decision. These actions involved forging alliances with vegetable farmers, local government and community organizations. Nonetheless, in November 2009, the plant closed (Barton & Fairbrother, 2014). The second set of events occurred in July–August 2015 in the Port of Devonport. First, the futures of 36 Australian seafarers working on an internationally owned tanker were threatened by employment termination and replacement with another cheaper crew. The MUA led rallies outside the terminal, involving at least six other unions. At the same time, a second dispute was under way involving the International Transport Federation (ITF) and the 'flags of convenience' arrangements (Lillie, 2005). In this case, a coastal tanker, crewed by non-Australians who had not been paid for two months, was detained in the port by the ITF. This event also involved inter-union rallies (Fairbrother & Gekara, 2016).

Unions also sought to address the consequences of mass closure via the establishment of support centres. Notably, a state-funded workers' action centre, at the closed paper mill site in Burnie, operated from 2009 to 2012. Organized as a 'Workers' Training Centre – Forest Industries Employment and Training Services', the service comprised two full-time peer coordinators who worked with education and employment services, providing advice and support

to displaced paper mill workers and others. Linked to the CFMEU, Forestry and Furnishing Products Division and the AMWU, this service was established with the support of the local federal member of parliament.

Finally, the NWT unions have sought to extend the bases of solidaristic action in relatively episodic ways. Some unions have attempted to adapt to a changed environment through different forms of organizing. Hence, in the public services, some noted that new working relationships have developed: 'We were fighting [with another union] over a dwindling pool of members. So we started jointly campaigning, with a change of leadership from both unions, we've both grown' (HASCU official, 2014). While the benefits of working together were seen, there was recognition among union leaders that such solidarity was difficult to maintain. As stated with reference to the 2007 'Your Rights at Work' campaign (the union alliance to challenge the then conservative government over industrial relations legislation):

Post-2007 the North West unions operated a successful ... 'Your Rights at Work' campaign. [After] we got the result that we thought we wanted – at the election – unions went back and concerned themselves with their own membership, their own workers.

(AEU official, 2014)

In part, the reversion to union narrowness is rooted in the tendency to define unionism in terms of the immediate workplace. Nonetheless, there remained a sentiment to extend union remits, particularly in situations where policy and legislation define unions in restrictive ways.

Unions at work in the region

The challenges faced by unions in the region often appear overwhelming, although regional engagement could provide one route towards union recovery. Most union representatives spoke of limits on what activity they could pursue. Time pressures were such that organizers found it difficult to move beyond activity over industrial relations and occupational health and safety issues. Union representatives, therefore, noted that union capacity was diminished in recent decades.

Union representatives reported that changes in industry and workplaces had presented challenges for unions in organizing and building relationships: 'In the 80s and the 90s in Launceston there were 10 unions in the one building, now we're the only one left. Because of amalgamations there's no State branches any more, they're run from [outside Tasmania]' (union officials focus group, 2014). In the context of changing workforce composition, with increased casual employment and mobility, initiating or maintaining contact with workers became a challenge: 'Traditionally we recruit union members more easily when the job's secure. If there is any level of fear that they may lose a job, because of union involvement they're less likely to be involved with us' (Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) official, 2014). Hence, where job security became an issue, unions often found it difficult to recruit and maintain membership.

One problem is that most union branch organizers were based in Hobart, with only five having offices based in the region. Union representatives, therefore, spoke of the need for a peak body in the region to represent unions, with a collaborative approach to resources and campaigning. This absence, however, must be viewed historically.

A history of ideological division and rivalry shaped the ways in which such labour councils were viewed, thereby limiting the prospects of achieving boundary spans from workplace (and often sector) to civil society (in the form of regional governance and policy-making). Still, there are Australian examples (the 'green bans' of the 1970s involving the then Builders Labourers Federation selectively embargoing demolition or building work as a way to protect heritage buildings, secure public space and preserve the environment in and around Sydney; Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998). Of note, the use of 'green bans' was extended throughout the 1970s as a way to influence public policy. By the late 2000s, not only did such steps seem the antithesis of the resource-focused unions (mining and forestry) but also other unions tended to be narrowly workplace and sector focused. Nonetheless, regional engagement remained a prospect for union revitalization, paradoxically illustrated by the challenging environmental union stances in 2004.

Unions and regional governance

As noted, general union concerns were with the immediate workplace, the industry, and the state at the provincial and national levels. In relation to regional governance and associated decision-making, union leaderships did not see the CCA, or even the councils in the area, as a focus for regional activity. Nonetheless, it should be noted that union leaderships did sometimes engage with councillors about local (regional) matters.

Some officials did see the importance of addressing regional challenges. One union leader was well aware of the value of a regional union presence:

there's been a long debate in Tasmania about local government and the amount of local government we have and the amount of local councils ... Cradle Coast gave us the capacity to aggregate up the council voice so we at least could get a coherent view.

(United Voice official, 2014)

To underwrite further the capacities of unions, in 2011, the then Minister for Economic Development initiated an opportunity for them to participate in regional vision-setting via the development of a Tasmanian Economic Development Plan (Tasmanian Government, 2011). As part of the process, the government established regional reference groups to facilitate plan development and mandated a union presence on them. In the event, most unions did not participate, and those that did so were unable to forge a collaborative approach.

Instead, many leaders defined their broader concerns as state wide (a relational conception of the region). One representative reflected on the evolution of their current purpose:

The work we do is more State wide ... we've had to adapt to a changing political environment ... what we have done ... is become far more vocal on issues beyond industrial relations to the civil society type conversations, the economic conversations that we're having.

(HACSU official, 2014)

In this respect, this union leader was drawing attention to the way the political environment had stimulated a definition of union purpose that went beyond traditional industrial relations concerns to consider a context beyond the NWT region.

ASSESSMENT

This study focuses on two related propositions. First, governance arrangements tend to favour a select set of actors, and thus may not be open to recombination and inclusion. Second, even when a rescaling of governance occurs, indicated by the devolution of economic strategy formulation to the CCA, actors, such as unions, may not have the capacities to secure inclusion in these forms of governance.

Regional governance

In relation to the first proposition, the specificity of regional governance at a sub-national level requires elaboration and development. The arrangements between the nine councils, and the mandate and composition of the CCA, create the possibility of inclusive and participative engagement on economic and social development in the region. The formulation of sub-regional economic plans furthers these possibilities. Of course, the CCA is an expression of the nine councils and is circumscribed in relation to their decision-making procedures and practices, as well as in relation to democratic accountability. To develop our understandings in relation to these arrangements, we should build on place-based leadership analyses (Beer & Clower, 2014; Sotarauta & Beer, 2017).

Attention should also be given to the scope and remit of such practices. In the case of the CCA, there was a concerted effort to engage with key regional actors, mainly the economically prominent, such as home-grown entrepreneurs. To illustrate, two notable families from the region were successful in establishing regionally based enterprises, one concerned with building and construction and the other with mechanical engineering. These families, and the key government agencies in the region, were active in relation to the CCA. Moreover, there was evidence of a mixed trajectory in relation to industrial decline and regeneration, and the NWT is no exception (Eversole, 2016, ch. 2). In such circumstances, and given the state-market narratives that characterize much of the recent debate about regional economic development, this aspect of

place-based leadership comprised an alliance between the regional state and economic elites (Pape et al., 2016).

Hence, while it may be argued that regional governance can be defined as a set of institutional arrangements, structured and focused in relation to socioeconomic change and development, it is equally important to consider the actors involved and those who are uninvolved or marginalized. One further proposition to consider is that engaged actors often express an overarching narrative in relation to their specific socio-spatial interests, which can exclude those who do not subscribe to the same narratives or indeed articulate different sets of class concerns (Pape et al., 2016). The challenge is to explain these processes.

The unions

The second and related focus is on the conditions for engaging 'new' actors in regional governance. As noted, literature on place-based leadership is quite suggestive (Beer & Clower, 2014; Sotarauta, 2014). While these analyses do not focus on union leaders, they provide insights into the conditions for active and engaged activity by such personnel. These conditions include: organizational capacities, such that the structures and practice of unions provide opportunities for leaders to emerge; capacities, the available capabilities and resources, such as ability and time; and the dexterity to commit to consensus-building and vision-setting (Sotarauta & Beer, 2017, p. 220). In an important literature review, Beer and Clower (2014) refer to the significance of 'slack resources' in regions (especially effective leadership – human resources). The question is do such leaders have time 'to devote to questions of regional strategic significance' (p. 11). While this analysis is persuasive in relation to regional leaders as 'high-quality individuals' (p. 11), when considering the collective aspect of trade union leadership, it is necessary to disentangle the meaning of slack resources in relation to the makeup of trade unions. Thus, it can be argued that in the case of unions (and like organizations) slack resources refer to the ways that collective capabilities and resources make up the capacities that unions may be able to exercise (Fairbrother, 2015). Of course, in the absence of 'systems of governance that are ... fully representative, deliberative and willing to share influence' (Sotarauta & Beer, 2017, p. 220), such prospects are unlikely to be realized, no matter how well-organized and capable the union and its leadership (Fairbrother, 2015).

Each factor is considered in turn. First, as demonstrated, the unions in NWT did have the organization and capacities to act collaboratively and span the boundaries and jurisdictions that customarily divide one set of unions from another, but it was episodic. The best example is the 'Your Rights at Work' union campaigns in Australia in 2005–07, where the unions engaged in a process of building what became 'transient solidarities', providing a distinctive focus for the unions as the voice of a threatened labour movement and thus promoting a new collective 'energy' within the region (on the analytic point, see Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014, p. 649). As noted, this sequence of engagement was transient,

although it became part of the collective union memory in the region, and thus susceptible to reinvigoration on future occasions (Barton, 2015).

Second, unions had limited opportunities to exercise their capabilities and use their resources to address regional prospects, even in relatively cursory ways. Hence, one set of barriers to regional political engagement resided with the unions themselves, in terms of their capacities and their 'imagined' futures. As noted elsewhere (Barton & Fairbrother, 2014), union capacities involve a complex interplay of resources and capabilities. These unions were time and personnel poor, with acute pressure on the organizers. In the absence of robust workplace union arrangements, organizers often became the union. Where branch organization and activity involved organizers from Hobart, and in some cases from the mainland, union capacities were sharply circumscribed. A further feature of unions in the area is that they appeared to have an attenuated relationship with the union confederation, Unions Tasmania.

Third, these unions found it almost impossible to commit to consensus-building and to engage in vision-setting. As indicated above, the unions did (could) not realize the opportunity provided by the state government in 2011 to participate in regional vision-setting. Equally, in a set of scenario events organized by the research team in 2015–16, the union participants were unable to work towards collective approaches and processes. Moreover, in 2016, there was field research evidence that some union members were critical of attempts to address broader regional matters rather than work-based problems. In part, this was put down to the remoteness of Unions Tasmania as the only confederation in the state and the absence of forms of collective engagement in the region, even at the level of social media exchange. The one qualification was that union organizers who had co-located in union buildings tended to develop mutual understandings of each union's capacities and interests.

The other feature in relation to consensus-building has been the prospect of cross-class coalitions in relation to regional governance. While a possibility, the unions in NWT did not seek to exercise their capacities in this direction; rather, they tended to define their interests in relation to workplaces and sectors. The outcome was a limited vision of the possibilities of regional regeneration. Hence, some of the initiatives pointed to elsewhere in the world, and particularly in relation to state-sponsored activity at the provincial and national levels, also tended to be the focus of unions in this region (Bailey et al., 2014). It was as if regional or place-based governance were the prerogative of the regional political and economic elites and not that of workers. Nonetheless, the prospect of such engagement remained a potential strategy and vision for the future.

Thus, union leaderships struggled to address their futures as regional actors in NWT. There was little evidence of any attempt to contribute to the formulation of an approach to regional development. At no point did unions seek to influence or shape the deliberations

involving the CCA, although key local employers were consulted; indeed, the CCA sought them out. While such intersections are two way, the point to emphasize here is that union leaders had a restricted 'imaginary' about their futures and how they could promote them. For this reason, the institutional space represented by the CCA was never occupied.

CONCLUSIONS

The last 30 years of industrial and employment restructuring and reorganization have left unions pressured to restrict their concerns to immediate industrial challenges. Indeed, such outcomes underwrite the basic principles of a neo-liberal agenda, focusing on the relationship between the state and the market, cast in a charade of consultation and the deployment of local expertise and knowledge.

The analysis reveals two themes that require further study and exploration. First, in situations where regional governance is fragmented and selective, there is a limited possibility for engaged and participative practice. Indeed, the structure of this form of regional governance is likely to be exclusive, involving limited sets of actors. Given the thrust towards more devolved and seemingly consultative practices in relation to regional governance, this structuring affirms the ongoing relations between political and economic elites at a regional level. Nonetheless, it is not only unions that are marginalized in this process: so too are other regional actors, such as NGOs, citizens' associations and others.

Second, whatever the structure of regional governance, unions face considerable difficulty in exercising their capacities in relation to regional governance and thereby helping to shape the future of regions. Unions require organizational capabilities and the resources (or 'slack resources') to become effective regional actors, pursuing regional vision-setting. Where unions can exercise their capacities (capabilities and resources), it is then likely that they will be able to play a positive role in relation to regional change and development. In the absence of such capacities, including a governance context in which to operate, unions (and other like actors) are likely to be bystanders in the processes of regional development and change. If the latter prevails, it is highly unlikely that regional change and development will proceed in inclusive ways. Moreover, the opaqueness of regional governance means that often the value of regional governance structures is not immediately apparent. These structures and the institutional space defined by them are often works in progress. Indeed, the general perception by others, including state officials and employers, that unions do not have the capacities to contribute to strategic dialogue and planning are damaging. Such perceptions may be rooted in particular experiences and with self-perceptions of managerial control and priority.

The more general point is that unions may not even recognize the value of the 'institutional space' opened up by evolving forms of regional governance. To use such

opportunities, it is necessary for unions to take proactive steps to develop their capacities in ways that enable a broad and layered sense of purpose to be developed. Such capacity-building will involve the experimentation of different forms of networking and collaboration within unions, between unions and with others. Exercising agency must be the mantra.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are thankful for the ongoing support and involvement of other members of the research team: Ruth Barton (RMIT University), George Cairns (Queensland University of Technology), Dora Carias Vega (University of Melbourne) and Larissa Bamberry (Charles Sturt University).

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council [grant number DP140102389].

ORCID

Peter Fairbrother  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8169-4811>

Matthew Walker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1086-6222>

Richard Phillips  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2904-4376>

REFERENCES

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). (2016). *Regional population growth, Australia* (Cat. No. 3218). Canberra: ABS.
- Bailey, D., Bellandi, M., Caloffi, A., & De Propriis, L. (2010). Place-renewing leadership: Trajectories of change for mature manufacturing regions in Europe. *Policy Studies*, 31(4), 457–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442871003723408>
- Bailey, D., Bentley, G., De Ruyter, A., & Hall, S. (2014). Plant closures and taskforce responses: An analysis of the impact of and policy response to MG Rover in Birmingham. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 1(1), 60–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2014.899477>
- Barton, R. (2015). 'Good riddance to the stinkin' place': Deindustrialisation and memory at associated pulp and paper mills in Burnie, Tasmania. *Labour History*, 109, 149–167. <https://doi.org/10.5263/labourhistory.109.0149>
- Barton, R., & Fairbrother, P. (2014). What can unions do? Addressing multinational relocation in North West Tasmania. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 56(5), 691–708. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185614533693>
- Beer, A., & Clower, T. (2014). Mobilizing leadership in cities and regions. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 1(1), 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2013.869428>
- Beer, A., Clower, T., Haughtow, G., & Maude, A. (2005). Neoliberalism and the institutions for regional development in Australia. *Geographical Research*, 43, 49–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-5871.2005.00292.x>
- Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE). (2008). *A regional economy: A case study of Tasmania* (Report No. 116). Canberra: BITRE.
- Burgmann, M., & Burgmann, V. (1998). *Green bans, Red union*. Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Burnie Trades and Labor Council. (1946). *Rules of the Burnie Trades and Labor Council, established 2-7-1939*. Burnie: Burnie Trades and Labor Council.
- Clarke, R. (1984). *The picket: Tasmanian mine workers defend their jobs*. Broadway: Resistance Books.
- Collits, P. (2015). Regional policy in post-war Australia: Much ado about nothing. In A. Hogan, & M. Young (Eds.), *Rural and regional futures* (pp. 19–37). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cradle Coast Authority (CCA). (2012a). *Welcome to the Cradle Coast Authority*. Burnie: CCA. Retrieved from <http://www.cradlecoast.com/>
- Cradle Coast Authority (CCA). (2012b). *The board*. Burnie: CCA. Retrieved from http://www.cradlecoast.com/board_members.html
- Daily Telegraph*. (1922). Unions combine: Movement in Launceston, Trades and Labor Council formed. *Daily Telegraph*, March 7, 4.
- Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources (DIER). (2013). *Tasmanian freight survey, data summary 2013*. Hobart: DIER.
- Devonport City Council. (2014). *Devonport City Council strategic plan 2009–2030*. Devonport: Devonport City Council.
- Devonport Trades and Labor Council. (1945). *The Advocate*, March 16, 2.
- Dingwall, D. (2015). Cradle Coast Authority to listen to councils. *The Advocate*, February 4. Retrieved from <http://www.theadvocate.com.au>
- Dowling, K. (2010). Recording Tasmanian labour history: Analysing the narratives of three breakthrough women union leaders. *Tasmanian Historical Studies*, 15, 151–174. Retrieved from <http://www.utas.edu.au/humanities/research/centre-for-tasmanian-historical-studies>
- Economic Policy Branch. (2013). *Structural change in the Tasmanian economy: Information paper*. Hobart: Department of Treasury and Finance.
- Eversole, R. (2016). *Regional development in Australia: Being regional*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Eversole, R., & McCall, T. (2014). Constructing advantage in the Cradle Coast region, Tasmania: Knowledge partnering as a regional development platform approach. *Regional Science Policy and Practice*, 6(3), 251–263. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsp3.12038>
- Fairbrother, P. (2015). Rethinking trade unionism: Union renewal as transition. *Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 26(4), 561–576. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035304615616593>
- Fairbrother, P., & Gekara, V. (2016). Multi-scalar trade unionism: Lessons from maritime unions. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 71(4), 589–610. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038524ar>
- Ford, R., & Goodwin, M. (2014). *Revolt on the right: Explaining support for the radical right in Britain*. London: Routledge.
- GHD. (2010). *Burnie: A thematic history*. Burnie: Burnie City Council.
- Goodwin, M. (2013). Regions, territories and relationality: Exploring the regional dimensions of political practice. *Regional Studies*, 47, 1181–1190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2012.697138>
- Heckscher, C., & McCarthy, J. (2014). Transient solidarities: Commitment and collective action in post-industrial societies. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 52(4), 627–657. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12084>
- Hess, M. (2011). Right vs left in the Tasmanian Liquor Trades Union. *Labour History*, 101, 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.5263/labourhistory.101.0145>

- Jacobs, K. (2007). Territorial modes of governance and the discourses of community reaction in the state of Tasmania. *Space and Polity*, 11(3), 263–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562570701811577>
- Jessop, B., Brenner, N., & Jones, M. (2008). Theorizing sociospatial relations. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 26(3), 389–401. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d9107>
- Kingsworth, P. (2004). Tasmanian devilry. *The Ecologist*, December. Retrieved from <http://www.paulkingsnorth.net/features.html>
- Langenberg, A. (2015). Central coast votes to remain with Cradle Coast authority. *The Advocate*, May 18. Retrieved from <http://www.theadvocate.com.au>
- Lillie, N. (2005). Union networks and global unionism in maritime shipping. *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, 60(1), 88–111. <https://doi.org/10.7202/011540ar>
- Mackinnon, D. (2011). Reconstructing scale: Towards a new scalar politics. *Progress in Human Geography*, 35, 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132510367841>
- Macleod, G., & Goodwin, M. (1999). Space, scale and state strategy: Rethinking urban and regional governance. *Progress in Human Geography*, 23(4), 503–527. <https://doi.org/10.1191/030913299669861026>
- Macleod, G., & Jones, M. (2007). Territorial, scalar, networked, connected: In what sense a ‘regional world’? *Regional Studies*, 41(9), 1177–1191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400701646182>
- Massey, D. (2004). Geographies of responsibility. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 86(1), 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0435-3684.2004.00150.x>
- McDonald, C., Kirk-Brown, A., Frost, L., Van Dijk, P., & Rainnie, A. (2013). Partnerships and integrated responses to rural decline: The role of collective efficacy and political capital in northwest Tasmania, Australia. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 32, 346–356. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2013.08.003>
- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). (2016). *Memorandum of understanding*. Retrieved from http://www.utas.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/855329/MOU-TasTAFE-Burn~pecific-matters-on-university-expansion-in-the-North-West-Tasmania-19-February-2016.PDF
- Morgan, K. J. (2007). The polycentric state: New spaces of empowerment and engagement? *Regional Studies*, 41, 1237–1251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343400701543363>
- Morgan, K. J. (2014). The rise of metropolitics: Urban governance in the age of the city-region. In N. Bradford & A. Bramwell (Eds.), *Governing urban economies: Innovation and inclusion in Canadian city-regions* (pp. 297–318). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- O’Brien, P., Pike, A., & Tomaney, J. (2004). Devolution, the governance of regional development and the trade union congress in the North East region of England. *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, 35, 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2003.05.001>
- Pape, M., Fairbrother, P., & Snell, D. (2016). Beyond the state: Shaping governance and development policy in an Australian region. *Regional Studies*, 50(5), 909–921. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2015.1055461>
- Pike, A., Marlow, D., McCarthy, A., O’Brien, P., & Tomaney, J. (2015). Local institutions and local economic development: The local enterprise partnerships in England, 2010. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 8(2), 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsu030>
- Quinlan, M., & Lindley, M. (2006). Trade unions. In A. Alexander (Ed.), *The companion to Tasmanian history*. Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, University of Tasmania. Retrieved from http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/T/Trade%20unions.htm
- Sayer, L. (2015). Plan for Murchison region. *The Advocate*, September 18. Retrieved from <http://www.theadvocate.com.au>
- Snell, D., & Fairbrother, P. (2010). Unions as environmental actors. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 16(3), 411–424. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258910373874>
- Snell, D., & Fairbrother, P. (2011). Toward a theory of union environmental politics: Unions and climate action in Australia. *Labor Studies Journal*, 36(1), 83–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X10392526>
- Sotarauta, M. (2014). Reflections on ‘mobilizing leadership in cities and regions’. *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 1(1), 28–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2013.869431>
- Sotarauta, M., & Beer, A. (2017). Governance, agency and place leadership: Lessons from a cross-national analysis. *Journal of Regional Studies*, 51(2), 210–223. <http://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2015.1119265>
- Tasmanian Government. (2011). *Economic development plan: Overview*. Hobart: State of Tasmania. Retrieved from <https://stors.tas.gov.au/802039>
- Thomas, H., Beer, A., & Bailey, D. (2008). A tale of two regions: Comparative versus competitive approaches to economic restructuring. *Policy Studies*, 29(3), 357–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442870802160085>
- Unions Tasmania. (2011). *Unions Tasmania directory 2011*. Hobart: Unions Tasmania.
- Unions Tasmania. (2015). *Annual report, 2015*. Hobart: Unions Tasmania. Retrieved from <http://unionstas.com.au/attachments/article/68/Unions%20Tasmania%20Annual%20Report%202015.pdf>
- Walker, M., & Fairbrother, P. (2015). *Labour market profile: North West Tasmania* (People and the Economy Report No. 2). Melbourne: RMIT University.