



'We'll all be rooned', but 'it's a great place to live'

Negotiating contradictory narratives of rurality for more effective policy-making

Professor Geoff Cockfield, Resilient Regions Week public lecture October 2, 2019

Institute for Resilient Regions (IRR) & Rural Economies Centre of Excellence (RECoE)

- ❑ Approach and context
- ❑ Reflecting on Australian rurality
- ❑ The challenges for rural development practitioners and advocates
- ❑ Narratives for policy action
- ❑ Some approaches to contemporary rural development policy

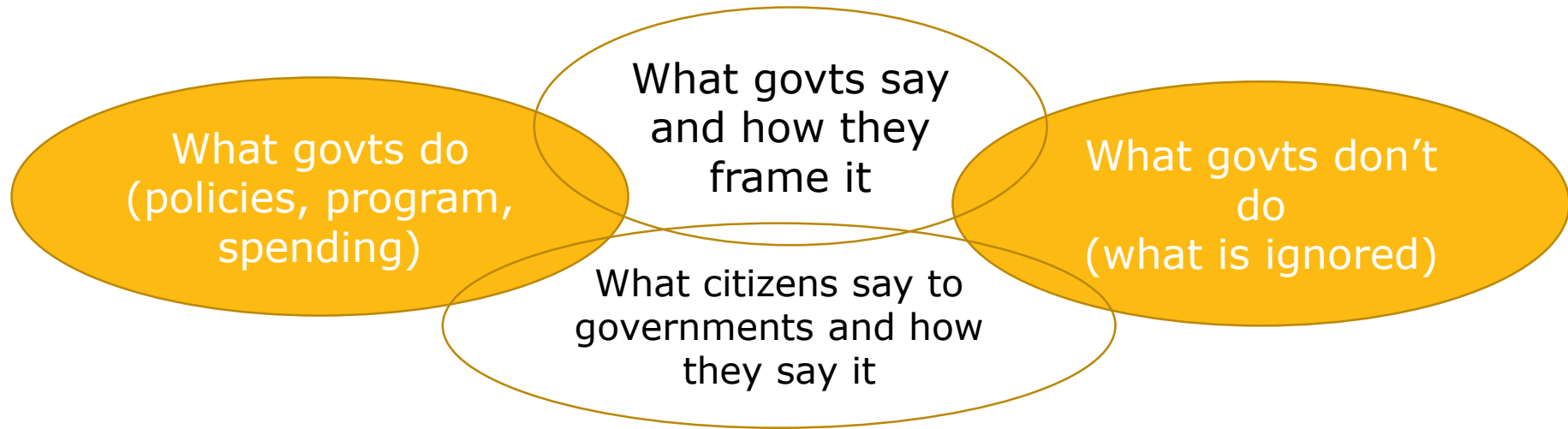
- ❑ Policy studies perspective
 - ❑ Understanding the policy 'ecosystems'
 - ❑ Actors, institutions, political culture, values
- ❑ Informed by:
 - ❑ Study of regional development policy
 - ❑ Comparative study of the US and Australia
 - ❑ Observations from engagement with regional development practitioners
- ❑ Primarily addressing those engaged in or with rural development

Policy normally addresses a 'problem'

- ❑ Means of disaggregating complex situations
- ❑ Enables focus on specific area
- ❑ Can sell the political message (we will fix it)
- ❑ Selection of specific policy instruments
- ❑ Can evaluate progress in mitigating the problem

** But 'opportunities' are also important considerations in rural development*

Look at both narratives & decisions



Look for the underlying values in policy choices

- ❑ Values are selected and prioritised
- ❑ Evidence can inform policy but values are primary
- ❑ Value priorities can shift over time



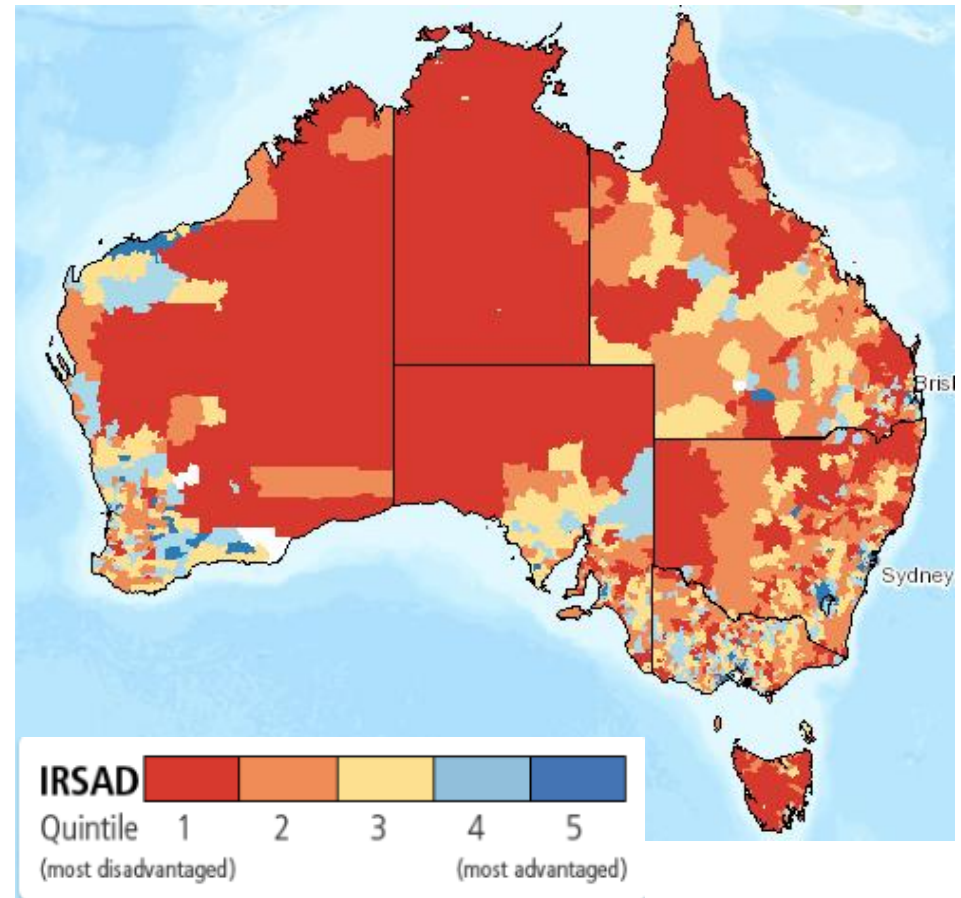
Why policy narratives matter

- ❑ Competition for political attention
- ❑ Means of persuasion and justification
- ❑ Representing and mobilising values
- ❑ Mobilising emotions
- ❑ Signalling preferences and intentions
- ❑ Creating advocacy coalitions
- ❑ Reflected in policy content

- ❑ A centralising federation
 - ❑ Constitution vs interpretation
 - ❑ Vertical fiscal imbalance (who has the gold makes the rules)
 - ❑ The subordination of local government
- ❑ A parental political culture
 - ❑ Looking to government for the solution to problems
 - ❑ Funders not (often) partners
 - ❑ Fear of ceding control
- ❑ Partisanship
 - ❑ Exaggerating differences
 - ❑ Revising language and programs

- ❑ Where there is a history of high dependence on agriculture
- ❑ Generally narrow economic base & labour markets
- ❑ Tendency to long-term depopulation
- ❑ Low rates of investment and capital flight
- ❑ Punctuated by areas of 'growth'
 - ❑ Regional centres and surrounds
 - ❑ Extractive industries support towns
 - ❑ Amenity or peri-urban transition areas
 - ❑ Some First Peoples' communities

- ❑ Relative disadvantage
- ❑ Transport & communications
- ❑ Social services
- ❑ Cultural capital
- ❑ Educational attainment & opportunities
- ❑ (unrealistic?) Expectations of 'revival' (repopulation & investment)
- ❑ The contradictions in government rhetoric and policy



2033.0.55.001 - Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, 2016

- ❑ Fairness and equity
 - ❑ Addressing relative inequality and fairness
 - ❑ Minimum service provision for citizens
- ❑ Decentralisation
 - ❑ For defence and regional development
- ❑ Maintaining the arteries of the rural economy
- ❑ The special roles and history of rural people & communities
- ❑ Policy legacies (and obligations?)

**Policy and program decisions
create path dependency and
constrain future policy options**

- ❑ Settlement & resettlement decisions
- ❑ Towns, services, infrastructure
- ❑ Public irrigation systems
- ❑ Land use rules
- ❑ Creating systems & expectations
- ❑ But does it leave an obligation?
- ❑ If so, how long does the obligation last?



The agrarian narrative

- ❑ Esteeming and promoting the 'special' roles of agriculture and rural life
 - ❑ Fundamental sector
 - ❑ Foundation of the nation
 - ❑ Country life as a moral life
 - ❑ Rural character 'traits'
 - ❑ A positive contrast to 'the city'
- ❑ A story of struggle
 - ❑ Market & climatic volatility
 - ❑ Exploited by big business & big labour
 - ❑ Political power in the cities



Agrarianism in political rhetoric

Australia's economic and environmental future has always been and will always be dependent on the success of rural and regional Australia

The bush has a wonderful place in the soul of every Australian

I want Australians in regional areas in particular to know that their efforts, their struggles and their values are respected by all Australians

Our farmers are Australia's best environmentalists



Daily Telegraph Bush Summit, Dubbo, July 18, 2019



But, policy transition

Exceptionalism

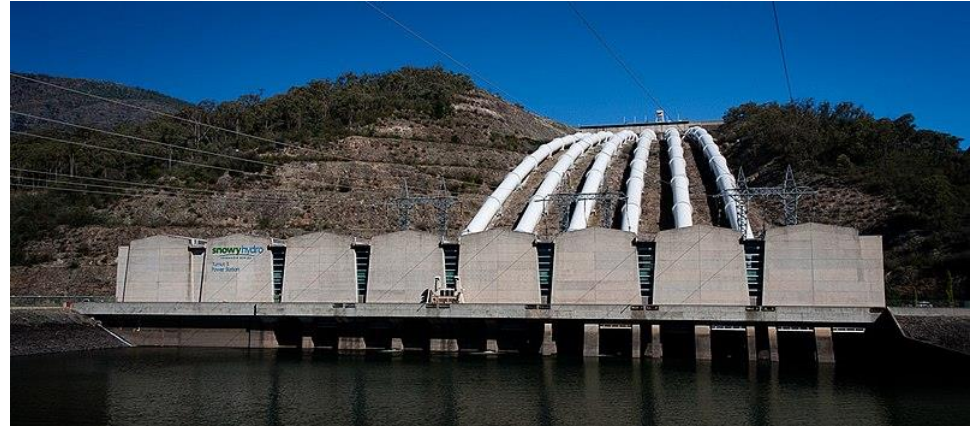
- ❑ Special roles of agriculture
 - ❑ Food security
 - ❑ 'Civilising' the nation
 - ❑ Comparative advantage
- ❑ Special difficulties
 - ❑ Market & climate volatility
 - ❑ Predatory buyers
- ❑ Policy responses
 - ❑ Land re-distribution
 - ❑ Support towns and services
 - ❑ 'Protection all round'
 - ❑ Marketing and distribution systems
 - ❑ Cost subsidies, etc
- ❑ Ag policy **was** rural development policy

To post-exceptionalism

- ❑ 'Equitable' policy treatment of sectors
- ❑ The inefficiency of protection & market distortions
- ❑ Enabling trade for other sectors
- ❑ Individual choice & self reliance
- ❑ Residual and *ad hoc* agricultural and rural development programs
 - ❑ Grants
 - ❑ Drought aid

- ❑ Agricultural policy as decentralization policy

- ❑ Through land settlement & agricultural intensification
 - ❑ Support towns



- ❑ Industrial decentralization (mainly to regional cities)
- ❑ Efforts at boosting rural cities & centres
- ❑ Limited regional public transport connections
- ❑ Acceptance of (inevitable?) urbanization





The dominant political thinking?

❑ Residual agrarian rhetoric

- ❑ You are vital to the nation and represent core values
- ❑ We would be happy with more people & investment in rural areas
- ❑ We want you to live in better conditions ... but

❑ Post-exceptionalist practice

- ❑ Farmers and rural communities must be (mostly) self-reliant for the good of the economy ... and we don't have much money
- ❑ We can't positively discriminate too much (equality of opportunity)
- ❑ The cost of services per person is high
- ❑ People are free to choose where and how they live
- ❑ We provide (mostly) equality of opportunity
- ❑ Underdevelopment in rural Australia is too big a problem

❑ Dealing with policy demands in general

- ❑ The problems are numerous and overwhelming



Some approaches to contemporary rural development policy



Managing local expectations

- ❑ Counter-urbanization is rare and brief
- ❑ People attraction is more than jobs
 - ❑ Amenity
 - ❑ Proximity to other centres
 - ❑ Natural features
 - ❑ A welcoming community
- ❑ Retention is important too
 - ❑ Integration of incomers
- ❑ A small town can still be a good town
- ❑ Maintaining social capital and goodwill
- ❑ There are already entrepreneurs in the community

Aggregation

- ❑ Rural disadvantage as a heuristic
- ❑ Building advocacy coalitions
- ❑ Political leverage
- ❑ Shared identity
- ❑ But it creates the 'wicked problem' of persistent rural underdevelopment

Disaggregation

- ❑ Understanding the problem
- ❑ Make it 'solvable'
- ❑ Target a functional area (health, education, etc)
- ❑ But with a focus on the compounding problems of distance and remoteness



Arguing for legacy obligations

- ❑ To First Peoples
- ❑ To citizens
- ❑ To keepers of the rural 'arteries'
- ❑ To custodians of some national heritage
- ❑ To people constrained by past policy decisions and actions

Favour the positive

- ❑ Working with existing goodwill
 - ❑ People generally appreciate farmers and rural communities
- ❑ Economic benefits of agriculture
- ❑ Agriculture as a modern industry
- ❑ Selling the rural image



But

- ❑ Not that inclusive
- ❑ Generally focused on one set of problems
- ❑ Can work against longer term policy



The values of choice

- ❑ The foundation of market thinking
- ❑ Individualism & personal responsibility
- ❑ Efficiency (movement of human resources)

Remote communities are 'lifestyle choices', says Tony Abbott

PM says it is right to axe funding for remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia if cost of providing services outweighs benefits



Barriers to exercising choice

- ❑ Attachment to country
- ❑ Attachment to family & community
- ❑ Skills and labour market opportunities
- ❑ Relative housing costs

Of opportunity

- ❑ To enable participation in society & economy
- ❑ Can be blind to culture, class, wealth, family and community context



Of outcomes

- ❑ The ultimate test of policies
- ❑ Evaluated to track all relevant factors
- ❑ If acted on, it brings generational change





From mendicants to partners to leaders

- ❑ Setting out what communities want and pursuing that
- ❑ Leveraging regional 'moments'
- ❑ Demanding and driving joined up government
- ❑ Refusing *ad hoc* funding and making counter proposals
- ❑ Where are the 'rural/remote community deals'?



Rural development is now much more than agricultural development.

The policy and engagement space is cluttered by narratives – only some are meaningful.

Policy and program engagement can be better with a clear problem definition and focus, strategic but positive rhetoric and managing upwards.

Argue back against dominant but irrelevant or distracting policy narratives. There is a case for obligations; fairness; equality of outcomes; constraints on choice.