



Charles Henry Woolcott,  
Busby's bore. Watercolour. It  
shows the standpipe in Hyde Park  
which dispensed Sydney's regular  
water supply from 1837.

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## CHAPTER 27

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT has its primary and secondary literature and also figures (though rarely significantly) in general accounts of government in Australia. It is connected, too, with the somewhat exclusive but popular industry of writing local histories. This essay examines first the primary and local history literature, and then focuses on the evolution of the secondary—and most easily accessible—literature of books and journal articles.

### PRIMARY LITERATURE

A copious primary literature on local government is to be found in the state acts of parliament establishing the local government systems, the rules and by-laws passed by the municipal councils, their annual and other reports, and particularly the reports of the increasing number of royal commissions and committees of inquiry appointed by the state governments to advise on local government reform.

A useful introduction to the reports these inquiries have produced is M.R. Rawlinson (1975) and there is also a list in R.L. Wettenhall (1979). Notable among the more recent reports is that of the Board of Review of the Role, Structure and Administration of Local Government in Victoria (chairman: M. Bains, 1979). A review of the publications of local governments was prepared by Gregory P. Jones (1979). In the same article Jones also dealt with the 'industry' journals published by the various local government associations (or municipal associations) representing the elected members of councils and professional staff associations. Amongst these the most notable is probably *Local government administration*, the quarterly journal of the Institute of Municipal Administration. Also falling within this category are the papers and published proceedings of the biennial national seminars of the Institute of Municipal Administration. Some yearbooks and occasional manuals published privately serve as guides to local government procedures and changes in local government law. The following titles are among the better known in this category of publications: *The Victorian local government handbook* and *Town planning and local government guide*, both irregularly issued by the Law Book Co, Melbourne; the *Victorian municipal directory: state guide and water supply record*, issued biennially in Melbourne by Arnall and Jackson; and *Bluett's local government handbook (New South Wales)*, published irregularly by the Law Book Co, Sydney.

None of this specialist material is readily accessible to the general enquirer, and to understand it properly it is advisable to begin with some of the secondary works considered later in this essay.



There are also hundreds of local histories which vary greatly in content and quality. Some have very little to do with local government; others are commissioned by municipal councils to commemorate openings, jubilees, centenaries. Even then, they may be social histories of districts rather than histories of governmental arrangements; but some make excellent contributions to the literature of local government. Pre-eminent among this group is the centenary history of the city of Brisbane by Greenwood and Laverty (1959). Brisbane is unique among the Australian capitals because it is governed as a single 'greater city' entity, a reform achieved in 1925 which makes this largest Australian local government a bigger population and revenue unit than the smallest state (Tasmania). A good example of the more recent work which contributes both to local history and local *government* history is M.A. Jones's (1983) study of the Dandenongs and the City of Knox in Victoria. The work by Barrett (1979) and Dunstan (1984) should also be noted.

On local history generally, see Philip Geeves, *Local history in Australia: a guide for beginners*, of which a 2nd edition was published by the Royal Australian Historical Society in 1971, and the article by R. Ian Jack, 'Local history in Australia', in *Current affairs bulletin* 54, 2, 1977, 24–30. The best bibliography of local histories to date is Carole Beaumont's *Local history in Victoria: an annotated bibliography* (Bundoora, Vic, La Trobe University Library, 1980). Bibliographies for other states are in preparation.

### SECONDARY LITERATURE

Until the 1970s, secondary literature about Australian local government was extremely sparse. Local government was generally regarded as the poorest, least efficient and least important of the three levels of government in the federation. Consequently its affairs attracted little serious consideration from those academic or other researchers who could have provided the information resource on which such a literature might have been based. Of course local government gained brief mention in most general works about government in Australia, but that fell far short of a literature about local government in its own right.

The University of Sydney had long been the oasis in this desert. It established the first 'school' for the study of public administration in this country, and a small group of scholars who took local government seriously emerged around the figure of Professor F.A. Bland, appointed to the first Australian chair of public administration in 1935. Thus scholars like Parker, Atkins and Bland himself began to write about local government along with their work on state and federal government, while Larcombe emerged as a specialist in local government history.

Besides the works by Atkins, Bland and Larcombe listed in the bibliography, see also the broader surveys by R.S. Parker: 'The government of New South Wales', in S.R. Davis ed, *The government of the Australian states* (Melbourne, Longmans, 1960) and *The government of New South Wales* (UQP, 1978, ch 7). Because the local governments most familiar to these pioneering scholars were those in New South Wales, the experiences they recorded and the conclusions drawn from them were mostly New South Wales based.

As very little work of this kind was being done in other states, the impression emerged that these experiences were typical of the whole country. Some research into local government in the other states took place in the years after World War II, but the outcomes were generally published in elusive booklets and journals. Notable among these were J.R.H. Johns, *Metropolitan government in Western Australia* (Perth, Dept of Economics, University of Western Australia, 1950) and Alan Davies, *Local government in Victoria* (MUP, 1951).

By the early 1970s, a number of nationwide stereotypes had developed: notably that local government was invariably weak and impecunious; that it had been forced on unwilling communities by state governments seeking to divest themselves of responsibilities; that it functioned merely as 'the administrative agent of the state'; and that it was more corrupt (largely because it was supposed to be dominated by estate agents and property developers) and less efficient than the other levels of government.

The election of the federal Labor government under E.G. Whitlam at the close of 1972 brought substantial change. For the first time a federal government insisted on establishing direct



links compelling local government to give greater consideration to the provision of welfare and other personal services. The Whitlam government also set up a systematic data base on local government—the Australian Municipal Information System—within the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and in 1976 local government obtained representation in its own right on the new Advisory Council on Inter-Government Relations. Along with the initiatives of the Whitlam government, controversial quality-of-life issues were emerging to confront local as well as all other levels of government, while local government became caught up in the growing credentialism and professionalism of representative bodies and management groups. So it began to attract the attention of researchers, writers and educators throughout the country.

Now messages came from South Australia that local government in that state did not fit the stereotype at all well. The problem of differentiation was clearly pointed out by J.B.Hirst (1973) and further examined by J.R. Robbins in his PhD thesis (University of Adelaide, 1975) entitled 'Local government and community in South Australia'. Comparative study across the six state systems was quickly generated, and the works by Bowman and subsequently by the group involved in preparing the encyclopaedic *Local government systems of Australia* (Power et al, 1981) demonstrated that there was much diversity. Comparisons showed, for example, that as late as 1905 only 1 per cent of New South Wales was administered by municipalities, whereas virtually all of Victoria had been so covered by the 1860s. In several states municipal institutions had been enthusiastically embraced by local communities, sometimes as safeguards against encroaching state power; mostly in those states, local government had exhibited much greater strength against the state government even though it may have managed a fairly narrow range of functions. There were indeed vast differences between the six systems, and the assumed stereotypes came to be seen as (sometimes very damaging) myths rather than expressions of the reality of Australian local government.

The belated recognition both of this general myth–reality misfit and of the separateness of the state experiences has challenged scholars to research more carefully, and to document and compare the various systems. Thus the last decade has seen a considerable expansion in available published studies. It has also seen many expressions of the advantages to be had from administration of services close to the communities being served. Today the diversity, challenge and opportunity of local government are highlighted, in stark contrast to the pessimistic tone of the few works of earlier generations.

The titles listed below include some examples of work from the earlier period. Most, however, come from more recent times, and show that some researchers and writers (including the author of this survey) have found cause—in the circumstances briefly described above—to revise their understandings about the development and role of local government in Australia. Some of the reasons for my own conversion are explained in 'Towards a reinterpretation of Tasmania's local government history', which appeared in the *J R Aust Hist Soc* 67, 2, 1981, 102–18. See also the 'Overview of local government in Australia', in Power et al (1981).





- ATKINS, R. *Albany to Zeehan: a new look at local governments*. Sydney, Law Book Co, 1979. 147 p.
- Emphasises the diversity of Australian local governments and challenges some stereotyped views about them (an appendix presents brief sketches of a 'scattered sample' of 30 local authorities).
- ATKINS, R. AND WETTENHALL, R. 'Local government', in *The Australian encyclopaedia*, Sydney, Grolier, 1983, 6, 133–8.
- An overview of the history, structure, functions and financing of Australian local governments, posing the question of whether they are merely agents of the states.
- BARRETT, A.H.B. *The civic frontier: the origin of local communities and local government in Victoria*. Melbourne, MUP, 1979. 329 p, illus.
- Detailed and scholarly study published in the centenary year of the Municipal Association of Vic.
- BLAND, F.A. *Government in Australia* (2nd edn). Sydney, Government Printer, 1939. 761 p.
- Chapters 17 and 18 of this comprehensive book of readings and commentaries deal with local government generally and in metropolitan areas. The 1944 edition is revised and enlarged.
- BOWMAN, M. *Local government in the Australian states*. Canberra, AGPS, 1976. 95 p.
- First comparative study of local authorities in Australia, sponsored by the Whitlam government's Dept of Urban and Regional Development.
- BOWMAN, M. *The suburban political process: in Box Hill, Melbourne*. University of Melbourne, 1978. 160 p. (Melbourne politics monograph, 5).
- A study of citizen participation in local government in Box Hill municipality, Melbourne. First published in 1973.
- BOWMAN, M. AND HAMPTON, W. eds, *Local democracies: a study in comparative local government*. Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1983. 207 p.
- An introductory study in comparative local government, relating to local government systems of Australia and the Pacific Basin to each other and to their largely British heritage.
- CHAPMAN, R.J.K. AND WOOD, M. *Australian local government: the federal dimension*. Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1984. 208 p.
- Considers local government as an actor with considerable advantages within Australian federalism and the networks of intergovernmental relations.
- DUNSTAN, D. *Governing the metropolis: politics, technology and social change in a Victorian city: Melbourne 1850–1891*. Melbourne, MUP, 1984. 362 p, illus.
- A history of local government and administration in Melbourne with particular attention to the possibility of the amalgamation of local authorities and the interaction between local authorities and non-elective public utilities.
- GREENWOOD, G. AND LAVERTY, J. *Brisbane 1859–1959: a history of local government*. Brisbane, Ziegler for the Council of the City of Brisbane, 1959. 695 p, illus, maps.
- The centenary history of local government in the only Australian capital city to be reformed (in 1925) as a single unified local authority.
- HARRIS, C.P. *The classification of Australian local authorities*. Canberra, Australian National University, 1975. 126 p. (Centre for Research on Federal Financial Relations. Research monograph, 9).
- An attempt to sort Australian local governments into categories, mainly intended to facilitate the payment of federal equalisation grants.
- HIRST, J.B. *Adelaide and the country, 1870–1971: their social and political relationship*. MUP, 1973. 266 p, illus.
- An account of settlement in SA, stressing Adelaide's dominance throughout and the development of municipal institutions which challenged the NSW-based stereotypes.
- JONES, G.P. 'Local government publications', in D.H. Borchardt ed, *Australian official publications*. Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1979, 271–80.
- The first attempt to examine critically the literature by local governments in Australia.
- JONES, M.A. *Local government and the people: challenges for the eighties*. Melbourne, Hargreen, 1981. 175 p.
- Examines the challenges, opportunities and dangers for Australian local governments as they enter the 1980s.
- JONES, M.A. *Organisational and social planning in Australian local government*. Melbourne, Heinemann Educational, 1977. 294 p.
- Considers problems of organisation, management and planning in, and the environment of, local government.
- JONES, M.A. *Prolific in God's gifts: a social history of Knox and the Dandenongs*. Sydney, Allen & Unwin in association with the City of Knox, 1983. 328 p, illus, maps.
- Commissioned by the City of Knox to mark its 20th anniversary, this is an excellent recent example of the local history that is both general social history and local government history.
- KNIBBS, G.H. *Local government in Australia*. Melbourne, Government Printer, 1919. 313 p.
- A digest of the statutory provisions governing the operation of the local government systems in each state at the end of World War I, by the then commonwealth statistician.
- LARCOMBE, F.A. *A history of local government in New South Wales*. Sydney, SUP, 1973–78. 3 vols.
- A definitive account of the chequered progress of local government in NSW from its inception to the mid-1970s. Each volume has a separate title. Supersedes the author's *The development of local government in New South Wales* (1961).
- MATHEWS, R. ed, *Local government in transition: responsibilities, finances, management*. Canberra, Centre for Research on Federal Financial Relations, Australian National University, 1978. 147 p.
- Reviews local government during the period of the Fraser government, especially in the areas of federalism, community development, social welfare, public finance and management innovation.
- PARKIN, A. *Governing the cities: the Australian experience in perspective*. Melbourne, Macmillan, 1982. 147 p.
- Considers the role of local governments along with that of the states and commonwealth in urban government and politics in Australia.
- POWER, J. et al, *Local government systems of Australia*. AGPS, 1981. 830 p, illus. Advisory Council on Inter-Government Relations, Information paper, 7.
- A comparison of the several Australian systems containing studies of local government in each state and an overview by the editors.
- PURDIE, D.M. *Local government in Australia: reformation or regression?* Sydney, Law Book Co, 1976. 200 p.
- This book focuses on the seeming paradox of Australian local government in the mid-1970s.
- RAWLINSON, M.R. 'Administering local government reform in Australia: the state experience', in *The first thousand days of Labor*, comp by R.L.Wettenhall and M.Painter. Canberra, Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1975, 2, 67–82.



A review of proposals for local government reform (including boundary adjustment) resulting from inquiries in all states except Qld in the period 1962–75.

STRETTON, H. *Ideas for Australian cities* (2nd edn). Melbourne, Georgian House, 1975. 367 p, illus, map.

A trailblazing study relating local and other levels of government in Australia's cities to the search for a return to civilised urban living. First published in 1970.

TUCKER, J.D. *et al*, *Local government in Queensland*. Canberra. Australian Institute of Urban Studies, 1981-. v, illus, maps.

A comprehensive study of local government in Qld sponsored by the Qld Division of the Australian Institute of Urban Studies.

VICTORIA. Board of Review of the Role, Structure and Administration of Local Government in Victoria. *Local government in Victoria: role structure and administration*. Board

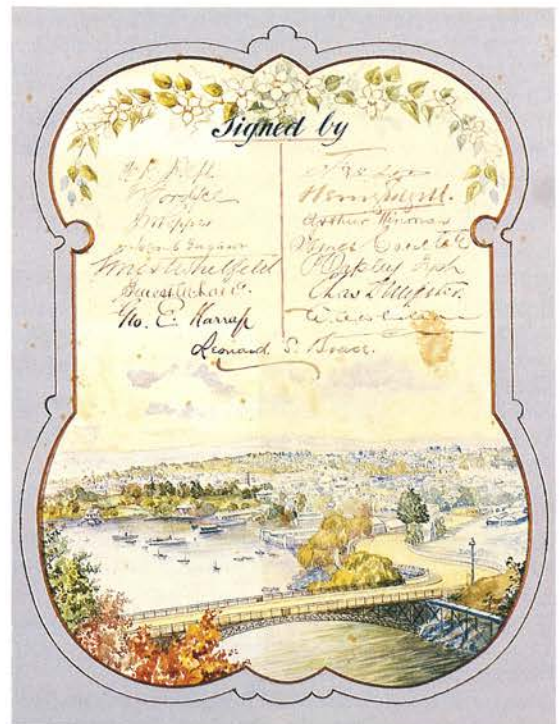
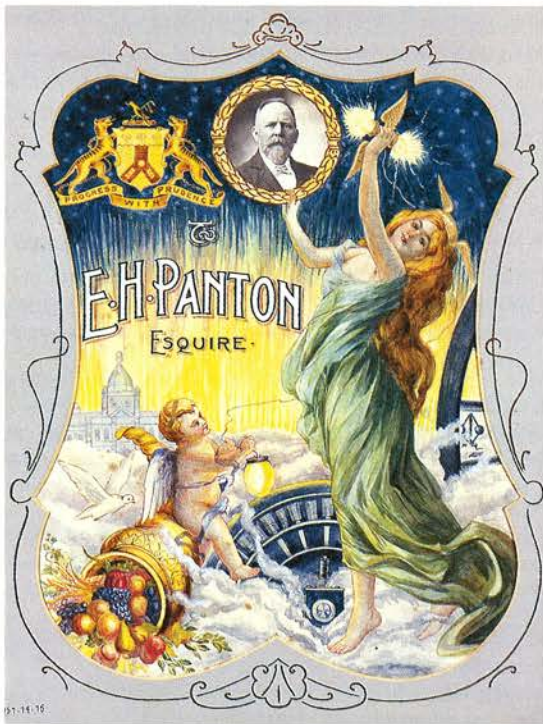
of Review final report [and] research appendices. Melbourne, Government Printer, 1979–80. 5 vols.

The most comprehensive so far of the reports resulting from recent public inquiries into local government systems in several states. Most of the inquiries can be traced through Borchardt's *Checklist of royal commissions, select committees of parliament and boards of inquiries*, 1958– (see chapter 7 of this volume).

WETTENHALL, R.L. 'Local government in Australia', in D.H.Borchardt ed, *Australian official publications*. Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1979, 27–56.

A chapter concerned with government publications at all levels; succinct overview of the role of local government.

WINSTON, D. *Sydney's great experiment: the progress of the Cumberland County Plan*. A & R, 1957. 146 p, illus, maps. An account of one of Australia's most ambitious metropolitan planning schemes and the role of local government in that scheme, before the abandonment of the particular administrative apparatus described.



Testimonial to E.H. Panton presented in 1905 on his retirement after fifteen years as alderman on the Launceston City Council. Born near Hobart in 1847, Panton owned several prominent hotels and enjoyed a variety of sporting interests. Testimonials of this kind, featuring elaborate illuminated addresses, appropriate mottoes and coats of arms and signed by colleagues and wellwishers, were common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

QUEEN VICTORIA MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY, LAUNCESTON