New Zealand needs community boards more than ever

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This article reprises a draft speech prepared for the 2011 community board conference that never saw the light of day. It seems rather relevant at the moment.

With many councils undertaking representation reviews at the moment the future of community boards becoming more and more topical, with boards in many districts and cities having to make the case for their continued existence. Indeed, some councils are even suggesting that impending local reform will make community boards irrelevant. Yet quite the opposite is true. We don't need less local democracy, we actually need a lot more.

As anyone who attends a community board conference would know, community boards are play a role in building strong communities and addressing the sort of problems and issues that both communities and neighbourhoods face. They do this by working with their communities and harnessing the knowledge and enthusiasm of local citizens to make neighbourhoods and communities better places in which to live. Citizens working with their elected representatives to develop solutions that are appropriate to their own circumstances is needed more than ever - we cannot depend on politicians and bureaucrats in Wellington to find the all the answers.

Background

Community boards are one of the ways in which councils keep in touch with the flax roots, a role that has increased in importance as local authorities have become larger and communities more diverse. And, even though regarded as a device to get over local opposition to amalgamation, they are not new. Although established as part of the 1989 re-organisation process they continued the tradition of community councils. Community councils were our first sub-municipal democratic model, with more than 150 in place before the changes of 19. Today there are about 110 community boards in 40 or so councils, plus the 21 local boards in Auckland Council. Local boards are often seen as "super charged" community boards (the next generation so to speak) yet apart from the two island boards (Waiheke and Great Barrier) most are larger than the average district council. Whereas community boards have a strong advocacy and representation role, local boards have a major role as local service providers. As a result they suffer from being neither one nor the other, and, as with many councils, they tend to represent multiple place-based communities, effectively deepening our democratic deficit.

New Zealand's reform of Local government in 1989, which consolidated 828 local bodies into just 87 territorial and regional councils, contributed to a major democratic deficit that left NZ, on a per capita basis, with fewer local authorities and fewer elected members than any virtually any other country in the OECD. Reform was instrumental

and placed efficiency and capacity objectives above representation of communities of interest. H G Wells' comment that English local government boundaries appeared to have been "mapped out by the wanderings of an intoxicated extortionist" could also apply to parts of New Zealand. With many councils having grown beyond the natural boundaries of communities of interest, responsibility for representing those communities and enabling them to make decisions about their neighbourhoods is left to community boards.

Back to the future

Paradoxically, when considering the role and future of community boards it is helpful to go back more than 200 years to Edmund Burke, the conservative thinker and strong advocate for representative democracy, who was concerned with the need to find a middle way between the Tory party's desire for order and Whig party's desire for liberty. One of his solutions involved the idea of the "little platoons". Burke described little platoons as the first sub-division that we belong to in society. In fact he refers to them as the "germ" of society (not of the virus sort, hopefully). Little platoons are the grass roots civic organisations, like voluntary associations, neighbourhood groups, and small scale governments such as community boards. Their strength is their connection to neighbourhoods and ability to bring decision-making down to a level where citizens can have real influence.

The importance of localness and community is not just the terrain of conservative philosophers like Burke. Michael Sandel, one of the world's leading moral philosophers, and a progressive thinker, made a similar point when speaking at a Local Government New Zealand conference some years ago. In Sandel's view, attachment to such local organisations connects us to our cities and towns, and thus to the country and humanity as a whole. Commenting on consultation and engagement, Sandel argued:

> to deliver services better, to make government work better, to be more efficient, more responsive, to figure out what people in the communities want and need, (is) of course, crucially important. But implicit in the idea of consultation with communities is another more demanding, more ambitious, you might say idealistic, dimension of democracy, and that has to do with promoting, fostering a richer kind of citizenship and of civic engagement (Michael Sandel, LGNZ Conference, Christchurch 2005).

Our challenge is to enable citizens to have a real say about how their communities and neighbourhoods work, not only to ensure the right services are provided but also to contribute to more resilient communities which are able to resolve many of their own issues.

The value of Local and sub-local democracy was also recognised by Walter Lippman who was concerned that growing centralization had generated problems that can only be relieved through a return to older forms of social organization (ironic given that he was writing in the early 20th Century). Lippman called these communitarian institutions (see also the work of Amitai Etzioni), and saw them as essential if democracy was to have a

future. He was also seriously nostalgic for the kind of town hall democracy that De Tocqueville so valued during his time in North America:

> A century ago the model of popular government was the self-sufficient township in which the voter's opinion was formed and corrected by talk with their neighbours – under absentee government (governments the grown too big) these checks upon opinion are lacking.

The need for sub-local democracy

Because of their size, complexity and the highly regulated way in which they work (long term plans, originally designed to enable citizens to have meaningful input into what councils do, have become quite the opposite) it is difficult for many councils to engage meaningfully. Community boards have the potential to bring citizens and local government closer together, establish relationships and work with and communities identify options for dealing with local issues – a form of "neighbourhood governance".

Strengthening neighbourhoods is one of those roles that sits uniquely inside the local government and community board mandate. While many organisations contribute to delivering efficient services local government's unique space is the quality of local governance and the provision of mechanisms that allow people to have a real say about what goes on in their neighbourhoods. Such mediating institutions play a crucial role in strengthening the fabric of our communities, including people's willingness to volunteer and help their neighbours and to express dissent. Providing avenues for people to interact and take part in civic life contributes to higher levels of trust and reciprocity..

Neighbourhoods were also a focus of a former mayor of Indiana, Stephen Goldsmith, who became mayor in 1992. Faced with seemingly intractable urban problems Goldsmith set about reversing what he saw as the ways in which local governments were actually perpetuating rather than solving the problems facing the city. Of interest was Goldsmith's focus on neighbourhood empowerment. From his experience as a city prosecutor he concluded that his city's over-riding problem was the disintegration of local civil society in which government programmes had created a culture of entitlement and the city's civic institutions seen as parochial backwaters. As a new mayor he staked his reputation on "reawakening the power in his city's neighbourhoods". Measures introduced included:

- sending senior managers out to meetings all over the city just to listen (a novel idea even here)
- investing in training programmes for neighbourhood leaders to teach them how to run grass roots organisations,
- establishing a community enhancement fund to make competitive awards to grass roots organisations
- investing in neighbourhood enhancement programmes which drew heavily on local volunteers, such as anti-graffiti programmes.

Goldsmith sought to organise the city government along boundaries that made sense to the residents and reflected real communities (the purpose of community boards) as

opposed to the administrative boundary of the council. Within his two terms as mayor (his policies were a step too far for some) Goldsmith promoted a form of municipal federalism in which council decision-making and services would be devolved to more locally based organisations. In his view, residents were wise enough to provide direction to their neighbourhoods, and government should be responsive to their wisdom.

Conclusion

The future of community boards is tied up with the future of community governance overall and the way in which citizens are able to have a meaningful say about what happens in their streets and their neighbourhoods. This is perhaps more important today given the growth of false truth narratives and willingness of authoritarian leaders to exploit social division and feelings of powerlessness. A strategy that enables people to have agency and to have a real say about the nature and development of their towns, cities and regions is urgent. Active citizens create what the economists call "positive externalities" - the more citizens network and interact with each other and take part in civic affairs the better the quality of community life. The challenge is to restore the commons and build social capital.

Local government and local democracy are critical factors. We should not underestimate the importance of local sports clubs and competitions and their contribution to building social capital, something that cannot be created by the centre. Social capital is also created in communities and neighbourhoods as a result of people brushing up against each other, forming relationships and identifying their common humanity. This is not a blank cheque for community boards. They too need to look at how they work and the degree to which they are engaging with their communities in a manner that empowers and enables. They are not "little councils" and if they are to have a future they need to see themselves as part of that community, not its government.

Although councils up and down New Zealand are debating whether to keep their community boards or not, the need for "sub-local" democracy has not gone away. In fact, as the country's population grows and becomes more diverse, and the more that central governments find themselves unable to address the critical issues facing our communities, the greater the need for more active and effective democratic engagement at a community level.