From White Shoes to Bold Future:  

the neoliberalization of local government in an Australian city?  

Final revised version accepted by Urban Studies  

June 2014
1. Introduction

Recent debates in critical urban studies about the significance of neoliberal perspectives in better understanding the nature of cities and processes of urban governance have focused on the importance of studying what Peck (2007) has referred to as ‘actually existing’ instances of neoliberalism in practice. There is also a growing acknowledgement that local practices of urban politics, planning and governance may be understood as the product of forces and factors that do not necessarily form part of the ‘neoliberal project’ (Sullivan, Griggs and Blanco, 2010). This extension of the analytical reach of the neoliberal perspective provides a welcome invitation to conduct empirical case studies of local urban politics and their impacts in particular places with a view to establishing whether or not they constitute forms of neoliberalism in practice or the extent to which they do so. With that in mind, this paper examines the changing form and impact of urban governance in one Australian city in order to explore in more detail the value of a neoliberal analytical lens and the scope for extending this analytical framework so that it is better able to account for the subtleties and sometimes contradictory process of planning and governance evident in this particular case.

But what is the theoretical significance of this case study? Two major cities have emerged in Australia over the last century. Following post-colonial confederation Canberra was designed to be the national capital and represents a commitment to large scale urban master planning; the city of Gold Coast on the other hand has grown as the result of more haphazard processes of urban development to become the sixth largest city in the country and has been described as the epitome of Australian neoliberal urbanisation (Bosman & Dredge, 2011). As Canberra celebrated its centenary and proclaimed itself ‘one of the most successful planned cities in the world’ (visitcanberra.com.au), in 2012 the Gold Coast elected a new council and mayor with a commitment to ‘getting the Gold Coast working again’ and restoring the city’s ‘have a go’ spirit (Tate, 2013). After a period in which the principles of sustainable
development and growth management dominated the local regime of urban governance, some of the more conventional principles of neoliberalism appear to have returned. The significance of Canberra in the Australian urban hierarchy lies both in its status as the nation’s capital city and in its continuing perception as an exemplar of highly planned city. But what of the Gold Coast? Is it any more than a collection of fast-growing seaside towns, assembled for administrative convenience and noted mainly for its apparent laid-back lifestyle and relaxed attitude to planning? Or is it really an entrepreneurial city, driven by an effective local governance regime that epitomizes many of the most important characteristics of ‘neoliberal localization’ in an Australian setting? To answer these questions we develop an analytical framework derived from the dual state thesis first proposed by Saunders (1981, 1986) in the 1980s. While this particular framework has fallen from fashion in recent years, its emphasis on generating hypotheses about the theoretical specificity of the local state and its operations continues to provide a valuable analytical approach which avoids the over-generalising tendencies of some analyses of contemporary neoliberalism.

This paper continues by reviewing attempts to better understand neoliberalism in practice and to explain how local configurations of institutional forms, political practices and ideological imperatives shape the governance arrangements of particular places. It then articulates and applies an analytical framework for considering the proposition that the Gold Coast in Australia represents a particular case of a local logic of neoliberalism. The paper concludes by reflecting critically on the theoretical lessons that might be drawn from this case about the variability of neoliberal governance regimes in urban areas.

2. Neoliberalization and transformations in conceptualisations of the local state

In their introductory essay to this special issue, Blanco, Griggs and Sullivan (2014) note that cities represent crucial arenas for the expression and contestation of neoliberal policies and
practices in which distinctive logics of the ‘local’ and the ‘urban’ interact to produce specific sets of outcomes in particular places. Conceptualising and specifying theoretically these distinctive logics of the ‘local’ and the ‘urban’ has presented a major challenge for critical urban studies over at least the last forty years. While long-standing concern with the nature of urbanism and urbanity has always been a prominent feature of urban sociology (Wirth, 1938; Tonnies, 1957; Weber, 1958), renewed debate about the nature of the ‘local’ emerged in the 1970s and focused initially on the specificity and significance of the local state within broader conceptualisations of the state in late capitalist societies. While Marxist state theory provided a useful starting point, it became increasingly clear that institutionalist accounts such as Milliband’s (1969) and structuralist approaches such as Poulantzas’ (1969, 1976) both failed to deal adequately in their analyses with the specificity of the local state. From a different and less critical theoretical perspective, conventional studies of local government typically charted its day-to-day operations and explained local variations in practice by reference to the personalities and influence of some councillors and senior officers (eg Dearlove, 1973), sometimes recognising systemic change as part of a transition to systems and processes of local governance (eg Hambleton, 2000; Stewart, 2000). Subsequent concerns with local government as the local manifestation of a capitalist or corporatist state and with the theoretical specificity of the local state (Boddy, 1983) diminished in the last decades of the 20th century often becoming lost in the grand narratives of neoliberalism and neoliberalization. However, more recent proponents of neoliberal analytical frameworks such as Brenner and Theodore, (2002), Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009), Beer et al (2005) and Peck (2010) have suggested that cities and their local governance regimes may constitute a distinctive set of ‘urban formations and conjunctures’ in a broad family of hybrid neoliberalisms. Thus, the operations of local governments, their possible transformation into neoliberal regimes of local governance and indeed the theorization of locally specific
processes of neoliberalization have once again been recognised as worthy of sustained and systematic empirical investigation. But, there remain significant problems in translating this renewed commitment into plausible frameworks for the analysis of locally specific processes.

Blanco, Griggs and Sullivan (2014) suggest that neoliberal accounts of local governance typically suffer from a variety of deficits: normative, theoretical, analytical and methodological. Normative deficits include both a tendency to political fatalism and a susceptibility to the accusation, by no means limited to the analysis of neoliberalism, that academic critique is often disconnected from actual practices of resistance to neoliberalism such that academic critique is presumed to be in itself a significant form of resistance (Barnett, 2005). Theoretical deficiencies include the tendency to subsume any local practice under the umbrella of ‘actually existing’ neoliberalism or ‘diverse neoliberalisms’ such that it becomes impossible to imagine the empirical refutation of any element of the theoretical totality. Similar analytical and methodological problems arise from the difficulty of identifying a priori any potential counterfactual sites or places where the neoliberal writ does not or has not been applied. As Peck (2007:807) rightly observes, ‘..there is, for obvious reasons, no control group of policy-off cities’, that would allow for the direct comparison of places where neoliberal principles have been explicitly and successfully rejected as the basis of urban governance practice with places where these principles have been embraced enthusiastically and successfully. This echoes a critique developed in Australia by Broomhill (2001) in which he argued,

The idea that local states and communities are firmly locked into a neoliberal policy framework as a result of globalisation is superficially plausible. [but] acceptance of this discourse of inevitability is politically de-powering [sic] and detrimental to the generation of any form of progressive alternative policy. (p116)
There is, therefore, a need to construct frameworks that derive from plausible theoretical conceptions of local urban politics, including the institutional structures that contain or frame political struggles and the specific local issues around which these struggles take place, and that enable rigorous empirical research. The ways in which empirical research articulates with theoretical conceptualisation and analysis has, of course, been a point of contention in urban studies for some time and remains so. Few theories of urban politics, urban governance or urban development are presented in ways that are especially amenable to direct empirical testing, whether by confirmation or by refutation and theoretical or conceptual propositions tend to rise and fall on the back of argumentative rather than empirical conclusions. In the next section an attempt is made to construct a framework for the analysis of changing local governance in the City of Gold Coast that both steers empirical investigation and is amenable to empirical testing.

3. A framework for exploring processes of neoliberalisation in the City of Gold Coast

As noted above, debate over the theoretical specificity of the local state emerged in the late 1970s but by the middle of the 1980s had been overtaken by a concern with regime politics (Stone, 1989), the significance of urban growth coalitions (Molotch, 1976) and urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). While these new approaches provided valuable insights and understandings of many of the day to day practices of urban governance, there remains a degree of conceptual ambiguity around the related notions of the ‘urban’ and the ‘local’ which elements of Saunders’s dual state thesis may still be capable of resolving.

In his attempt to specify theoretically the local state and in related work on the distinctiveness of urban politics, Saunders (1986) constructs a Weberian ideal type integrating three essential elements: the primary function of state intervention, the mode of interest mediation and the
dominant ideology. Along each of these dimensions he suggested a distinctly local form would be apparent in contrast to a national or central form: the primary function of local state intervention would be to support social reproduction rather than enhancing local productive capacities; the mode of interest mediation or form of politics would be predominantly democratic rather than corporatist; and the dominant ideology of the local state would focus on the rights of citizens rather than private property rights and furthermore show concern with how these might be supported through the provision of public services; These broad theoretical assumptions could, in principle at least, be subject to empirical testing in particular places and in turn contribute to further refinements to the broad conceptual framework.

While some attempts have since been made to apply Saunders’ framework (Elander, 1991; Hayward, 1993) it has not been used extensively to guide empirical research in urban studies. Nevertheless, its three dimensions can still serve as a useful starting point for the analysis of local government change in the City of Gold Coast. They have however been modified for reasons of empirical applicability to take account of the deficits noted above by Blanco, Griggs and Sullivan (2014) and are now presented as institutional structures, forms of politics and ideological underpinnings. Taken together these allow for a rounded and theoretically coherent appreciation of the nature of local urban politics and the development of local systems of governance. On each of these dimensions we can look for empirical evidence to position the Gold Coast case study on a spectrum ranging from an ideal typical local state formation suggested by Saunders’s framework to what would be expected if the Gold Coast was indeed the epitome of a neoliberal regime of urban governance.

4. **Empirical investigation of local governance in the City of Gold Coast**
4.1 Institutions of local government for the Gold Coast

The origins of local government in what is now known as the Gold Coast region can be traced back to the 1870s when the Queensland Colonial Government delegated responsibility for providing local services and raising revenue to various local government authorities. Six Divisional Boards were proclaimed for the area south of Brisbane in 1879 but these early local authorities struggled to raise adequate funds for their primary purpose of constructing road systems and providing basic infrastructure for the emerging towns of the region. Small towns such as Southport emerged as both administrative centres and holiday destinations catering for visitors from Brisbane and political tensions arose sporadically within many of these jurisdictions between town dwellers wanting urban facilities and infrastructure and rural landholders in the surrounding countryside, who typically demanded more basic public services and restrictions on growth. These tensions around the provision and cost of local services and the management of growth remain to this day in debates over the role and scope of local government in Australia in general and in the city of Gold Coast in particular. From a critical perspective they reflect a persistent institutional tension between those advocating a minimalist form of local government and those pressing for more local services with the concomitant need to expand the local tax (or rate) base in order to pay for them. This institutional tension is often further complicated by additional pressures to expand the role and scope of local government into new forms of civic boosterism (Boyle, 1997) and this was apparent in the changing form of local government for the Gold Coast.

In the immediate post-war years Brisbane newspapers and local real estate interests began using the term ‘Gold Coast’ to refer both to the place between the Tweed and Coomera Rivers and to the economic opportunities available in this areas to investors. The name appealed also to many local business and civic leaders and in 1958 the South Coast Town Council adopted the name Gold Coast Town Council and the State Government approved the
local authority name of City of Gold Coast in 1959. Over the next twenty years local authorities in the region began providing an increasing range of community and leisure services to an increasingly diverse population of residents and visitors, but faced substantial challenges in providing adequate infrastructure to meet the needs of their rapidly growing population. In 1994 the Queensland Local Government Commissioner began another review of local government boundaries and after extensive public debate of the Gold Coast City Council and the Shire of Albert were amalgamated to create a new local authority called the City of Gold Coast Council, with its first Council meeting held on the March 24th 1995. Apart from some relatively minor changes in recent years the boundary of the City of Gold Coast has remained to this day although the population living within it has grown considerably.

**Insert Figure One about here**

As the second largest local government in Australia its extensive bureaucracy which employs almost 3000 staff has the capacity, in principle at least, to pursue a number of functions beyond the scope of more typical, smaller institutions including emergency management operations (especially relevant in a city built mainly in a coastal flood plain) and large scale economic development. While these functions are seen broadly as valuable by the public at large (City of Gold Coast, 2013) they nevertheless contribute to the overall scale of the council which is regularly portrayed in the local media as a ‘bloated bureaucracy’.

This ongoing public debate about the role and scope of local government is evident across the whole of Australia as well as in the Gold Coast and reflects a much more widespread tension in the process of defining local government boundaries. The desire for bureaucratic efficiency and effectiveness tends to exert pressure to enlarge boundaries and the rate-paying populations they contain, while the expectation that local governments reflect some sense of local identity often serves to narrow their geographical reach. The boundaries of the Gold
Coast have flexed considerably over the years and in the process have created a varying set of political challenges associated with the different needs and aspirations of a rural and an urban population, alongside tensions driven by the competing needs of urban tourism and those of more permanent residential communities demanding better social services. However, as the population of the city grew, its expanding revenue base allowed for both these sets of demands to be met by an ever greater local government bureaucracy. In the next section the political challenges of managing these conflicting demands are explored in more detail.

4.2 Forms of politics

Local governments in Australia have long been formed through processes of local democratic politics and while these have sometimes been corrupted by electoral irregularities, including in the course of recent Gold Coast elections, local issues are mostly dealt with through relatively open forms of democratic politics. There have been some attempts to form local corporatist partnerships based on informal agreements between local governments, organised business interests and some community groups, mainly to promote the growth potential of the city to external investors, but these have yet to become established features of the local political landscape as they have in Sydney and Melbourne and in some European and North American cities. In recent years some new partnerships have also formed to address local social as well as economic concerns and to forge new relationships with other local institutions. In the field of primary healthcare planning, Gold Coast Medicare Local now brings together a range of local bodies including community based organisations while the Gold Coast Committee of Regional Development Australia works to link all three levels of government in processes of regional economic and community development.

This transition from a relatively simple system of local government regulated by periodic elections, to one of more networked governance among a range of partners represents a shift
in the arenas in which local politics are conducted. However, the city is not renowned for the
density or stability of its institutions of local civil society and the local voluntary sector is not
well-developed by European standards, nor is it well organised. There is a pronounced lack
of city-wide voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations that support local
initiatives and the sector tends to be dominated, in terms of scale if not politically, by local
branches of national and international welfare bodies such as the Salvation Army and the St
Vincent de Paul Society. There is growing local concern about a range of social and welfare
problems such as homelessness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse and care for an
increasingly elderly population. However, the dominant representation of the Gold Coast in
local and national media as a laid back and relaxed place for living the good life makes it
difficult for social welfare issues to establish themselves with any degree of security in local
political agendas. Nevertheless, the growing political significance of the aging population
may well have a more profound effect on what are seen as the key issues of local politics and
on the scope of local government in the future. Sectors of the business community are
typically better resourced and organised, often through local branches of national bodies such
as the Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA), the Property Council of Australia
(PCA) and the Master Builders Association (MBA). These have been especially effective at
promoting a pro-growth political agenda and in lobbying for changes in policy and practice to
support their members’ interests and are discussed in more detail below.

Although local democratic politics remain the cornerstone of much local political activity and
corporatist formations that we might expect of an emerging neoliberal regime are not yet
pronounced in the city, there is evidence of degree of clientelism (Roniger & Gunes-Ayata,
1994; Carson et al, 2010) that derives from the Australian federal structure. In view of local
government’s constitutional dependency on the State and the significance of State provided
services within the city, successive Gold Coast local governments have attempted to cultivate
productive working relations with the State government in general and certain ministers in particular. While this is of course a common ambition of many local governments, the Gold Coast was able to rely on the active support of State ministers in the latter years of the 20th century. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s the State Minister for Local Government and Main Roads, Russell Hinze (formerly Mayor of Albert Shire which was incorporated into the new City of Gold Coast in 1995), was particularly active in supporting local developer interests, especially through the exercise of State planning powers and the commitment of urban infrastructure. Following the formation of a new conservative State government in 2012, a number of members of Gold Coast constituencies have been included in the ministry, including the Assistant Minister for Planning Reform and the Minister for Education and Training although the extent to which these political representatives are able to promote the interests of the city, whatever they are seen to be, remains a topic of considerable local political debate.

While local politics on the Gold Coast has retained its traditional democratic form, there have been persistent but not especially successful calls for the city’s leaders to be more insulated from parochial political pressures. These include calls for an even smaller council, for the election of councillors on a whole of city rather than divisional basis, and for the creation of ‘independent’ panels to determine development applications, which is still seen as one of the mainstays of local government. This attempt to ‘take the politics out of planning’ reflects a widespread contradiction in the perception of local government and especially in its perceived ability to reconcile political and technical debates.

Local politics on the Gold Coast has always been preoccupied with growth and although the city has experienced the boom and bust effects of the business cycle on its growth, political attention has focussed more on the stimulation of growth than on its management. Between 2004 and 2008, under the leadership of Mayor Ron Clarke there was a greater degree of
commitment to growth management, arguably because the booming national and regional economy meant there was less need for local growth stimulation. This period also saw the emergence of a number of local groups campaigning against specific development proposals, including plans to develop a cruise ship terminal within the Gold Coast Broadwater (an important site for local recreation), a major new quarry and a cable car connection to an area of international landscape heritage. While many of these particular political battles are still being fought, the new Council has so far been relatively successful in claiming a fresh political mandate to pursue the best interests of the city as whole in the face of what are often framed as minority vested interests.

In summary, corporatist politics of the sort suggested by Saunders’ framework have not been especially evident in the Gold Coast and the more conventional forms of democratic electoral politics continue to predominate, albeit with an especially parochial flavour. Local elections are not contested on party lines and attempts to do so have been singularly unsuccessful. Rather, a strongly localist stance is usually adopted in which State or Federal levels of government are invoked as ‘the opposition’, alongside any groups eschewing a staunchly pro-growth agenda. While the politics of ‘small government’ and rhetorical attacks on the ‘bloated bureaucracy’ of the local council have served to mobilise some local political forces the very long history of this stance does not support the notion that it is a prominent feature of the neoliberalisation of local governance.

4.3 Underpinning ideologies

Local governments typically conduct their business within ideological frameworks that prioritise certain values and political dispositions in respect of property rights, the role and scope of government and civic entitlements. Neoliberalism is often presented as a distinctive package of such dispositions and ideological values, emphasising the necessity of economic
growth, the primacy of business interests in achieving growth and the need to focus state intervention on creating the conditions for economic growth. This neoliberal ideological package has underpinned the outlook and disposition of local government on the Gold Coast since its inception, but there is evidence of a slight but significant change of emphasis during the early years of the current century.

Current political debate around the greater application and extension of market principles in government is focused in Queensland more on the actions of the State rather than local government. In the 2012 State government election for example the program of privatisation of assets and facilities pursued by the Labour administration figured prominently in the (ultimately successful) campaign of the opposition Liberal National Party, although the basis of their attack was Labour’s change of direction in supporting privatisation rather than the principle itself. These two main political parties both promote a similar philosophy of efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of public services and both are sensitive to suggestions of tax rises and major new spending programmes, unless cloaked in the rhetoric of ‘nation building’ or ‘disaster recovery’. As in other countries, services and facilities that were nationalised or municipalised in the last century are now being considered for privatisation, primarily to generate funds for current investment in major infrastructure projects and in public health services.

Local governments in Australia, as elsewhere, are often criticised for the regulatory burdens they impose on business, although in this they are usually acting as agents for their constitutional masters in State government. On the Gold Coast there has been a vociferous campaign from local interests such as the Chambers of Commerce to lift these ‘burdens’ on the significant number of local small and medium sized enterprises. Notwithstanding these demands for a rollback of local state intervention, other significant sectors of the local economy have been campaigning with equal vigour for greater intervention in the form of
subsidies or ‘stimulus measures’. The UDIA for example has for a number of years pressed, with some success, for the introduction of local subsidies to supplement national grants designed to stimulate the purchase of new houses by first time buyers. The fact that these calls come from the same sectors that celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit that saw the Gold Coast grow rapidly over the last fifty years illustrates not only the contradictions inherent in the stance taken by many local free-market boosters but also the success of neoliberal ideology in calling simultaneously for more and less local state intervention.

Although the three dimensions proposed by Saunders and applied above in modified form are conceptually distinct, they describe processes and forms that are in practice connected. To illustrate these practical interconnections the following section considers how the City of Gold Coast has over the years approached the issue of growth management.

4.4 Exemplary local policies

Saunders’ dual state thesis suggests that the primary function of the local state is to invest in reproducing the social relations of the capitalist mode of production through the supply of welfare services. In contrast, the central state is said to be concerned mainly with investment in productive forces through policies that directly support economic growth. However, there has however always been a preoccupation among Australian local government with productive investment and the provision of infrastructure to support local economic growth. This investment in local infrastructure in the form of roads, bridges, water and power supply and waste facilities clearly serves the needs of resident citizens as well as those of local businesses and as such cannot unequivocally be categorised as investment in economic production rather than social reproduction. A more appropriate indicator of the possible transformation of the primary function of Gold Coast local government has been the
changing ways in which the council has approached the question of growth promotion and
growth management.

The history of local government on the Gold Coast is inextricably linked growth promotion
and more recently with growth management. The very naming of many of its most
prominent places shows the historical salience of boosterism and place promotion. The
renaming in 1917 of the small coastal town of Elston as Surfers Paradise is symptomatic of
these processes, and as already noted, in the 1940s Brisbane-based developers and realtors
began to promote the whole coastal strip as ‘the Gold Coast’, a place for Brisbanites to spend
weekends and for those from the southern states of Australia to escape their relatively
inclement winters and enjoy a ‘sea-change’ or ‘tree-change’ (Burnley & Murphy, 2004).

As well as being a place of tourism, the identity of the Gold Coast developed also as a place
of personal re-invention and entrepreneurialism. The entrepreneurialism of the Gold Coast
has always concentrated on property development and small business franchising rather than
industrial development, although it has been home to a number of innovative (and often
spectacularly unsuccessful) property finance companies. Many Australian innovations in
property development were introduced or taken to new levels on the Gold Coast, including
high rise residential schemes, canal estates, strata and community titled developments
(equivalent to American condominium schemes) and timeshare developments. From the
1950s onwards the Gold Coast acquired and cultivated a reputation for encouraging this
particular form of unbridled urban development, with its leading developers willing to take
great risks in pursuit of great rewards and expecting local government to do little else but
create conditions favourable to their plans. Thus, local government was seen at this time to
exist primarily to support these processes rather than to hinder them with regulation, a stance
bolstered by the State government led by Premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson from 1968 to 1987 and
in particular by his Minister for Local Government, the aforementioned Russell Hinz.
Although the council adopted a local planning scheme in 1969 it provided little check on the ambitions of local developers and as a prominent member of the (conservative) National Party said in 1982, ‘...because of the wide discretionary powers contained in the town plan for the Gold Coast, the City Council can change anything overnight. It is not a town plan, it is simply a convenience document’ (Jones, 1986: 62). He went on to claim,

The Gold Coast has been developed without modern town planning methods; this may be the key to its success and vitality…The virtual absence of town planning enables the Gold Coast real estate economy to respond to sudden changes in demand and so develop and crash remarkably quickly... (Jones, 1986: 62)

But as we know from critical analyses of planning elsewhere (Dear & Scott, 1981; Healey, 2010; Rydin, 2011), the local state performs an essential role in regulating the excesses of the market, providing a degree of certainty and predictability and managing the externalities of unfettered development. It is not surprising, therefore, that even in a supposedly entrepreneurial or neoliberal city like the Gold Coast the demand for more planning and regulation grew, not just from local residents concerned with bad neighbour developments, but from the development sector itself.

From the late 1990s a more assertive and proactive city council began to produce and implement planning schemes that were increasingly comprehensive in scope and bold in their ambitions to regulate development in pursuit of broader notions of a better city. The city hoped to become known more for the quality of its architecture and urban design than for its ‘innovative’ approaches to development financing and real estate marketing associated with the White Shoe Brigade.

In 2006 the Council agreed to consider seriously the long term future of the city, including its economic, social and environmental sustainability, and launched its Bold Future project with
the appointment of an Advisory Committee to oversee the production of a long term vision, a set of strategic action statements and a complementary set of performance measures. The Advisory Committee submitted its report to Council at the end of 2008 and this was endorsed in early 2009 and has since been used as the foundation for a number of more focused statutory plans. Subsequent Corporate and Operational Plans embodied the Bold Future principles and a major review of the Gold Coast Planning Scheme attempted to incorporate sustainability and place making as well as more conventional land use planning principles into its statutory planning framework. However, the new council, with the strong support of the new conservative State government, has already moved to limit or reduce the charges levied on new development to pay for local infrastructure and the latest review of the planning scheme is designed to cut further the scale of development regulation and to produce a more streamlined planning regime.

As the leading advocate for developers, the UDIA on the Gold Coast promotes a view of growth that is now tinged with some notions of sustainability and recently re-named one of its major committees the Growth and Sustainability Committee to reflect its concern for a broader public agenda. Previously the UDIA felt more able to work with council officers than with its elected members, who were widely regarded as capricious and parochial in outlook. Ad hoc liaison arrangements were established to address matters of concern, usually about the operation of the planning scheme, but there was no ongoing and systematic attempt to develop formal partnerships between the council and the organised development sector, let alone with the organised community sector.

Differences among local business interests are significant and these too are reflected in the ways in which major local development projects are managed by the local state. In addition to winning the right to host the 2018 Commonwealth Games, the biggest of these local projects is the Gold Coast Rapid Transit project which will provide a new light rail service.
along a 14 km corridor through the centre of the city. This is widely recognised within and beyond the city as one of the most important public transport initiatives in the country and as a significant opportunity to transform the urban form of the Gold Coast through higher density, mixed use developments along its spine. Nevertheless, there has been a small but vociferous campaign by local business located along the route, objecting to the disruption caused to their operations by the construction of the network. They were supported in this by a number of the mayoral candidates at the last local election, suggesting that it is not always easy for political leaders to reconcile the parochial pressures emanating from one section of the local business community with calls for bold visions for the long term future of the city as a whole from other sectors.

In short, the local council has been consistent in its support for investment in the growth of the city. While its conception of growth has typically been focussed on the population, the housing stock and the economy, there has recently been some concern also with the cultural, community and social growth of the city. During the millennial period the previous Labour State government also promoted a ‘smart growth’ programme which recognised the importance of research and development, the potential of the so-called knowledge economy and the need for cultural facilities to attract a Floridian creative class (Florida, 2002).

5. **Contradictions in the neoliberalization of Gold Coast local governance**

The pattern of local government and its transformation into new regimes of local governance in any particular place is always the product of its own history and circumstances, albeit in a broader context not entirely of its own making. Despite its colonial antecedents and the continued dominance of the ‘Westminster model’, local government in Australia has followed a different trajectory to the UK. While there are traces of municipal grandeur in the council offices of some capital cities and even fainter traces of municipal socialism, the
scope of Australian local government has always been more parochial and pragmatic: providing basic infrastructure for expanding settlements and regulating new development. In contrast to the UK where the Keynesian local state reached its high water mark in 1980s with an extensive set of statutory obligations to deliver welfare services bolstered by a further set of commitments to gender and racial equality, local economic development and environmental sustainability, the Australian local state has been much more modest in its ambitions and practices. The retreat from this high water mark in accordance with an emergent set of neoliberal principles and imperatives was therefore all the more pronounced in the UK than in Australia, and it is against this backdrop that we must consider the transformation of local government in the Gold Coast.

The huge variation in the size of local governments in Australia, whether in terms of the area covered, population or budget, ensures that only the largest, such as the Gold Coast, have the capacity to extend their scope and to develop substantially new approaches to service delivery. This is exacerbated by the continued fragmentation of local government in most capital cities where it is common for around thirty local governments to cover the metropolitan area and hence by the difficulty of constructing effective and enduring metropolitan scale planning bodies (Gleeson, Dodson & Spiller, 2010).

These local states remain beset by a number of contradictory local political pressures and ideological tensions: as free market advocates demand protection and subsidy; local entrepreneurs want more certainty via planning and regulation; and the general public often demands simultaneously higher quality public services and lower local taxes. These present significant challenges to the legitimacy of local government, even in a country where participation in local elections is high because of compulsory voting. The realities of a three-tier federal system add further complications as the division of responsibility and power is complex and not well understood by many citizens.
Contrary to Saunders’ thesis, local government in Australia and the Gold Coast is not a significant site for explicit local class politics, indeed insofar as political parties reflect class interests there is a strong public preference in most cities for keeping party politics out of local government. There is little evidence of concerted political action around the provision of social or collective consumption goods as this is the province of State government and the institutions of local civil society that might stimulate this type of debate are often poorly developed. But if traditional class politics are not especially evident, the aging of the population is likely to provoke new struggles around the provision of welfare services which the local state will have to manage.

Public participation in local politics is not extensive although there is a small but growing body of ‘ratepayer’ groups demanding lower rates and smaller government. Particular local issues will of course stimulate political action and these will often be around major new development proposals: a cruise ship terminal on an environmentally sensitive piece of coastline; plans to run a cable car into a National Park; a new quarry near a residential suburb. Because the city has no industrial heritage there have been no opportunities for campaigns to stop the closure of major industries and there tends to be an acceptance that buildings will be replaced on a cycle of decades rather than centuries.

In conclusion, the Gold Coast is a relatively new city by European standards and may well represent a distinctive form of urbanisation in Australia (Burton, 2009; 2010). The form and structure of its local government is also relatively immature, preoccupied with the provision of physical infrastructure and the regulation of new development. Without major responsibility for the provision of welfare services the local state in Australia has not yet faced the fiscal pressures foretold by O’Connor (1973) or been forced to wind back extensive programmes of Keynesian welfare spending and manage any ensuing crises of legitimacy. It is, of course, possible that over the coming century the City of Gold Coast will take on a
broader range of responsibilities and will have to develop new forms of governance to manage these. By this time it might also have to cope with some of the more extreme manifestations of climate change as rising sea levels threaten its beach tourism, peak oil threatens its low density, car-dependent urban form and the latest financial and economic crises threaten the lifestyles of its growing and aging population.

We are left with this question: in its short life, has the City of Gold Coast always been governed according to neoliberal principles and priorities? While in broad terms the answer to this is ‘yes’, it must be qualified in a number of ways. First and notwithstanding the suggestion of Blanco, Griggs and Sullivan (2014) that local governance regimes range from enthusiastic adopters through accepters to resisters, the stance of successive Gold Coast city councils has been one of enthusiastic but unselfconscious adoption. They can perhaps be described as ‘natural’ adopters who have internalised the fundamental principles of neoliberalism and see no need to explicitly and self-consciously proclaim them. Second, this does not mark this particular council out as especially different to others in Australia, most of which have participated with varying degrees of enthusiasm in the wider project of dismantling the post-war Keynesian political settlement. Both major political parties in Australia are now committed to the promotion of economic and population growth and cities are acknowledged to be the primary sites for this growth. While some smaller coastal cities remain governed by councils concerned to limit growth, the 2012 local government elections in South East Queensland saw pro-growth mayors and councils returned in all the major cities, including the Gold Coast. In this respect we might conclude that apart from a brief period from 2004-12 when growth management as well as (rather than instead of) growth stimulation underpinned the Gold Coast local governance regime, it has been business as usual. But, can this be described properly as neoliberal business as usual? Local government in Australia has typically embraced a somewhat minimalist position, reflecting in part the
influence of 19th century British thinking on the role of municipal government in which the provision of public infrastructure and public health services tended to overshadow wider social welfare concerns and responsibilities (Freestone, 2010). While this may be consistent with some forms of contemporary neoliberalism, it is by no means clear that this constitutes a theoretically distinct form of local governance. As Thompson (2005:23) notes in his review of Harvey’s brief history of neoliberalism,

> Neoliberalism is therefore not a new turn in the history of capitalism. It is more simply, and more perniciously, its intensification, and its resurgence after decades of opposition from the Keynesian welfare state and from experiments with social democratic and welfare state politics.

While the immediate future is likely to see a greater emphasis on productive investment in infrastructure and the ideological dominance of property rights, alongside a celebration of entrepreneurialism (Property Council of Australia, 2012), the social impact of the ageing population is likely to generate substantial and new pressures on the local state to provide social, health and care services on a scale previously unseen on the Gold Coast. How these pressures are managed between local and State governments remains to be seen, but in the future they could well provoke new fiscal and legitimacy crises for one or both of the sub-national levels of government.

Finally, what of the value of an analytical framework derived from Saunders’ dual state thesis? Increasing recognition of the limitations of an abstract and totalising conception of neoliberalism in the analysis of urban politics has fuelled growing calls for empirical research on the specific and contested practices governance in particular urban places (eg Castree, 2006; Peck, 2010; Cahill, 2013). In order to locate and frame this type of research it is necessary to address the theoretical specificity of both the urban and the local and Saunders’
thesis offers a useful starting point in this process. In applying a modified version of his thesis and analytical framework in this particular case study it is apparent that further conceptual refinement is needed. A theoretical and analytical framework derived from a British local government system of two tiers is not necessarily well suited to the analysis of an Australian system of three tier federalism. Furthermore, the historical trajectory of Keynesian local government in the UK does not travel especially well to Australia and stands in marked contrast to the development of the comparatively young, but rapidly growing City of the Gold Coast. Nevertheless, Saunders’ thesis has provided the foundation for an initial exploration of the intersection of the logic of the local and the logic of the urban in the changing governance of one of Australia’s most important cities. In particular it has drawn attention to the ways in which debate about the primary function or purpose of state intervention, the form of politics mobilised around the roll out or roll back of specific instances of intervention and the ideological framing of these debates are inextricably bound up in institutional and jurisdictional tensions. These tensions between the three levels of government are especially pronounced in Australia where cost shifting and disputes around the division of responsibility for the delivery of core services and functions are commonplace. While Saunders’ framework was based on a British two-tier system, the Australian three-tier system demonstrates that a degree of institutional separation serves to obscure more fundamental tensions and contradictions in the operations of the state in capitalist societies. Whether this obfuscation can resolve the underlying tensions remains to be seen, but it does suggest that there remains some value in Saunders’ framework when exploring empirically the complex processes of neoliberalization in Australian cities in general and in understanding processes of local governance transformation in the City of Gold Coast in particular.
6. References


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