

Report of the RSA International Research Seminar on 'Leadership in Urban and Regional Development: Debates and New Directions', 5-6 February 2014, University of Birmingham

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Thirty five enthusiastic academics converged on Park House on the wooded outskirts of the Birmingham University campus on a rainy British morning, but the weather could not dampen spirits. The speakers and discussants were from diverse academic backgrounds (from politics to palaeontology, and from planning to psychology), had varied careers (from a physicist to a field geologist, and from a curator to councillor) and had travelled from disparate locations round the globe (from Auckland to Bishop Auckland, and from Babeş-Bolyai to Birmingham). But we all shared a passion for leadership of place: cities, conurbations, rural areas and regions. Discussing the seminar with a more experienced conference goer on the way back to the station, this mix of disciplines, careers and nationalities, held together by a shared interest in this emerging subfield, was highlighted as the reason for its success: diverse actors and a strange attractor!

John Gibney kicked us off with a brief, considered introduction. This wasn't going to be an easy conference. We weren't given the answer at the start. We were going to have to work out 'what it was all about' for ourselves.

Our first speaker was **Lummina Horlings**, who gave a paper on an entrepreneurial rural area just west of Groningen, Netherlands. She was interested in how to enhance collaboration, institutional reform and joint learning to help make a place more resilient. From informal foundations with a small group of visionaries engaging in a pilot project, collective agency emerged through 'spiral development' of bottom up initiatives, supporting policy schemes and joint learning by doing. The conclusion was that collaborative leadership played a critical role in enabling success. The discussion explored the motivation(s) to collaborate, the catalytic role of a key actor, the supporting role played by local politicians, the role of the research team and their relationship to the local people.

This was followed **Andrew Beer**, President of the RSA. Andrew has taken it upon himself to try to make sense of leadership of place; and in part to answer the question 'how do we get beyond case studies?' But he wasn't being driven by some esoteric desire for theoretical purity, rather he came across as having a great streak of pragmatism, wanting to do something practical with the growing research on leadership of place. Building on his earlier work, he outlined a project he is developing with Markku Sotarauta to test his emerging theory in Australia and Finland. We await their conclusions with interest.

Up next was **Markku Sotarauta** who began with a series of thought provoking questions: what is the place of leadership in regional economic development?, specifically, how do we get beyond simplistic dichotomised interpretations, to a more nuanced understanding of territorial developments in a challenging networked world? The main body of the talk detailed different facets of leadership and illustrated the complex, non-linear nature of the evolution of visions in the leadership of place. The talk ended with some more thought provoking questions: who are the leaders in different institutional settings and different phases, and how do they earn their positions? How do the

influence and for what? How do they establish power and governance systems? What's the soil in which regional leaders emerge, operate and learn their skill?

Alyson Nicholds boldly tackled the fourth session, with a tea break looming. With a high impact set of slides, she passionately engaged us with her research on smart cities and her love of rigorous and meaningful qualitative research methods – specifically Gerhardt's methodology using Weberian ideal-types.

After de-hydrating and re-hydrating, **Robin Hambleton** introduced us to his model of the four forces constraining leadership of place. The first three forces – economic, government and socio-cultural – can be influenced by leaders. The fourth force – environmental – are non-negotiable and act as constraints that have to be accommodated. The part of Robin's talk that provoked greatest discussion was his idea of 'place-less power'. By this he meant action by people in a globalised world, who feel no sense of place where the impact of a decision is felt. But this was contested by some participants who felt that all power is wielded with a sense of place, but that there can be impacts in multiple places – some good locally, some bad.

Garri Raagmaa heroically fought his flu, to give a clear example of the impact of the foundation of higher education institutions. His contention was that HEIs can play an important leadership role in regional development. Using quantitative, longitudinal data collected in Estonia over more than a decade, he showed that they had all grown in terms of staff and student numbers, and this appeared to correlate with the R&D investment in those areas. In a qualitative survey of key leaders, he convincingly showed the positive impact of the HEIs in regions in which they are based when compared to regions without HEIs in terms of local pride, social capital, human capital, innovation and the quality of leadership and management.

The role of Tail End Charlie for the afternoon was ably fulfilled by **Guy Robinson**, who gave a surprisingly upbeat summary of the leadership of place in a 'lagging region'. The Upper Spencer Gulf Common Purpose Group, South Australia, were trying to carry out regional development across three towns that had a history of competition and economic development support from three different regional bodies, yet they shared many common problems relating to reliance on mining and heavy industry in a sparsely populated desert area. Aided by a mining boom they had succeeded in diversifying the economy and lowering unemployment, but long term sustainability remained in question.

After a fine dinner of soup, duck and treacle tart, washed down by some quaffable Montepulciano d'Abbruzzo, we were treated to an exposition of a successful career in the leadership of place. **Sir Albert Bore** is leader of Birmingham City Council and has a PhD in nuclear physics. These may seem like unrelated facts, but his speech was a thoughtful journey through time (from Joseph Chamberlain to the near future) and space (Brussels, to Barcelona, to Birmingham). What's more, it culminated in his vision of a triple devolution solution for local government, which welded the rational rigour of a scientist, with his ability to tell entertaining, plausible, persuasive stories.

The second day of the seminar began with an oxymoron – a Kiwi talking passionately about Australia. **Clare Mouat** told us about the Committee for Perth, an active think tank

and a positive and influential advocate for the Perth region. The contrast with Guy Robinson's 'lagging region' in South Australia at the end of the previous day was stark – Perth is the Australia's fastest growing city and it's in the fastest growing state. The University of Western Australia takes an active part in the Committee for Perth, which prides itself on the quality of its research, which is trusted and is used to create spaces for reflection and discussion.

John Shutt and **Gill Bentley** gave a masterclass in the confusing maelstrom of sub-national economic development policy in England. Since the removal of all regional infrastructure and most of the funding, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) have been encouraged to take forward their own agendas in their self-defined sub-regional 'natural economic areas'. The spatially and temporally chaotic situation that has emerged over the last 4 years was compounded by their prognosis for an even more confused future. Those participants from other nations could afford to smile; those of us from England have to hope that local transformative leadership begins to emerge and that Whitehall gives local leaders the power and finance to act.

Following the LEP theme, **Joyce Liddle** introduced her multi-dimensional accountability framework for the chaotic and largely unaccountable subnational leadership in England. Taking cognisance of more biological co-produced approaches to governance and more service oriented approaches to public value, she then explored public leadership from a number of angles, most provocatively looking at elites, power and authority. The presentation ended by looking at accountability in LEPs, proposing a multi-dimensional framework which potentially has impact in many complex situations involving diverse actors (public, private, third sector and citizen representation) well beyond the LEP context.

After refreshments, **Oana-Ramona Ilovan** gave a case study of leadership in local and regional development. The concept of 'space pioneers' was introduced, as small innovation-networks of locally-based social entrepreneurs. This was used as a research framework for looking at the impact of plural leadership in local development, specifically translating experimental projects into sustainable solutions that impact upon improving peoples' lives. Using data gathered from Lassaner Winkle, a municipality in Germany (the town of Lassan and four local villages), Oana illustrated the ways in which the community came together, agreed their priorities and worked communally to develop economic, environmental and community projects.

Sarah Ayres gave an enlightening presentation about centre-local relationships in the UK, from the perspective of central government. Using the ideas of hard, hard(ish) and soft steering, she explored the difference between the New Labour government's approach to regions and the Coalition government's approach to localism. Sarah gave an insight into how Whitehall mandarins are coming to terms with the new reality, at times retreating to more formal, centralised forms of leadership, whilst at others trying to master a new skill set of embracing diversity and soft steering from afar.

Last before lunch was **Nicola Headlam**, talking about the role of an elected mayor in the leadership of the city and city region of Liverpool. Never dull and often thought provoking, this was an enthusiastic and at times impassioned look at the possibilities of

and problems with elected mayors, and some of the particular and personal issues relating to Liverpool's mayor Joe Anderson. The talk was illustrated with a number of social network diagrams showing the relationships between key leaders, visualising the leadership of place in Liverpool.

After another excellent lunch, **Xenia Havadi-Nagy** gave a case study of local leadership that has attracted global attention. The village of Viscri is in the centre of Romania in a pocket of Saxon ethnic concentration that dates back centuries. This area has a distinctive culture, architecture and way of life, that was threatened with being lost in the post-socialist changes that are taking place in rural areas. Xenia illustrated the community-led change that has been brought about by Caroline Fernolend, a key individual who was well known and trusted by the community and who was a catalyst for community wide action. The approach taken at Viscri has become an exemplar that is being used as a template in rural development elsewhere in Romania.

The final presentation was given by **Alistair Bowden** and **Joyce Liddle**, who looked at the changing nature of who is doing the leading in the leadership of place in England. The talk began by introducing two comparable frameworks of leadership roles and capabilities. Using three pairs of case studies in heritage management, economic development and planning in the New Labour and Coalition eras, they looked at how the people occupying these roles and capabilities had changed. In particular they argued that the public sector held less powerful leadership roles that required less powerful capabilities, with the exception of the technical assistance role (institutional capability) which they still fulfilled and through which they were still able to exert influence.

The seminar ended with a discussion about the future of the network led by **Joyce Liddle**. This seminar was the last of the three funded by the RSA, so the question posed was "how do you want to take this forward?" There was a strong feeling that the network had been successful in bringing people together and detailing the limits and variety of leadership of place. However it was also felt that more synthetic work needed to take place, to make sense of the empirical data (mainly case studies) and move towards more firm theoretical foundations. There were three actions:

- In the short term, a number of conference streams were highlighted as locations where the dialogue could continue.
- In the medium term, an application will be taken to the RSA for funding for another set of seminars to act as the catalyst to a more generalised conceptual understanding of leadership of place.
- In the long term, the group hopes to capitalise on existing connections in Brussels and the Committee of Regions and discussed a future RSA Network event in leadership, most notably the strong links already made with European Commission DG REGIO and EuroCities.

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