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Bifurcation of a Rural-Urban Regional Partnership: A Study of Hidden Dynamics

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Abstract

Region-based solutions present a promising avenue to addressing contemporary challenges facing municipalities. But regional formations require the messy reworking of networks of power among multiple stakeholders, often leading to power struggles. Challenges can be compounded when a rural-urban dimension is added to such an undertaking. This study examined the hidden power dynamics of a case involving 18 rural and urban municipalities in the Calgary region of Alberta called the Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP). In 2005 these municipalities voluntarily embarked on a major city-region initiative involving land-use planning and water sharing. However, by 2009 four rural municipalities had left the CRP, bifurcating the partnership along rural and urban lines. The dynamics of this case were traced through time and viewed through the lens of Foucault's concepts of discourse and mechanisms of exclusion as well as Hajer's concepts of metaphors, story-lines and discourse coalitions. The study demonstrates how mechanisms of exclusion led to the creation of dominant discourses, the formation of coalitions around counter-discourses, and the eventual disintegration of the rural-urban dimension of the partnership.

Keywords: water, regionalism, Foucault, Hajer, discourse, power

1.0 Introduction

Region-based partnerships have been used to achieve a multitude of objectives such as economic growth, reducing municipal infrastructure costs and improving natural resources management. Common themes in regional-based partnerships are the challenges and complexities involved in developing the structures under which the partnership is managed and governed (Brenner, 2002; Jessop, 1995; Swyngedouw, 1997; Tickell & Peck, 1996). Under regional formations, power dynamics shift and become more fragmented given that many more agencies are involved. Networks are re-worked, necessitating co-operation and interdependencies amongst a multiplicity of actors that must create the capacity to govern and achieve policy goals (Amin & Thrift, 1995; Healey, Davoudi, & O'Toole, 1992; McGuirk, 2000).

But creating the CRP was doubly challenging because in addition to the task of forming a regional partnership amongst 18 diverse municipalities, there was the added dimension of bringing together distinctly urban and rural jurisdictions.

Additional challenges can include rural suspicion of urban motives, bureaucratic and administrative structures that promote and perpetuate rural-urban division, long-engrained rural-urban competitive attitudes, and defending local interests (City-Region Studies Centre, 2010; Caffyn & Dahlstrom, 2005; Derkzen, Franklin & Bock, 2008; Roberts, 2007). Political tactics have been used to derail collaborative processes including the use of structural and rhetorical mechanisms to assert power where imbalances exist (Walker & Hurley, 2004; Hibbard & Lurie, 2000).

This study focused on the process that led up to the exit of four rural municipalities from a voluntary regional partnership which consisted of rural and urban members. The loss of the rural municipalities bifurcated the partnership along rural-urban lines and rendered the rural-urban dimension of the initiative unworkable to this day. In this study we explored the dynamics behind the partnership's challenges and complexities as predicted and stressed in the literature. The study concentrated on the 2005 to 2009 period when 18 municipalities were engaged in the voluntary process of developing the operational, management, and governance details of the CRP. It traced the eventual unravelling of the CRP when the four rural municipalities in the partnership decided to leave. The analysis was given focus through Foucault's concepts of discourse and mechanisms of exclusion and Hajer's concepts of metaphors, story-lines and discourse coalitions (Foucault, 1991; Hajer, 1995).

We begin our account of the study by providing contextualization in describing the Calgary region. This is followed by the conceptual and methodological framework. The findings are enumerated in the subsequent section wherein we portray three stages to the CRP process over the study period. The final section sums up the results and provides concluding thoughts.

2.0 Study Context

Oil and gas development has been the economic driver behind rapid population growth in the Province of Alberta. Between the census periods of 2006 to 2011, for example, the population grew by 10.8 percent. This was the highest growth of all Canadian provinces. Even more pronounced was the growth of the city of Calgary and the surrounding communities. The city and the communities within 50 kilometers of it experienced an average of 31.8 percent growth over that period.

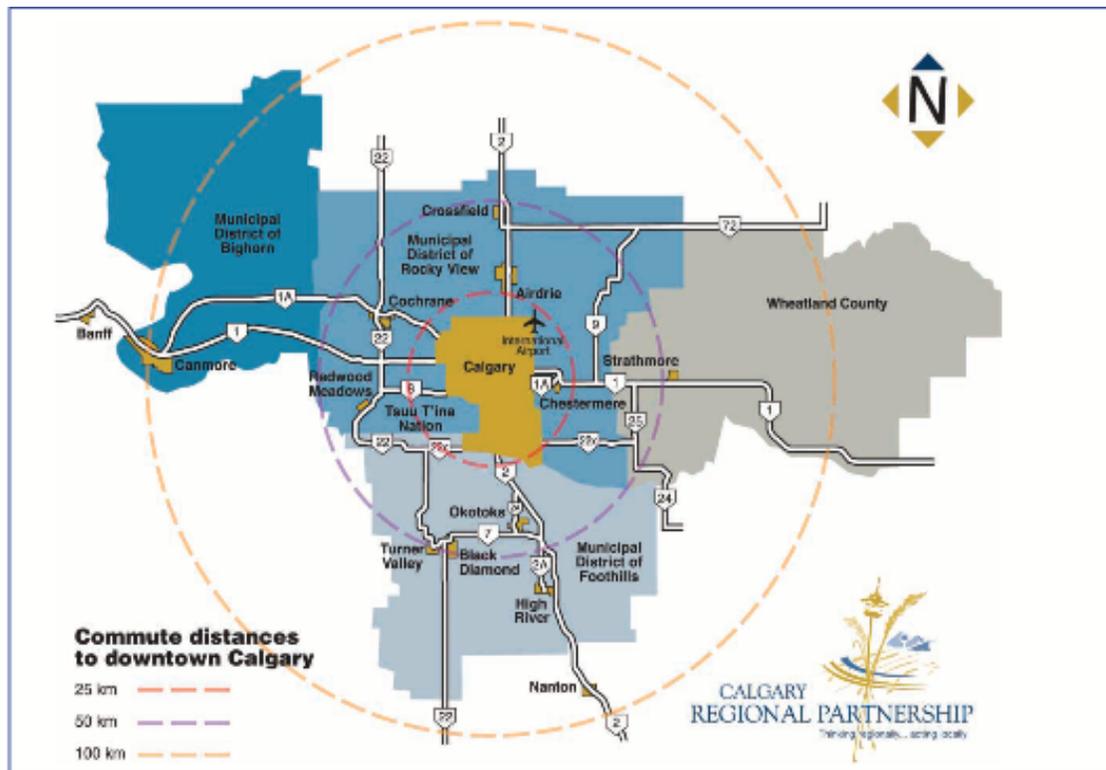
A response to these growth pressures from the provincial government was the mandatory establishment of the Capital Region Board in the Edmonton region. The Board was granted the authority to make binding decisions on regional land-use planning, inter-municipal transit, water and waste water management, social services and economic development, among 25 municipalities (Capital Region Board, 2008). Shortly thereafter the provincial government imposed a regional management structure on the entire province. This involved a land and water management framework embodied in the Land Use Framework (LUF) of 2008 and its legislated product, the Alberta Land Stewardship Act (ALSA) of 2009.

The LUF created seven regions based on the major watersheds in Alberta with the requirement to develop a regional plan for each. Under the LUF, Calgary was mandated to develop a metropolitan plan that would guide development with a focus on sustainability principles for the region (Norman, 2012). The 18 municipalities of the CRP had voluntarily begun this process earlier, in 2005.

The characteristics of the 18 municipalities of the CRP underscored the divergent nature of the municipalities involved. Populations ranged from approximately one

thousand people in one municipality, the municipal district of Bighorn, to almost one million in another, Calgary. The presence of one major city in the region was to become an important factor in the power dynamics of the CRP process. The four rural municipalities of Rocky View County, the municipal district of Foothills, Wheatland County and the municipal district of Big Horn together only accounted for about six percent of the population of the region (less than 70,000 people). However the four rural municipalities accounted for the vast majority of land in the region. Figure 1 below depicts the CRP region, the four rural municipalities, and several towns and cities.

Figure 1: CRP Region.



Source: <https://www.uleth.ca/dspace/bitstream/handle/10133/3494/nicol%2c%20lorraine.pdf?sequence=1> (p.9)

In addition to significant discrepancies in population and land holdings amongst the CRP member municipalities, water allocation was also unevenly distributed. Under Alberta's water management framework, access to water supply is managed through a water licensing system, specifying access to an acre-feet quantity of water on a yearly basis. The population and economic growth experienced by the province, combined with increased concern for the environment, prompted the Alberta Government to take the unprecedented step in 2006 of closing the three sub-basins of the South Saskatchewan River Basin to new licensed water allocations. This measure applied to the Bow River Basin where all but one of the CRP member municipalities was located.

In 2007, a study commissioned by the CRP assessed the long-term water supply needs of each municipality and determined if and when those supplies would be exceeded. For the three rural municipalities of Rocky View County, Wheatland County and the municipal district of Foothills (M.D. of Foothills), it was determined

that they did not have sufficient water licenses for large-scale regional growth. That study also determined that for nine additional municipalities, within five to 20 years, their existing licensed water supplies would no longer be sufficient (CH2M Hill, 2007). Calgary, however, would have ample licensed water allocations, enough for three times its current population.

Another important characteristic of the region was that power dynamics and inter-municipal tensions and disputes amongst Calgary and certain rural municipalities have historically been commonplace. In Climenhaga's (1997) detailed account of the history of regional planning in Alberta, contestation in the Calgary region has largely centered on the city of Calgary versus Rocky View County. Oil-driven growth of the city of Calgary has resulted in the city seeking annexation of additional land to accommodate such growth. The official position of the city of Calgary has been that it should maintain at least a thirty-year supply of developable land within its boundaries (Sancton, 2005). So, in 1970, the city's growth plan included major annexations which Rocky View County staunchly opposed. Again, in 1976, to accommodate Calgary's growth, the Alberta government established a Restricted Development Area comprised of a five kilometre wide area immediately surrounding the city of Calgary. This area represented a loss of population and commercial and industrial development for Rocky View County and the M.D. of Foothills (Price, 1986). But in 1995 the new Municipal Government Act gave rural municipalities more power, putting them on an equal footing with cities and henceforth empowering municipalities like Rocky View County. Calgary faced a strategic choice of whether to work cooperatively with rural municipalities on its fringe or absorb them through additional annexation processes which would be "considerably more difficult than those it won in the past" (Sancton, 2011, p. 107).

Friskin and Norris (2002) note that the ability of regions to take advantage of opportunities depends on their ability to overcome internal divisions. MacLeod and Goodwin (1999) stress that regional governance formations do not start with a clean slate but have to reform and restructure within the bounds of earlier interventions. Scales are perpetually being redefined, contested and restructured; they are sites of conflict, struggle and power dynamics (Brenner, 2002; Gibbs & Jonas, 2001; Ward & Jonas, 2004).

During the period for which this research is focused, 2005 to 2009, CRP member municipalities attempted to set aside their differences and work to voluntarily create a long-term 60 to 70 year blueprint for the region¹. At least initially, the CRP engaged in a highly participatory public exercise. Consultations and participation included: in excess of 2,000 participants in a visioning exercise; 700 people involved in nine workshops; 320 internal meetings of CRP elected leaders and staff; and 90 presentations of over 2,000 residents (Calgary Regional Partnership [CRP], 2009a). After four years of work, the over-arching planning document, the Calgary Metropolitan Plan, was produced. The key feature was the inclusion of housing density targets that would reduce urban sprawl and concentrate housing development away from ecologically sensitive areas. The Plan also included a water-sharing agreement where Calgary, endowed with excess water licensed allocations, would operate a water utility to distribute water to those member municipalities and

¹ The genesis of the CRP was established in 1999 when the provincial government created the Regional Economic Development Alliance Initiative which encouraged community partnerships to stimulate long-term economic development and growth strategies in Alberta's rural and urban communities.

counties which faced water supply constraints within the next twenty years. This study found that impending water shortages and water redistribution made possible under the CRP was a main motivator for some municipalities to participate in the partnership.

As this study will show, contestation among member municipalities accelerated between 2005 and 2009. In 2008, the first rural municipality of Big Horn left, stating that their rural nature did not fit with the urban thrust of the partnership. In 2009 the remaining three rural municipalities announced at the general assembly that they had reached an impasse in the partnership. The defection of the four rural municipalities bifurcated the partnership along rural-urban lines.

3.0 Conceptual and Methodological Framework

A toolkit of several concepts was used in this study. The concepts included Foucault's theory of discourse and mechanisms of exclusion and Hajer's concepts of metaphors, story-lines and discourse coalitions.

Beginning with Foucault's theory of discourse, he argued that society deems certain discourses as being knowledgeable and true. In elevating these discourses to 'truth', there is a constant conflict with other discourses that are struggling to gain hegemony (Foucault, 1991). It was discovering how these dominant discourses were created and upheld that was of most interest to Foucault. In addition, Foucault's approach towards discourse explicitly acknowledges power differentials, and their potential, which underpin specific processes (Foucault, 1991). This approach to power was particularly appealing in studying the rural-urban dimensions of the CRP given the divergent nature of the municipalities involved. Foucault also believed that where there was power there was resistance and that no power relation was simply one of total domination; power circulates rendering people at times powerful and at times powerless (Mills, 2004; Richardson, 2000). Using a Foucauldian approach to this research enabled us to examine, through discourse, the dynamics of rural and urban participants occupying varying positions of power within the CRP process.

How dominant discourses were created and upheld in the CRP process was traced through Foucault's concept of mechanisms of exclusion, the belief that there are processes of exclusion that limit what can be said and what can count as knowledge and truth (Mills, 2004). Foucault spoke of the limits and forms of the sayable; what utterances are put into circulation and upheld as valid versus which ones are debatable (Mills, 2004). What was of most interest in this study was identifying the mechanisms which supported one discourse and excluded and marginalize others, and the effect on the CRP planning process.

Hajer built on Foucault concepts of discourse and power by conceptualizing the possibility of metaphors, story-lines and discourse coalitions that can bring together fragmented and contradictory discourses over issues, creating new discursive relationships and positions. Hajer used these concepts in his landmark study of the highly complex and perplexing problem of acid rain (Hajer, 1995). Over time a vast array of disparate discourses amongst a wide range of individuals and groups merged into the succinct concept of 'acid rain' linked to dying forests and lakes and the deleterious effects of smoke stacks. Hajer's work demonstrated how coalitions can form around a common narrative that can become a powerful symbol around which initiatives can move forward (Hajer, 1995).

Metaphors are the basis on which story-lines are formed. Metaphors are highly useful constructs in providing a common ground, reducing often complex problems into “a visual representation or catchy one-liner” (Hajer, 1995, p. 62). Story-lines build on metaphors by working to enhance understanding between groups of actors. They are “narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding” (Hajer, 1995, p. 62). Story-lines serve several purposes in that they: reduce the discursive complexity of a problem, acquire a ritual character as they are accepted by more and more actors, and allow the inclusion of several narratives (Hajer, 1995).

Finally, discourse coalitions are groups of actors (for example, scientists, politicians, activists, or organizations) whose discourses “merge, are sustained and contribute to particular ways of talking and thinking about a problem” (Hajer, 1995, p. 13). The construction of metaphors into story-lines and then into discourse coalitions enable change through the creation of new meanings, new identities, cognitive patterns and positioning (Hajer, 1995). The relationship between story-lines and discourse coalitions is that story-lines are the glue that keeps the discourse coalition together (Hajer, 1995, p.65). In this study we traced the development, deployment, and effect on the CRP process of metaphors, story-lines and discourse coalitions.

The methodological process of this research involved reconstructing the dynamics of the CRP by first, examining written documentation. Since the focus of the research was on the power relations that evolved over time as the regional planning process unfolded, the documents deemed most critical to understanding discursive power, contestation and the creation of metaphors, story-lines and discourse coalitions were: texts of visioning exercises and workshop sessions; minutes from general assembly meeting (nine sets) and executive committee meetings (33 sets); documentation of public consultation and analysis of member issues following release of the draft Calgary Metropolitan Plan; and formal documents including the final version of the Calgary Metropolitan Plan.

Foucault believed that the constitution of discourse has both internal and external mechanisms which keep certain discourses in existence while others do not survive. One of these mechanisms is commentary—“those discourses which are commented upon by others are the discourse which we consider to have validity and worth” (Mills, 2004, p. 60). Since virtually every municipality in the CRP region has a community newspaper, this source was deemed useful in analyzing how CRP developments circulated across the wide range of communities within the region. Thus community newspaper coverage represented a second source of analytical data. The CRP’s own newspaper clipping service collected 137 newspaper articles from across the region which reported on CRP events and developments during the 2005 to 2009 period.

While analysis of written documentation and newspaper articles enumerated above assisted in constructing the CRP process, they provided a limited account. Therefore, the findings were supplemented by insights gleaned from the interview data collected from 28 participants. These individuals represented a cross-section of individuals on the various decision-making and working committees of the CRP. Interviews were carried out in order to obtain access through words to an individual’s constructed reality and interpretation of his or her own experience (Fontana and Frey, 2000). In this way, interviews facilitated the exploration and subsequent understanding of how numerous participants perceived the CRP process.

These interviews were conducted over the space of five months, from May 2012 to September, 2012 in an in-depth, semi-structured interview format.

4.0 Findings

In tracing Foucault's and Hajer's concepts over time, there were three distinct phases of the CRP process during the 2005 to 2009 period. The process evolved from the early period of optimism when the region's vision articulated a positive future, to realism when faced with the challenges of developing the details around implementing the vision, to the final period of pessimism when it was realized that issues of disagreement could not be reconciled. The findings below are enumerated under Stage I (2005 to 2007), Stage II (2008) and Stage III (2009).

4.1 Stage I

The institutional framework within which processes are embedded has a significant bearing on the discursive roles and identities of the players involved (Thornborrow, 2002). In the case of the CRP, a municipally-based institutional model was adopted beginning with the establishment of the executive committee. The committee was comprised of one elected mayor, reeve or councillor from each member municipality. The committee was endowed with the highest degree of institutional power within the CRP because it: "holds the responsibility for approving key Regional Land Use Plan proposals, work plans, communications, outcomes and implementation strategies before moving them to the General Assembly for final ratification" (CRP, 2007, p.10).

Given this authority, the executive committee had a significant degree of influence and control over the CRP process—its proposals, plans, communications and strategies. The decisions made by the executive committee were carried forward to be voted on by the general assembly and, if approved, were thereafter embodied in the Calgary Metropolitan Plan, the long-term planning blueprint for the region.

Within the committee, the decision making process was modeled on municipal precepts. Decisions which could not be reached unanimously were made through a majority-rule voting process. Each member municipality on the CRP executive committee held one vote. As noted, Foucault emphasized the existence of mechanisms of exclusion that place limits on what can be said, keeping some utterances in place and maintaining some utterances as valid and debatable. The decision-making process of the executive committee would prove to be critical as a mechanism that upheld some utterances and marginalized others.

In addition to the formation of the executive committee and general assembly, in 2006 it was determined that a sub-committee of the executive would comprise a steering committee which would work to advance initiatives and grapple with what would become the most contentious issues—the CRP governance structure. The steering committee consisted of seven municipal representatives and was to "present recommendations from time to time regarding key developments of the regional plan and related governance and implementation strategies to the CRP Executive committee and ultimately to the CRP General Assembly" (CRP, 2007, p.11).

This committee also operated under a majority rule voting structure. In time the committee became known as the exclusive 'Group of Seven'. The rural municipalities' representative on the committee was from the municipal district of Foothills and, as will be seen, was to become the most outspoken opponent of the CRP.

In this early period of the CRP formation, a coherent vision was needed to successfully construct a regional identity for the CRP. In Richardson's (2000) study of the European Union's construction of the new vision of 'rurality', he examined the development of a common vocabulary of symbols and visions as part of the structuralization of a new discourse of European spatial development (Richardson, 2000). Similarly, within a CRP process the construction of the Calgary region was formed through the 'TOGETHER, 2105' visioning exercise conducted in 2005. Visioning workshops and an on-line survey were among the methods used to obtain public feed-back through which there emerged four metaphorical 'pillars' for the region. The pillars included: healthy environment, enriched communities, sustainable infrastructure, and a prosperous economy (CRP, 2006). This development demonstrates how multiple, hitherto disparate actors mobilized and became engaged around a common story-line. It re-ordered and created a new understanding of the region. The process gave meaning to the region and propelled the process forward.

Based on feed-back from public forums held during this time, the CRP executive committee decided on the broad strokes of the land-use framework. The framework would be based on the concept of compact urban nodes and growth corridors. Land would be designated and set aside for future concentrated housing development.

During this first stage of the process newspaper coverage served as an external mechanism that supported the enthusiastic statements flowing from the CRP executive committee and supporters. The print media upheld the regional vision story-line embodied in the four pillars.

4.2 Stage II

The open and congenial tone during the first stage of the process took on a much more contested quality in the second stage, especially within the CRP executive committee. The broad discursive space which characterized the early phase narrowed significantly to key issues of municipal autonomy and Calgary veto power.

The second stage encompassed the year 2008. Results from a water supply and distribution study commissioned by the executive committee resulted in the committee determining that water access and servicing—from Calgary's licensed water allocations—would be provided to the compact urban node developments conceptualized in the land-use plan. As will be shown, the authority to determine the *placement* of the nodes and the *densities* of the nodes became grounded in highly controversial issues of CRP control versus individual municipal autonomy.

In addition to water servicing, the proposed voting structure of the CRP, once formally established, provided that decisions would require a majority of the population and two-thirds of the CRP membership. Given that the city of Calgary comprised 85 percent of the population of the region (based on 2006 census data), any decision would require Calgary's approval. The voting structure was to become the second highly controversial issue because some municipalities felt it gave Calgary veto power.

It was at this juncture that the institutional framework, developed in the early stage of the process, was more fully deployed in a contested environment, upholding certain discourses and marginalizing others. The Group of Seven committee presented the rough draft of the regional land-use plan and the governance framework to the executive committee in March, 2008. As noted earlier, the Group

of Seven also operated under a majority-rule voting procedure. The procedure can be seen to work as a mechanism of exclusion given that the rural representative on that committee, the member from Foothills, stated his concerns and comments had not been addressed at four previous meetings of the Group of Seven committee. Despite this, the executive committee put forward proposals which provided that:

Membership in the CRP...be mandatory; it should not be possible for communities to *cherry pick* (original emphasis), to opt into or out of individual components of the (Plan);

The governance structure...be expansive...within areas that are truly regional in scope e.g., regional land use planning, regional servicing, and transportation...;

A super majority decision-making process (comprising the votes of a majority of the region's population and two-thirds of the CRP membership) be implemented for an explicit list of decisions that affect the region as a whole (CRP, 2008a, p. 18-19).

During that executive meeting Foothills' representative stressed that the land-use provisions of the draft proposals represented an incursion into the authority of the municipality and did not represent regional issues. But a motion to accept the draft of the Plan prepared by the Group of Seven was approved by the executive committee (CRP, 2008b). Foothills voted against the motion, marginalizing the counter-discourse of municipal autonomy.

As noted, the proposed voting structure of the formally established CRP was another contentious issue for the rural municipalities. At this time a motion by Rocky View County's representative on the executive committee proposed an amended voting structure that would include a majority of the region's population, two-thirds of the CRP membership *and* at least one municipality of each incorporation type. This would mean that motions could only be passed with Calgary's approval as well as at least one of the rural municipalities. This would dilute Calgary's voting power and provide the rural municipalities a degree of autonomy which they viewed as necessary. The motion was defeated when the three rural municipalities voted in favor of the amendment and eight municipalities voted against it.

Hajer argued that "(p)ower is not simply in discourse but in the performance of the conflict, in the particular way in which actors mobilize discourse" (1995, p. 182). Hence we see that discursive contestation circulated within the executive committee as actors mobilized discourse, seeking discursive dominance given that the dominant discourse can ultimately define the problem, frame the debate, and devise the solutions (Weber, Samson & Jakobsen, 2010). It was at this juncture that the institutional framework, developed in the early stage of the process, was more fully deployed in a contested environment, upholding certain discourses and marginalizing other.

The institutional power of the Calgary Mayor's statements was demonstrated in November, 2008, when he presented an ultimatum to the executive committee. The Mayor stated the city would be unable to participate in the continued development of the Plan without "first ensuring that its citizens' interests are protected through a super majority governance structure to guide the implementation of the plan" (CRP, 2008c, p. 2). Excerpts from the minutes include:

Calgary: The easiest thing for Calgary to do right now is nothing...If we don't decide now, the City of Calgary will do something different; not sure what that might be, but something different.

Cochrane: Is there any other option than what Calgary proposed?

Calgary: No (CRP, 2008c, p. 4-5).

Rocky View's representative requested "that (the Mayor) give some comfort to the rurals on the super majority" (CRP, 2008c, p. 5). The Mayor refused, stating that Calgary, in offering to become a regional water service provider, was making a "very significant departure...a very major concession" (CRP, 2008c, p. 6).

Interviews with participants underscored the impact of discourse on the CRP process. Consider the statement made by the Mayor of Calgary which included the word 'veto'. The former chairman of the CRP executive committee recounted the incident:

I could strangle (the Mayor) because at one of our big meetings, workshop seminar type of day, everything was going perfectly...and then he said veto. Calgary and veto. And I went Dave! And after that everybody referred to the Calgary veto².

Six interviewees spoke of the significance of a single statement or a discernible change that resulted in the positive nature or tone of discussions turning negative during this second phase of the planning process. One representative noted that a change in the nature of the discussion occurred when, broadly speaking, discourse turned from 'us' to 'we'. This speaks to the effect of the change in the direction of the discourse at this time. The representative said "it was 'we' they were looking after and basically previous to that it was 'us', the whole region"³.

Some participants believed Calgary's water license holdings were used by Calgary to influence behaviour, constraining what could be said. Nine interviewees observed this influence including two that said:

When you're supplying the water to all those municipalities and you want to control, how are they going to vote? There's no way they can vote any other way than with Calgary. So Calgary can do anything it wants without a rural member sitting at the table⁴.

With zero water license (Airdrie) was totally dependent on not pissing Calgary off, for lack of more oblique terms⁵.

Thirteen informants characterized Calgary's water licenses in various, often negative metaphorical terms: a hammer (5), a lever (2), an even trade with land (1), a water gun (1), a carrot (1), a big stick (1), making or breaking the Plan (1), the bully (1). One person observed that people never viewed Calgary with indifference;

² Interview #5, Mayor of Airdrie.

³ Interview #9, Councillor from Nanton.

⁴ Interview #10, Councillor from Wheatland.

⁵ Interview #14, Councillor from Rocky View.

they either viewed them as adversaries or people whose favour they wanted to win⁶. Another believed the Plan was driven by Calgary to gain control of the region⁷.

The statements that circulated in the local media during this period reported on CRP concepts and progress, CRP and long-term transit, and the Land Use Framework. Only 3 of 30 articles sampled focussed on CRP issues of contention. So although the analysis of texts, principally the executive minutes, revealed there was a significant amount of contestation, this contestation occurred within the confines of the executive meeting and did not appear to be exposed to media scrutiny or wider public dissemination. Despite the contestation that was occurring within the executive, it seemed to have been internally contained. The message coming out of the CRP was controlled. This suggests members did not choose to expose their differences, presumably remaining hopeful that differences could be resolved.

4.3 Stage III

The unresolved tensions of the second phase carried into the third and final period where differences continued to build and the most serious consequences on the final outcome were delivered. During the third stage, 2009, contestation accelerated around where the compact urban nodes would be placed and their densification. The strongest opponents within the executive committee worked to discredit the compact urban node concept through the creation of a story-line to transform it. Ultimately two individuals were central to the power dynamics, the Mayor of Calgary and the representative from Foothills.

A derogatory reference to compact urban nodes entered the vocabulary of the executive committee in February, 2009 when a draft of the Calgary Metropolitan Plan was presented for approval in advance of its unveiling at numerous public open houses planned for March and April. The compact urban nodes appeared on the region's map as misshaped forms colored in blue. They were now objectified as 'blue blobs', not neat and compact but rather something vague, formless, uncontrolled, ill-defined and intrusive. The committee minutes indicate reference was exclusively expressed by the three rural municipal councillors on the executive committee.

The rural municipalities contested the location of the compact urban nodes in the absence of any consultation with the public, including the land owners themselves. The action was also perceived as absconding municipal authority in determining the location and densification of the nodes. 'Blue blobs' could then be seen as a metaphor appealing to collective anger and fear, a powerful example of a story-line to which opponents could relate. As predicted, it served its purpose to position actors and create a coalition among those individuals. It also shifted the nature of discursive power.

The public consultation sessions that occurred in April and May found a hostile response delivered on the nodal concept by residents of Foothills and to a lesser degree by Rocky View and Wheatland residents. One interviewee described the experience as such:

⁶ Interview #27, anonymous member of an ancillary water-related organization.

⁷ Interview #13, Councillor from Rocky View County.

We made a date...we would get to those meetings, they were ugly, they were horrible, people were ready, they were *mad* and they had these ideas we were called communists⁸.

In some open houses, anger had eroded common decency to such an extent an informant from one of the communities was prompted to say she was ashamed of the behavior⁹.

In newspapers, statements referring to 'blue blobs', 'land freezes' or 'loss of control of land' included:

...these blobs would affect land freezes on the areas and be a de facto annexation (Careen, 2009, p. 1).

What has caused the most concern are the now infamous "blue blobs" which identify areas of future dense, urban style development in the MD (MacPherson, 2009, p. A12).

...two large land masses...would fall under areas where further development would no longer be allowed, essentially permanently freezing the properties for years...(Stier, 2009, p. A13).

The open houses held in Foothills were characterized in the media as battles between Foothills residents and the CRP, as well as battles between Foothills residents and Calgary. Thus the contestation that occurred within executive meetings was no longer contained, as it was during the second phase. Rural dissent was now exposed to the public at large. One newspaper report indicated that Rocky View County and M.D. Foothills had fundamental differences in principle with the CRP which were irreconcilable (Herron, 2009).

At the same time, the concept of 'Calgary veto' was also a metaphor around which the story-line relating to loss of municipal autonomy revolved. In the newspaper coverage, references to the Calgary veto were not as frequent as blue blobs and land freezes but they did arise in newspaper coverage in the Foothills region about a half dozen times. Aside from references to a Calgary veto specifically, other negative references to Calgary included: the city of Calgary having too much power; erosion of autonomy; disrespect for democracy; Calgary as the "heavy weight in this partnership" (Worthington, 2009, p. A14); and Calgary "pulling the wool over the eyes of rural land owners" (Stier, 2009, p. A13). In addition, the Calgary 'veto' was the basis around which the website 'www.nocalgaryveto.com' was established by a Foothills resident, serving as a communal space for often highly negative commentary and postings of petitions and protests. Also about 40 protestors rallied in the community of Okotoks, objecting to loss of control of their land. These multiple developments - the creation of the blue blob and Calgary veto metaphors and story-lines, the formation of discourse coalitions around them and the heightened public awareness brought to the CRP - underscore the shift in discursive power to the rural municipalities.

Contestation and resistance within the executive intensified as rural councillors became increasingly aware of the high degree of public discontent that sprung up and fermented, particularly within the Foothills area. Paraphrased statements

⁸ Interview #5, Mayor of Airdrie.

⁹ Interview #23, member of a watershed organization.

recorded in the June, 2009 executive committee minutes underscore the rural-urban tensions that could not be surmounted in attempting to develop a coherent regional identity:

Mayor Bronconnier (Calgary)...felt it fair to say there has been an inordinate amount of time taken to this point...We have an agreement in place and with great respect, he noted the City has moved 180 degrees on their position to provide servicing which is a monumental decision.

The MD of Rocky View would like to see a motion to recommend approving the plan in principle pending resolution of governance, water allocation and perhaps blue blobs.

The MD (of Foothills) would like the blue blobs removed from the maps to ensure municipal autonomy.

Mayor McAlpine (Canmore) noted...we have spent two years on this issue and it's time to move on.

Mayor Matthews (Chestermere) noted....perhaps if the blue blobs are so offensive, they should be removed. However, if we continue to debate these issues we will be in the same spot six months from now (CRP, 2009b, p. 5-6).

The executive committee voted to make "minor conciliatory amendments so that everyone can agree" (CRP, 2009b, p.6) but these changes did not address the substantive rural issues and could not have been seen as satisfying the disgruntled rural members. Thus, in making a motion to approve the Plan to be presented to the general assembly, thirteen members voted for the motion and Rocky View and Foothills voted against it. By now two critical votes on iterations of the Plan did not receive unanimous consent yet the Plan continued to progress towards the final ratification at the general assembly with issues left unresolved.

Hajer acknowledges the influence of particular individuals exercising discursive power (Hajer, 1995). Two individuals became the focal point of the discursive power dynamics of the CRP - the Mayor of Calgary and Foothills' representative on the CRP. The shift in discursive power, from the Mayor of the city of Calgary to the representative from Foothills, significantly altered the nature of discourse and the balance of power on the process. While the rural municipalities did not have the institutional power of Calgary with its large population, economic base, and water license holdings, they did represent the vast majority of land in the region, and they now had the backing of a vocal, discontented population. Of equal significance was that, given the CRP was still a voluntary partnership; the rural municipalities had the right to defect from it.

The 2009 general assembly was unlike any other because until that day, contentious issues were never on the agenda. Almost 50 elected municipal representatives attended the meeting, more than any general assembly in the research period. In total almost 130 people were present. Although dissenting voices may have been silenced by voting procedures in executive meetings, the general assembly provided the discursive platform to express the rural municipalities' discontent. A lengthy statement read by the deputy reeve of Rocky View County confirmed the rural municipalities' decision to leave the partnership. The Reeve stated in part:

Rocky View and Foothills and Wheatland stand here today with 100% of the rural land-base and natural capital....Yet the majority of CRP members appear indifferent to our outstanding concerns and have no voice within the proposed voting structure to influence regional decisions (CRP, 2009c, p. 13-14).

The rural municipalities used this very public platform to exercise their discursive power. This counteracted the lack of discursive power they experienced in the executive and Group of Seven committee meetings. Ultimately, instead of successfully working out the details around the common vision that earlier had embodied so much optimism, the rural municipalities overthrew urban power and left the partnership. The CRP was reduced to strictly an urban organization. The ramifications were captured by one interviewee when he said: "They're all urbans now...we're talking about islands of urban-ness"¹⁰.

5.0 Conclusion

Creating rural-urban regional formations amongst hitherto autonomous municipalities is exceedingly difficult. Contestation is an inevitable consequence of the necessary reworking of networks of power. This study confirms the findings of region and rural-urban studies that stress these characteristics. As with other studies, we also find convincing evidence of the use of political tactics as well as structural and rhetorical mechanisms to assert power where imbalances exist. In this detailed study, Foucault's and Hajer's conceptual frameworks helps expose the hidden dynamics, as traced through time, leading to the bifurcation of the CRP partnership. In deconstructing the steps that led to the rural-urban split, the findings are consistent with Foucault in that mechanisms of exclusion existed which initially mobilized some discourse and immobilized others. The counter-discourse that ensued led to a collision of discourses, which pitted rural against urban.

We turned to Foucault to unearth the discursive constraints that arose from the mechanisms of exclusion which was the majority-rule voting framework within the committee structure of the CRP. Discourse around rural objections was constrained as Calgary gained, and deployed, discursive power. But consistent with Foucault, no power relation is simply one of total domination. Counter-discourses found expression through channels including open houses, the local media, websites and public rallies.

Viewing these developments through Hajer's conceptual frame enables us to identify the metaphors, story-lines, and discourse coalitions unique to this case. 'Blue blobs' and 'Calgary veto' coalesced actors who held a common fear of losing control over land and municipal rights. Those metaphors grew to represent several highly negative themes including loss of landowner rights, big city domination, 'communism' and erosion of democracy. Around these themes a distinct group of residents in the M.D. Foothills area formed a coalition and delivered the negative effect it sought. It emboldened the elected councillor to oppose the CRP's Plan and when Rocky View County and Wheatland County joined the coalition, the entire rural contingent jointly exited the partnership. Ultimately the CRP reproduced and reinforced the power dynamics between Calgary and Rocky View County. It also

¹⁰ Interview #11, Reeve of Big Horn County.

created new, hitherto largely non-existent, tensions between Calgary and the M.D. Foothills and Wheatland County.

By elevating our awareness of processes, this study identifies the pitfalls encountered by regional processes such as the CRP. Unintended negative outcomes can emerge from the institutional foundations on which the process is based. They had an enormous bearing on outcomes and became the single-most important factor in this study. As such, regional processes must recognize, and avoid, mechanisms of exclusion that can undermine such endeavours. One recommendation is to adopt, at least for key decisions in the process, a unanimous voting framework within decision-making committees rather than majority rule.

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