

Interrogating devolved natural resource management: challenges for good governance

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Introduction

In this chapter, we explore the contradictory effects of devolution as a neo-liberal method of rule on the governance of Australian natural resource management (NRM). A number of scholars have argued that there are strong neo-liberal influences on NRM regionalisation. Their primary focus has been on the deployment of various methods of neo-liberal rule, including decentralisation or devolution (Lane *et al.* 2004), intensification of market logic (Lockie *et al.* 2006), individualisation (Cheshire and Lawrence 2005), instrumentalisation of community (Cheshire and Lawrence 2005), an increased responsibility for regional actors (Higgins and Lockie 2002) and performance management (Higgins and Lockie 2002). While there is general consensus that its influence is pervasive, several authors have noted the diverse and complex means employed by neo-liberal governance, and the internal tensions and contradictions to which this form of rule is subject (Cheshire and Lawrence 2005; Peck and Tickell 2002).

For almost two decades, the broader scholarly community has utilised the explanatory power of Foucault's 'governmentality' approach and its central concept of the 'conduct of conduct' to illuminate the workings of power and control in neo-liberal systems of rule (Dean 1999; Rose 1996b; Rose and Miller 1992). Governmentality may be thought of as the way governments try to produce the citizen best suited to realise their policies, and the organised practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed. The term is made by combining 'governing' ("gouverner") and modes of thought ("mentalité"), or governing mentality. It is a useful conceptual tool for explaining how governments use neo-liberal techniques to disperse power, and to share responsibilities for addressing difficult problems with other state and non-state actors, yet retain control in order to achieve desired political and public policy outcomes. A key feature of neo-liberal governance is its 'underlying logic' for multi-level governance, which includes devolution of policy responsibilities to lower governing levels in ways that promote market rule and minimise direct regulation (Harmes 2006). To facilitate devolved rule and to regulate activities within disparate subject areas and spaces for the purposes of the neo-liberal project, a number of strategies and practices can be deployed (Dean 1999).

In analysing devolution through a governmentality lens, we have several objectives. First, by interrogating what is known as the '*techné*' of governance – 'the means, mechanisms, procedures, instruments, tactics, techniques, technologies and vocabularies [by which] authority is