

Some Options for Central Highlands

1 Background

At its meeting on 15 April 1992 the Central Highlands Advisory Committee ...

“resolved unanimously to:

Recommend to the Board of the Brotherhood of St Laurence that they proceed forthwith to establish a Central Highlands Regional Division of the Brotherhood. That this Division be overseen by a Committee of Management comprising representation of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Bishop of the Diocese of Ballarat, and the local community; and that this committee be duly empowered, to carry out, in accord with its constitution, the mission and charter of the Brotherhood of St Laurence in the Central Highlands Region of Victoria.”

This recommendation was accompanied by notes on the rationale under the following headings:

- Statement of needs and proposals in region
- Why the BSL as the auspice?
- Rationale for an autonomous structure rather than the present state
- Geographic area
- Relationship with the Diocese of Ballarat
- Relationship of Regional Committee with Brotherhood of St Laurence Board
- Internal structure
- Internal finances

The Special Board meeting of Saturday 30 May 1992 anticipated later discussion at the next (July) meeting with the following recorded in the Minutes ...

The Board expressed the view that there should be considerable local involvement with the external control being reduced as soon as possible. It was agreed that the subject of Central Highlands region be on the Agenda for the next meeting for discussion and that the representatives of the Ballarat Committee be invited ... to participate. Discussion is to then surround the question of whether the BSL wishes to go down the path of further regionalisation or whether it wishes to see Ballarat as a development area under central control for the next few years.

The Board of the Brotherhood of St Laurence formally received the Central Highlands Advisory Committee's recommendation at the meeting of 7 July 1992. Comments from the discussion recorded in the Minutes of that meeting include ...

Some concern was expressed to ensure that the Brotherhood is working with the local community and growing from grass roots rather than having a professional model imposed from outside. Ian Brain responded that he offered no apology for taking advantage of the Brotherhood name as it gives access to opportunities that would otherwise be denied. ...

... In response to a question as to whether the Brotherhood could work to empower the agencies rather than taking on service delivery itself, Ian Brain responded that in fact the model is not to take over but work with existing agencies adding the Brotherhood's depth of expertise to existing services.

Andrew Ferry ... stated that the committee has a clear understanding that the funding won't necessarily come from Melbourne and that there is a strong leaning toward self funding over time. He stated there was a clear need and a very loud call from rural Victoria so that the Central Highlands region could be something of a different concept than the existing regions - particularly those based at Carrum Downs and Lara.... that he was not keen on immediately acquiring property assets and would suggest that these be deferred for three years to see where the region heads and to solve any difficulties the organisation faces . At the initial stage he would rather see funds being used at the coal face concentrating on the needs for employment and family services.

... Very few of the other organisations have any advocacy services that the Brotherhood can bring.

2 *Intention in the establishment of Central Highlands as a Region*

The Board agreed on 7 July 1992 that ...

The working directors ... discuss a range of issues concerning regionalisation at an extended meeting on 16 & 17 July. Following clarification of their thinking on this matter they will bring back to the Board specific recommendations on regionalisation, and particularly on this Central Highlands proposal.

A paper was prepared by the Executive Director (*The Policy of Regionalisation*) and revised in the paper *Regionalisation within the BSL*, dated 26 August 1992. The recommendations to the Board in this report were:

- 1 That the Board formally adopts the principle of regionalisation.
- 2 That the Board adopts the philosophy and proposals of this report.
- 3 That the Central Highlands region be officially established.
- 4 That the Board reviews the practice and policy of regionalisation in 1995 unless circumstances suggest an earlier re-appraisal.

Comments from Board members (in correspondence) on this report included:

- ...being at the 'cutting edge' of welfare ...is quite difficult ... more than having the good regard of the welfare establishment or the public ...being able to see gaps in current service of the agency, able to react with speed and common belief in the new strategy, changing programs if necessary.

BSL is not the only agency combining policy advocacy with innovative services ...

...bureaucracy is inevitably levelling as an organisation continues over time i.e. a 'respected' organisation attracts people who will uphold existing beliefs, establishing services in line with these, but not necessarily being sensitive to the weaknesses in the 'proven' beliefs.

Some amendments ... a 'region' being a time-limited state e.g. 5 years. ...A possible 'associate' status from areas which have the ability to develop their own programs. I believe 'big brother' should have limited use.

- ... (the) proposal is decentralisation not regionalisation ... Regionalisation implies that all major decision making takes place in the region: the region establishes its own committee of management, identifies the needs of the region's disadvantaged people, collects its own funds, devises its own programs etc., without redress to the central organisation. The proposal is a decentralised proposal because the Board of the BSL appoints the committee of management and makes all final funding and program decisions (albeit after consultation with the local people). ... In sum, I am suggesting service delivery only is conducted by the "regions" all other functions are conducted by Head Office (...BSL should beware of developing further decentralised offices) You could still have your Directorate (but called an Executive Committee) with the same functions as proposed.
- While I note that opinion at Board level appears to be divided as to the question of centralism versus regionalisation, I do not consider that the Board in the past has necessarily exhibited any traits which would, to my knowledge, have encouraged the development of regions. ... I consider that the advocates of a strong centralist board perhaps overlook what I perceive to be an inability to deliver policy decisions which have much practical effect at the regional level.
- The regional structure does provide a local input into the decision-making processes of the Board. ... The name of BSL will undoubtedly give credibility to the work being done in the Central Highlands, and will help initially in fund-raising. At a later stage, however, there may be a local resistance to supporting an agency based in Melbourne.

...The formal policy regarding the establishment of the Central Highlands region ...should contain a provision which will allow the Region to become autonomous under the sponsorship of its own Diocese should the need arise. This would protect the BSL from any accusations of empire building, and would show a sensitivity to the proper aspirations of rural areas. A suggested additional recommendation could read: "That the Board accepts that local conditions may in the future require a Region to develop into an independent locally-governed agency".

3 *What was clear and what was assumed*

At its September 1992 meeting the Board accepted recommendations 1, 3 and 4. The second recommendation - *That the Board adopts the philosophy and proposals of this report* - was held over to the October 1992 meeting "to further consider the relationship between the Board, the Regional Committees and the Directorate". The matter did not come up again, at least not in the context of Central Highlands becoming a region.

Lack of definition of the meaning of "region" left room for the assumption that it was synonymous with "region" as used by other Human Services agencies (and probably identified with the regions of Health & Community Services in Victoria).

This also left room for assumptions about relationships between the "centre" and the regions in all matters including funding. Nor were there distinctions made between regions.

While discussions at Board level had led to spoken and written comments about limitations on time and resourcing (as quoted above), nothing definitive was stated in the decision about the Central Highlands Region.

Prepared for the *Directions 2000* Implementation Committee

Michael Wilson
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