



## A Regional Studies Association International Research Network Seminar

### EXPLORING VARIETIES OF LEADERSHIP IN URBAN AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Organised in association with the **Enterprise & Diversity Research Cluster** and **City-REDI** at The Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK, 12th-13th November, 2015.

**Co-convenors:** Dr John Gibney (University of Birmingham); Professor Markku Sotarauta (University of Tampere); Professor Andrew Beer (University of South Australia); Professor Joyce Liddle (University of Aix-Marseilles)

Held over the 12-13th November 2015 at the University of Birmingham (UK) and in association with the **Enterprise & Diversity Research Cluster** and **City-REDI** at Birmingham Business School, this most recent seminar was one in a series convened since 2010 by members of the Regional Studies Association's international research network on Leadership in Urban and Regional Development.





Related to the growing interest in spatially-informed accounts of leadership, the aim of the November 2015 seminar was to bring together a growing international network of scholars keen to build an international community of learning that will reflect more critically on the changing and often contested role(s) that leadership plays in urban and regional development. Lively debate ensued at times over a two day gathering in Birmingham where around thirty participants listened to informative and stimulating presentations on leadership theory, research methodology and considered a number of sub-national leadership case examples where city and regional economic development, public service and community leaders are encountering, and engaging with, globalising industry and business interests and at all scales. A high standard of debate was provoked by thoughtful presentations from fifteen speakers currently working on a variety of sub-national leadership research and development projects from University and research-based organisations in the UK, Finland, Italy, Sweden, Estonia, the Netherlands, Australia and the USA.



Following a warm welcome and introduction from John Gibney and a first key-note presentation from Markku Sotarauta, speakers drew attention in their individual research update sessions that followed to the case for **improving leadership education and learning for regional development practitioners** (Frans Padt, Penn State, USA) - and covered a wide variety of leadership experiences in **low carbon sustainability, knowledge creation and spread across City-regions and Smart City settings** (John Mawson, Durham Business School, UK; Chris Collinge, Birmingham Business School, UK; Fred Paterson, Derby Business School, UK; Alyson Nicholds, Middlesex University Business School, UK); **city and regional development leadership in the UK, Australia and Italy** (Robin Hambleton, University of the West of England, UK and David Sweeting, University of Bristol, UK; Andrew Beer, University of South Australia; Leslie Budd with Alessandro Sancino, The Open University, UK; John Shutt, Leeds Business School, UK and with Gill Bentley, Birmingham Business School, UK); across **the changing landscape of urban and regional entrepreneurship and innovation policy** (Kiran Trehan, Birmingham Business School, UK; Joyce Liddle, CERGAM, Aix-Marseilles, France; Johan Miorner, CIRCLE, Lund University, Sweden); and **the particular leadership**





**challenges faced in peripheral cities and regions** (Martiene Grootens, University of Tartu, Estonia; Dane Anderton, Edge Hill University Business School, UK). At the seminar dinner at the end of the first day, and drawing on over twenty years spent 'in the field' in various sub-national economic development leadership roles, guest speaker Stewart Towe, Chair of the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (UK) and Group Chair & Managing Director of Hadley Industries Holdings Limited, reflected on his personal leadership learning and took some challenging questions from seminar delegates.

The speaker presentations and the ensuing discussions (which continued over tea breaks and sustaining sandwich lunches) in the formal seminar sessions gave participants the opportunity to explore different conceptions and meanings of the term 'leadership' in urban and regional studies; provoked discussion of the relative strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches to the study of urban and regional development leadership; and surfaced, in conversations between RSA members, the idea of developing a further round of collaborative international research partnerships that would aid our understanding, categorising and explaining of the many varieties of leadership found in sub-national settings.

Prompted by Markku Sotarauta at the outset of the seminar where he reflected on the conceptual and methodological state-of-the-art, participants considered the extent to which so-called 'place leadership' researchers need to be clear about which precise expression of leadership is the focus of their research enquiry. Are we researching political, executive, community or business leadership – or all of these? Are we talking about formal leadership and/or emergent leadership? And at what scale is research to be conducted? At community, neighbourhood, town, city, region or trans-border level? Perhaps in new and emerging ICT-enabled settings? And to what extent might there be other distinct expressions of leadership to be found across these settings?





Informative research updates from many of the presenters also highlighted the value of drawing on a wider range of comparative case experiences from around the world (Leslie Budd and Alessandro Sancino, for example, walked delegates through the world of urban public service leadership in Milton Keynes (UK) and Brescia (Italy) in their presentation. Alyson Nicholds presented her 'work-in-progress' that is developing a sense-making approach to researching leadership with (EU) RSA partners across a number of EU Smart Cities).

Wider discussions over the two days drew attention to some of the transferable lessons that can be learned from qualitative research methods deployed in academic disciplines beyond economic geography and including from leadership scholars who are attempting to build an integrated understanding of varieties of leadership experience by drawing upon political economy, psychology, sociology, social anthropology, linguistics, and education studies. The adoption of a multi-disciplinary approach – of course with care taken to avoid theoretical and methodological confusion and inconsistency - could aid a much more extensive exploration of leadership dynamics in cities and regions over the coming years.





It was felt that a fresh focus on uncovering the relationships between three core aspects of the sub-national leadership experience – namely; i) the tricky question of the roles and contributions (formal/publicly expressed and also sometimes hidden) of individual leaders and groups of individuals attempting to lead urban and regional projects as well as places (in order to better understand the motivations of those who seek to lead as well as the relational dynamics across and between leadership teams and how these are mediated and reconciled); ii) the everyday activities of leading (what are leaders actually doing?) and leadership processes (how is this 'leading' being enacted, by whom and with whom?); and iii), the relevance and impact of different local and national contexts both in terms of how economic, social, environmental and policy context shapes (or does not) leadership approaches and how different leadership approaches might influence place-based development outcomes differently (if they do at all). In terms of the latter discussion, it was felt that systematic studies of matched pairs of leadership case studies in different places in the same country or in different countries might provide a body of valuable cross-cultural comparisons and could help to better evidence the nature and relative 'weight' of any contextual factors at play.

In terms of bringing in approaches to leadership enquiry from disciplines beyond the traditions of urban and regional studies, participants agreed overall on importance of capturing the 'doing' of leading *in vivo* and *in situ*. This would help to reveal the fine detail of how leadership is enacted at the micro-level and across the ordinary and mundane everyday activities that take place in and around leaders and leading. Adopting ethnographic and action research methods that allowed for long term longitudinal data to be gathered, it was felt, could provide rich qualitative accounts of the experience of those 'doing the leading' and of those 'being led' that might help to capture less-well understood features of urban and regional development such as hidden/covert leadership and the place of 'the other' in the enactment of counter-reaction leadership, as well as the significance of emotionality and identity in sub-national decision-making.

The question of hidden/covert leadership was a leitmotif in the final exchanges on day two of the seminar. Leadership, it was suggested, refers not only to the things that senior leaders do publicly in an urban/regional development entity *per se*, but also needs to be understood as 'how leaders go about influencing others off-line' beyond their formal organisational boundaries and beyond their own local geographical settings. This 'influencing of other things' – including the sometimes covert or veiled influencing of wider framing policy and institutional design – the establishment of the formal policy parameters and the strategic and/or operational 'ground rules' and norms that serve either to constrain or enable others - is often invisible and represents a hidden form of leadership. Hidden leadership may be unauthorised, undemocratic and unaccountable – it may at worst evolve into what might be characterised as 'Leadership as Cabal' where the degree and form of influence may not be apparent (if ever at all) until long after events have occurred and projects and programmes have been completed and economic growth agendas have succeeded or failed. In periods of political and economic transition, where there is heightened intra- and inter-place competition for resources, or where there is economic uncertainty or social instability within and across places, hidden forms of leadership can have powerful effects on development trajectories. Increasingly undertaken by private sector consulting firms working with and/or alongside large (often transnational) firms and in association with other compliant local entities (including Universities), this type of leading is opaque and alternative voices may be squeezed out, and other important creativities suffocated, if they do not align with





whatever is the dominating 'party line' of the day – and irrespective of the strength of alternative arguments and propositions. The dynamics of hidden leadership (and its purpose) in city and regional development are under-researched and a more critical approach to leadership enquiry, it was felt, may reveal more about how hidden forms of leadership may explain decision-making outcomes, who's counsel is listened to and who's is not, and the social equity (or lack of it) in the distribution of money and resources.



Participants also discussed the question of the research network's engagement with policymakers and practitioners. An action research approach to leadership enquiry was proposed as one possible way of engaging with practitioners in the co-production of knowledge. The learning surfaced from action research could contribute to improvements in leadership policy and practice, and inform the development of curricula and pedagogies relevant to future generations of urban and regional development leaders. However, seminar participants acknowledged the many challenges around aligning a more critically reflective approach to the study of leadership in urban and regional development settings with the growing interest in the HE sector in engaging policymakers and practitioners more directly in research. Not an easy relationship to balance...

In summary, the areas of general common interest regarding future research and engagement activity that surfaced during the seminar included:

- The need to ensure conceptual/definitional clarity in leadership research;
- The value of adopting tried and tested research approaches from beyond the mainstream of urban and regional studies (ethnography, long term process-tracking studies, biographical analysis, fuzzy sets, matched pairs of case studies of leadership in action...);



- The potential of comparative cross-country and cross-scale studies;
- The possibility of developing and learning from 'action research' relationships with policy-makers and practitioners

Joyce Liddle, Chair of the network concluded the seminar by reminding colleagues of the Regional Studies Association Annual Conference in Graz in April 2016 and invited papers for the conference panel session on leadership.

The next RSA leadership research network seminar will be held at the University of Aix-Marseilles, France, in autumn 2016 where the network's spirited debate around leadership experiences in city and regional development will continue.

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