‘About Time the Regions Were Recognised’: interpreting region-building in Western Australia

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About Time the Regions Were Recognised: \(^1\) interpreting region-building in Western Australia

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ABSTRACT The region-building process in Western Australia is examined using Paasi’s theoretical framework of ‘regional institutionalisation’. The paper examines the formalisation of the regions in Western Australia from the 1940s with the first attempts to regionalise the State, through to the recent political and policy shifts. A particular focus is given to the pivotal legislation passed in 1993 which created nine Regional Development Commissions, and the implications of the post-2008 Royalties for Regions program. The discussion examines the trajectory of the Western Australia regions through the lens of Paasi’s model. The paper shows that the Regional Development Commissions have had a critical role in fulfilling the different stages of the model.

KEY WORDS Region; Paasi’s ‘regional institutionalisation’ framework; regional development; regional planning; Western Australia.

Introduction

Since the 1990s the regions have become an important arena in the Australian landscape and thus are scholarly ‘fertile territory to explore’ (Tonts et al. 2012, p. 291). McManus and Pritchard (2000) describe an emergence of regional Australia as a process affecting politics, policies and politicians. Much of the research on regional Australia has adopted an economic focus (among others, Beer et al. 2003; Tonts et al. 2012, 2013; Plummer & Tonts 2013). As stated by Collits (2012, p. 206), ‘[r]egional policy typically responds to regional disparities and often focuses on economic development, jobs and investment’. This economic focus is not particular to Australia—Harrison (2006) and Lagendijk (2006) show that internationally discourses on the region tend to be strongly concentrated on development—but in Australia this is especially evident.

Although some Australian scholars acknowledge that regions in Australia are ‘malleable’, ‘varying’ and ‘contested’ (Maginn & Roé 2007, p. 204; Brown & Bellamy 2010, p. 153; Collits 2012, p. 205), little attention has been paid to the formalisation of Australian regions as scrutinised by the political geography literature developed by Keating (1998) and Paasi (1986) elsewhere. The relevant literature in Australia often lacks a consistent conceptualisation of what is meant by ‘region’.

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(e.g. Rainnie & Grant 2005) and thus underscores the claim that regions should not be taken as given. This gap between economic analysis and political geography has been noted by Harrison (2006, p. 27), appraising ‘two potentially untapped avenues of theoretical engagement’. Following a similar argument, Paasi (2010, p. 2298) claims that there is a widespread ‘incautious use’ of the concept of region by economic geographers and Lovering (1999) notes conceptual vagueness in most of the literature on regional development when defining its central term: region.

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to examine the significance of the region-building process in Western Australia within the theoretical framework of ‘regional institutionalisation’ initiated by Paasi (1986), which is considered ‘stimulating’ (Morgan 2005, p. 30), ‘influential’ (Painter 2008, p. 353) and ‘well-known’ (García-Álvarez & Trillo-Santamaría 2013, p. 107). Western Australia offers a valuable opportunity as a case study because for more than two decades, and unlike other jurisdictions in Australia, its regions have had a legislated role since nine development commissions were created in 1993. These agencies were reinvigorated in 2008 through the creation of the Royalties for Regions (R4R) policy. The regional commissions and the R4R program are unique, not only for their arrangement but also for their durability, in contrast to the inconsistency of regional entities elsewhere in Australia, and at the federal level (Tonts 1999; Beer et al. 2003; Tonts & Haslam McKenzie 2005; Brown 2007; Collits 2012). Importantly, this paper focuses on the developments in Western Australia because each State and Territory largely shapes its own institutional architecture for regional development, and consequently there is ‘fragmentation’ and ‘no uniformity’ across the nation (Beer 2007, p. 120).

In Australian political and public policy discourse, the notions of ‘region’ and ‘regional’ are often understood as synonyms of ‘rural areas’ (McManus & Pritchard 2000; Tonts & Haslam McKenzie 2005; Beer 2007; Brown 2007; Brown & Bellamy 2010) even though in theory and policy regions do not ‘distinguish between urban and rural areas’ (Maginn & Rofe 2007, p. 205), urban regions have been identified, researched and planned in Australia (Jones 1986; Beer et al. 2003; Gleeson 2007, 2010; Glasson 2010; Collits 2012) and much of the recent international literature on regions is metropolitan-focused (Harrison 2006; MacLeod & Jones 2007; Paasi 2009b). The Australian usage of ‘regions’ reinforces the appropriateness of our approach. As regions have an undefined and sometimes confused meaning in Australia, it is pertinent to discuss when they become particular and bounded territories with specific attributions. In Western Australia especially, the regions have evolved from being ambiguous rural areas to constitute ‘certain territorial shape[s]’ ‘identified as a distinct unit in the spatial structure of the society’ (Paasi 1986, p. 124, 2009b, p. 134). This is the first step in Paasi’s ‘institutionalisation’ process, the framework of which will be revisited in this paper using Western Australia as the case-study site.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. It begins by reviewing Paasi’s conceptualisation. It briefly outlines the formalisation of regions in Australia and considers the significance of regionalisation in Western Australia in particular. It traces the first attempts to regionalise the State after the Second World War through to the recent political and policy shifts, with a specific focus on the legislation passed in 1993 and the more recent R4R program. The paper concludes by discussing the trajectory of the Western Australia regions in light of Paasi’s ‘regional institutionalisation’ framework.
Paasi’s conceptualisation of ‘regional institutionalisation’

The article by Paasi (1986) constituted ground-breaking work on the ‘regional institutionalisation’ framework. Since then, Paasi has refined the model but it remains ostensibly the same. Paasi’s conceptualisation is considered an illustrative example of the ‘new regionalism’ and/or ‘new regional geography’ theoretical body which emerged in the 1980s (Lovering 1999; Lagendijk 2003; Harrison 2006; MacKinnon 2009). Paasi is structuralist, that is, derived from Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration, which recognises how societal structures are dialectically produced and reproduced, emphasising the role of power relations in framing this process (Paasi 1986, 2009a). Importantly, MacKinnon (2009) has highlighted that, unlike most of the regional structuralist and post-structuralist literature derived from Giddens which remains purely theoretical speculation, Paasi’s model is empirically appropriate—see Paasi (2009b) for an extensive record of applications.

When defining regions, Paasi rejects the widespread assumptions that regions can be merely defined by:

- assuming predetermined spatial units;
- research which sets ‘perfectly objective’ regional boundaries; or
- individual beliefs and opinions on regional extent.

Instead, he postulates that regions are historical processes with an inevitably collective dimension. This means that they emerge, evolve and eventually disappear, and are thus ‘perpetually “becoming” instead of just “being”’ (Paasi 2009b, p. 133). He considers the key aspect in researching regions to be the process during which regions become ‘part of the spatial structure of a society and […] established and clearly identified in different spheres of social action and social consciousness’ (Paasi 1986, p. 121); hence, ‘regional institutionalisation’. For Paasi the opposing concept to ‘region’ is ‘place’. He argues that the region necessarily has a social meaning that is missing in the case of place, which he considers a personal appropriation. In this sense a region transcends individuals and is part of the spatial structure of the society. For Paasi ‘place’ and ‘region’ do not differ in terms of scale and are not interchangeable concepts. Consistent with other commentators (Agnew 1999; MacLeod & Jones 2007; Tomaney 2009), Paasi postulates that regions do not happen at a fixed scale, but at several levels.

According to Paasi (1986, 2009a), the ‘institutionalisation’ process consists of four stages:

1. Assumption of territorial shape.
2. Development of symbolic shape.
3. Development of institutions.
4. Establishment of an identity and regional consciousness.

These stages may occur, entirely or partly, simultaneously. The first stage refers to setting regional boundaries, which are not automatically regional territories per se, although social and political practices influence the production and reproduction of boundaries. In addition, the bounding effects are limited in the sense that regions ‘rarely seek to displace states or take over the state functions of social regulation and legitimation’ (Keating 1998, p. 11). Scholars such as Painter (2008),
Massey (2004), Bristow (2005), Morgan (2005), MacLeod and Jones (2007) and Painter (2008) have contested the prominence given by Paasi to regional boundaries on the grounds that the fluid contemporary world, with networks and flows connected globally, contradicts the emphasis on boundaries. Moreover, Keating (1998) and Painter (2008) argue that regions can be incongruous because of the multiple coexisting delimitations. However, as MacLeod and Jones (2007) conclude when examining this issue, it is impossible to escape from the territorial grids determined by the regional boundaries once they have been established.

Regarding the symbolic shape, Paasi considers the creation of symbols used for constructing narratives of regional identity, such as social and economic practices, traditions, the naming of regional foods, birds, songs or logos. Paasi attributes a pivotal role to the name of the region, given that it contributes to social consciousness and historical thickness. Agnew (1999) concurs, suggesting that people use regional designations to make sense of the world but, confirming Paasi, these denominations are not neutral but shaped on the ideas that people and scholars have about regional differences, rather than simply based on those differences per se. School geography textbooks and maps are common mechanisms for diffusing regional symbols (Paasi 1986, 2002), an unsurprising observation taking into account that cartographic products are mechanisms of power and often reflect the particular socio-political contexts in which they are produced (Dühr 2015). Moreover, a specific but widespread trend is the use of symbols for region-marketing and promotion (Paasi 2009b; Tomaney 2009).

Institutional development includes both formal and informal institutions, located inside and outside of a particular region. In this sense, Paasi emphasises that this development is not only limited to political-administrative institutions but is also performed by mass media, educational establishments, firms, and other private organisations. While Paasi (2009b) has acknowledged the presence of soft institutions in ‘regional institutionalisation’, such as informal conventions and tacit rules (Bristow 2005; Harrison 2006), his research focuses on the formalised institutions which influence the territorial and symbolic shapes of the region and its identity.

With reference to identity and consciousness, Paasi (2002, p. 140) differentiates between the identity of a region, which ‘refers to those features of nature, culture and inhabitants that distinguish or, in fact, can be used […] to distinguish a region from others’ and regional identity (or regional consciousness), which is people’s ‘identification with their region’. For Paasi the region achieves a specific identity in itself, but this does not necessarily equate to the feeling of regional consciousness or identity of the people living within it. Keating (1998), Rodríguez-Pose and Gill (2003), Tomaney (2009), and García-Álvarez and Trillo-Santamaría (2013) suggest that there can be a gap between them both. In analysing this gap, the difference that Scott (2000) makes between formal and informal ways of institutionalisation is notable: those that are fully institution-building processes (formal) and those that are community-building (informal). Paasi argues that the establishment of a regional government is a typical basis for the identity of a region (‘formal’ according to Scott 2000), but this is not necessarily the most effective tool in the process of institutionalisation. Keating (1998) agrees that regional identity may lead to regional autonomy and argues that the presence of both a regional identity and the identity of a region as interpreted by Paasi does not necessarily have political consequences.
The evolution of regions in Western Australia

Underpinned by Paasi's (2009b, p. 136) statement that '[t]he institutionalisation perspective puts stress on the historical process' and his own diachronic analysis of Finnish regions (Paasi 1986, 2002), this section of the paper proposes an evolutionary examination of the regions in Western Australia, in line with the federal developments in this field, through analysis of a wide range of key policy documents (reports, plans, Acts and bills, Hansard, etc.) and other sources such as media, websites and public discussions. Our direct observation and analysis of regional agencies' roles and policies also informs this section. Finally, statistical data on the funding of regional agencies is examined to assess some of the impacts of the R4R policy since its inception in 2008.

The precedents: federal government initiatives (1940s and 1970s)

Formal regional delimitations in Australia date from the 1940s with the establishment of the Commonwealth Department of Post-War Reconstruction (DPWR). Its purpose was oversight of a successful transition from a war to peacetime economy and domestic reconstruction which outlined a national regional development program (Beer et al. 2003; Brown 2007). During the Curtin and Chifley periods (1941–49) there were several Premiers’ conferences where regional organisations were planned to enable coordination of federal and State government services in each region (Rainnie & Grant 2005). In 1949 the DPWR published a map delineating ‘regions for development and decentralization’ (Figure 1). The DPWR and its regions were disbanded in 1949 when Menzies took office.

Until the Labor Whitlam government in 1972, regional development policy was the responsibility of the States rather than the Commonwealth. The Whitlam government established the Department of Urban and Regional Development (DURD) through which it actively promoted regional development in an attempt to expand the role of the federal government. Initially 68 regions were created nationwide, later expanded to 76 in 1974 (Drummond 2007) (Figure 2). In Western Australia the Tonkin government (1971–74) collaborated with this federal initiative of regional organisation:

Considerable research has been undertaken [...] in association with the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics to define regional boundaries within the State. (Hon. Tonkin, Assembly Hansard 24 October 1973)

Commonwealth grants under the Grants Commission Act 1973 had a particular focus on rectifying spatial inequality through direct fiscal arrangements to the regions. However, after the initial enthusiasm, there was disenchantment because the programs did not offer any autonomy at the regional level, were often improvised and therefore contentious. Another issue which undermined the efficacy of DURD strategies was the States’ suspicion of the expansion of federal government involvement (Jones 1986; Rainnie & Grant 2005). This sentiment was underscored by the Governor’s speeches to the Legislative Council in 1974 and 1975, while Court was State Premier and Whitlam the Prime Minister:
My Government views with concern the expressed intention of the Commonwealth Government to legislate and act in areas which may encroach upon functions which are Constitutionally and traditionally State responsibilities. (Sir Hughie Edwards, Council Hansard 25 July 1974)

Following the State Government’s undertaking [...] to resist centralisation of power in Canberra, [...] Western Australia [...] [will] detect and resist intrusion by the Commonwealth into its Constitutional rights and responsibilities. (Sir Hughie Edwards, Council Hansard 13 March 1975)

The demise of the Whitlam government in 1975 signalled the end of this initiative and an overall diminution of federal funds for regional development for two decades. Regional development policy, in so far as it existed, became mostly the domain of State governments.
The early regional agencies in the 1980s

Prior to the 1980s, various forms of regional development committees coordinated advice to State government regarding regional social and economic development in Western Australia. Regional centres were established in 1976 in the Kimberley and Pilbara, and regional officers were routinely appointed. There had been a minister for the North West since 1943, but there was no one ministerial portfolio or government department whose responsibility was dedicated to regional development. Therefore, regional investment tended to be haphazard and vulnerable to electoral cycles and individual ministerial agendas.

After a decade in Opposition, the West Australian Labor Party (ALP), led by Burke, hatched an audacious strategy in 1982 to break the hold of the conservative parties in the non-metropolitan regions by implementing the Bunbury 2000 Plan which focused on the then bellwether parliamentary seats of Bunbury and Mitchell. It proposed to develop Bunbury as the South West regional capital and growth

**Figure 2. Regionalisation, 1973–74.**
*Source: Drummond (2007: 2C6).*
centre. The ALP won the 1983 State election, and those seats. The intention was to create a regional authority by way of an Act of parliament, with coordination responsibilities, promoting economic and social development, and overall planning control of the region’s activities. The parliamentary discussions were vigorous as the Opposition claimed that the government wanted to create non-elected regional governments who would challenge the elected representatives. The Premier responded:

Let me make it perfectly clear: This authority does not aim to dominate local authorities, nor will it do so. It will work in partnership with local government for the benefit of the whole region. […] Let me also make it plain that this Government has no intention of establishing regional governments to either replace or dominate local government. […] The Bunbury 2000 Plan, of which the South West Development Authority is a centrepiece, has been welcomed by the people of the south-west and their local authorities. (Hon. Burke, Assembly Hansard 3 May 1984)

After 1984, four additional statutory regional bodies were created by successive ALP governments (Figure 3). Each time a bill was discussed in parliament there were accusations of pork barrelling and undue favour because the respective parliamentary seats were important for maintaining the governmental majority. Eventually, however, the Opposition supported the creation of these regional agencies.

At the outset I advise that the Opposition supports this Bill. […] It is no secret that after a pretty close poll [February 1988] the Government has realised it will have to do quite a bit of work in Geraldton if it wants to retain the seat of Geraldton at the next election. […] One point I want to raise […] is the name of the Bill. […] It is interesting that the South West Development Authority did not have the name of ‘Bunbury’ in its title. The same applies to the Great Southern Regional Authority […]. However, in this case, it will be the Geraldton Mid-West Development Authority and this alone highlights that the Government is trying to build up the seat of Geraldton in its favour. […] Within the Mid West region there are many major towns and it is important, when carrying out a regional development strategy, that services are not centred in one area. (Hon. Court, Assembly Hansard 2 June 1988)

The 1992 Act for the creation of a Pilbara Regional Commission was the last of this wave, adding more functions to its portfolio than the previous four, including the implementation of a policy document (the Pilbara 21 Strategy Report) and the marketing of the region. In all the regional agencies the appointments of the director and senior roles were made by the relevant minister, and for this reason there were often accusations of control from Perth. Importantly, these five regional agencies attained some strategic planning capacities but separate from the formal, statutory planning which was the responsibility of other State government departments. Spatially, Figure 4 shows how the planning regions created in 1985 were inconsistent with the development regions (Figure 3).
The Regional Development Commissions Act 1993 and its consequences; federal developments in parallel

Before the end of the ALP State government in 1993 there had already been discussions about expanding beyond the five statutory regions (Figure 3), especially as other regional commissions had been created as interim bodies. This was eventually achieved with a hung parliament in 1993 when the Nationals, linked mainly to rural constituencies, had a decisive role in forming government. The Liberal–National Coalition legislated to harmonise the pre-existing regional commissions and authorities and to establish them elsewhere (with the exception of metropolitan Perth).

The Regional Development Commissions Bill seeks to enable the establishment of regional development commissions on a standardised basis, Statewide. This legislation will repeal all existing regional development authority and commission Acts. [...] This legislation marks the start of
a new era for regional development administration in Western Australia. Never before in the State’s history has each region been formally recognised or given equal ranking from a legislative and administrative perspective. [...] The different status of regions in the past has meant that the needs and rights of people in some regions have not been adequately represented or reflected in the State’s priorities. [...] The Government intends that this situation now change. (Hon. Cowan, Assembly Hansard 4 November 1993)

The rationale for achieving equity among regions dominated the parliamentary discussions. ALP MPs emphasised that the 1993 Bill was rooted in the Bunbury 2000 Plan while the Coalition MPs claimed that the local governments gained influence under the new legislation because one third of each Regional Development Commission (RDC) board membership was nominated by local councils. The control of the RDCs by the State was discussed:


[The Bill] does not give each region sufficient autonomy; it reverses the power structure and brings it back to the metropolitan area. Although I do not think that was the intention, I am sure that is what will happen. The sooner decision making is given back to the country regions, the better off they will be. (Hon. Leahy, Assembly Hansard 8 December 1993)

Each region is different and we should customise the way regional development commissions are put into place. [...] The Government should think again about standardising regional development authorities and about transferring the final decision making process to [Perth]. (Hon. Thomas, Council Hansard 16 December 1993)

The boundaries between the RDCs departed from the geography of Figure 3, although the Peel region was created by a split from the South West. Particular discussions were held about the Peel and the Gascoyne, the former because of the local governments that had to be included within, and the latter because of the small population (approximately 10 000 inhabitants). Figure 5 reflects the map of the 1993 Act which has remained unchanged since. The RDCs have implemented regional development policy, with particular emphasis on social and economic strategies to enhance growth and job creation. They are statutory authorities with the status of a State government agency and they consequently gained a pivotal role in planning, in collaboration with the peak planning agency, the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC). In 1994 the existing planning regions (Figure 4) were amended to the RDCs (Figure 5), enabling the latter to participate in statutory planning.

The State Planning Strategy (1997), the Regional Development Policy (1999), the Regional Development Strategy (2003) and the State Sustainability Strategy (2003) acknowledged the regional scale, using the nine regions (Haslam McKenzie & Tonts 2005; Glasson 2010). The 1997 State Planning Strategy is a case in point because of its implications for land uses and infrastructure planning. The Strategy acknowledges the regions as passed in 1993, in addition to the metropolitan area of Perth, adopting them as the basic bounded framework for planning. The rationale for this comprehensive approach is expressed as follows:

Regional planning and regional development are complementary. [...] The extensiveness, natural diversity, socio-economic differences and concentrated settlement pattern of this State can make standard models of regional planning practice irrelevant and/or ineffective and regional development initiatives ad hoc, inefficient and inequitable. A whole-of-government approach [...] is the cornerstone of an effective regional planning and development planning. (WAPC 1995, p. 3)

Despite the strong legislative framework enabling the RDCs, and like the Commonwealth regional development organisations explained below, they were under-resourced and by the 2000s investment in rural Western Australia waned (Tonts 1999; Haslam McKenzie & Tonts 2005). Politically, the non-metropolitan areas were increasingly deemed unimportant electorally. Furthermore, the electoral malapportionment in Western Australia, in place since 1890, which meant that rural votes were worth twice those of metropolitan votes, was repealed in 2005,
with the passing of ‘one vote, one value’ legislation (Davies & Tonts 2007). Regional issues were constant during the electoral reform discussion, with regard to the boundaries between regions (Figure 6) and the fact that decreasing the number of members of parliament from non-metropolitan constituencies would limit the opportunity for exerting influence and receiving government funding.

If talking about electoral reform, [...] the government should look at bringing Mandurah and seats to the north of Mandurah into the South Metropolitan Region or the Peel region rather than the South West Region. (Hon. Johnson, Assembly Hansard 5 April 2005)

The Premier stated [...] that would resist the federal government’s move to centralise to Canberra. I have no real argument with that comment. However, I want to stop this government’s centralising power in Perth. (Hon. Castrilli, Assembly Hansard 5 April 2005)
Since the early 1980s Australian federal governments have adopted a neo-liberal non-interventionist policy stance (Tonts 1999; Tonts & Haslam McKenzie 2005). Regional development policies by the Commonwealth were generally short term in their perspective and funding with a greater reliance on local populations to be more self-determining for economic development and locally determined, yet globally responsive, community-based decision-making frameworks. As noted by Beer et al. (2003) and Beer (2007), fragmentation in responsibility and administration was a hallmark of Australian regional development. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Commonwealth commitment to regional development was episodic, influenced by economic and social restructuring.

The federal government attempted to develop fully integrated regional policy through the development of the Office of Regional Development and the Bureau of Rural Sciences. The Kelty report (1993) proposed the establishment of Regional Economic Development Organisations (REDOs), later Regional Development...
Organisations (RDOs), and Area Consultative Committees (ACCs) across Australia to develop individual regional strategies, promote regional development and improve policy coordination between federal, State and local governments, a strategy which was subsequently taken up in the federal government’s ‘Working Nation’ program in 1994. In Western Australia, the RDO regions (Figure 7) of the 1990s did not match the RDCs (Figure 5) and included metropolitan Perth.

The Howard government (1996–2007) showed little inclination to drive a national regional development agenda and the REDOs and RDOs were subsequently scrapped, although some RDOs survived as local corporations. The ACCs remained and were restructured for channelling federal funds to regional communities. The ACCs were disbanded and RDOs, re-badged as Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committees, were once again revitalised under the Rudd/Gillard Labour government (2007–13), drawing together representatives from all levels of government and the community in a region, through which to channel funds and roll out regional development initiatives which had matching funds from State,
community and local government. In Western Australia, the current RDA map (Figure 8) is consistent with the RDCs (Figure 5), except in the Gascoyne and in metropolitan Perth, which has a RDA Committee but lacks a RDC.

**The 2008 turnaround and the Royalties for Regions Act 2009**

Davies and Tonts (2007) predicted disputes after the ‘one vote, one value’ legislation due to the diminution of government funding to areas that had lost seats in the parliament of Western Australia in the 2005 electoral reform. Dissatisfaction was evident in the 2008 State election campaign when the Nationals claimed that rural areas were disproportionately contributing to the State and national economies, but the government was not equitably re-investing in them. The National Party contentiously announced that it would contest the election as an independent party, having previously always aligned itself with the Liberal Party. In 2008 it contested a number of non-metropolitan seats which had traditionally been held by Liberal

**FIGURE 8.** The RDA regions in 2014.

*Source: Regional Development Australia (http://www.rda.gov.au/).*
candidates. The 2008 election resulted in a hung parliament and the Nationals held the balance of power. A Liberal–National Coalition formed government with conditions which revolved around greater investment in non-metropolitan regions. The pivotal electoral commitment was a R4R program, aiming to quarantine 25 per cent of the State’s mining and onshore petroleum royalties for additional investments in projects, infrastructure and services in the non-metropolitan regions—over and above the State government service obligation. Initially the scheme was applied without supporting legislation, but a Royalties for Regions Bill was introduced in parliament and passed in 2009.

Essentially, royalties for regions is about the devolution of decision making back to a local level. [...] Who better to prioritise expenditure in a region than the people who live, work and invest there? It is actually a policy that encourages the participation of regional decision-makers, whether they be local government representatives or members of the boards of the regional development commissions. (Hon. Davies, Council Hansard 25 November 2009)

Tables 1 and 2 show that, although the overall percentage of spending in the RDCs increased only slightly after 2008, the RDCs have progressively become dependent on the R4R program. The Regional Development Council, in existence since the 1993 Act, endorsed an Action Agenda for Regional Development in 2011 prioritising six areas for R4R fund investment. However, in the early years there were complaints that investments were not responding to appropriate strategic goals (Tonts et al. 2013).

In 2013 a State Planning and Development Framework was set up to coordinate R4R and other department expenditure programs (Government of Western Australia 2013). In 2014, each RDC collaborated with its parallel RDA Committee to develop a

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<th>Table 1. Net cash provided by State government to the RDCs</th>
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<td>Gascoyne</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goldfields–Esperance</td>
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<td>Great Southern</td>
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<td>Kimberley</td>
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<td>Mid West</td>
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<td>Peel</td>
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<td>Pilbara</td>
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<tr>
<td>South West</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wheatbelt</td>
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<tr>
<td>All RDCs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actual expenses of the State budget</td>
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<td>Expenses in RDCs over the State budget (%)</td>
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*For three RDCs, figures for 2006–07 are unavailable and are replaced by those for 2004–05.
Regional Blueprint with the intention of guiding the future development of the region to 2050, utilising R4R investment funds. At the same time, a second State Planning Strategy was developed (WAPC 2014) which, unlike the previous one, confirms the Perth–Mandurah conurbation by absorbing the Peel region into that of Perth in planning terms. Over time, the funding arrangements and governance structures of regional organisations have, progressively, been shaped by state-controlled entities, although local representation and intra-governmental collaboration have consistently and successfully underpinned the function and strength of the RDCs.

Discussing Western Australia region-building through Paasi

As noted above, this paper discusses the region-building process in Western Australia in light of Paasi’s (1986) ‘regional institutionalisation’ framework. This discussion subverts the widespread taken-for-granted regions researched by Australian economic geographers, as reflected, for instance, in the Pilbara region. By analysing the previous section, it is evident that the Pilbara region has only recently become a distinctive unit in the spatial structure of society, using Paasi’s (1986) words. Until the 1970s it was an undefined portion of the North West conceived as a broad policy area (Figure 1). Critical documents such as the Pilbara Concept (1972) and the Pilbara Study (1974) pre-empted the mining and industrial development of subsequent decades affecting part of the area. In the early 1990s the Pilbara consolidated its shape (Figures 3 and 5) after various local government shifts and its RDC became an established bounded entity with specific policies such as Pilbara Cities (2010), funded by R4R. Interestingly, recent publications compiled by Plummer and Tonts (2013) examined the Pilbara to theorise the relationship between resources and economic geography. However, these scholars assumed the Pilbara as a fixed, defined region, thus demonstrating that set regional borders ‘may ultimately become “actors” in guiding […] research work’ (Paasi 2010, p. 2298), leading the researchers to fall into a ‘trap of reification, by presenting the region as a coherent unit of activities and action’ (Lagendijk 2003, p. 724). Alternatively, the Pilbara should be understood as an ongoing process.

As argued in this paper, the territorial shapes defined through regional boundaries have fluctuated in Western Australia since the 1940s, and indeed there had previously been regional attempts in the form of ‘regional states’ that were designed

### Table 2. Participation of the Royalties for Regions funds in the net cash provided by State government, in percentages

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gascoyne</td>
<td>48.48</td>
<td>58.59</td>
<td>63.71</td>
<td>69.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldfields–Esperance</td>
<td>23.34</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>57.24</td>
<td>77.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Southern</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>37.66</td>
<td>57.04</td>
<td>75.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberley</td>
<td>73.76</td>
<td>38.25</td>
<td>49.72</td>
<td>77.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid West</td>
<td>49.24</td>
<td>50.80</td>
<td>55.86</td>
<td>78.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peel</td>
<td>44.73</td>
<td>58.31</td>
<td>50.18</td>
<td>68.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilbara</td>
<td>32.41</td>
<td>42.55</td>
<td>47.56</td>
<td>73.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West</td>
<td>15.23</td>
<td>38.16</td>
<td>23.36</td>
<td>52.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheatbelt</td>
<td>44.55</td>
<td>36.51</td>
<td>33.49</td>
<td>30.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>37.44</td>
<td>40.71</td>
<td>48.68</td>
<td>66.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RDCs’ annual reports, available on their websites.
to split the State (Brown 2007; Drummond 2007). Figure 9 superimposes all of them. Its scrutiny confirms that regional geographies in Australia are contested and incongruous (Beer et al. 2003; Beer 2007; Maginn & Rofe 2007; Everingham 2009; Collits 2012). However, our analysis shows that the 1993 Act and its associated map (Figure 5) stabilised the vacillations. In this respect, Western Australia stands out from other Australian jurisdictions where the regions and regional boundaries are prone to changes with the waxing and waning of regional policy frameworks (Beer et al. 2003; Beer 2007; Everingham 2009; Brown & Bellamy 2010; Collits 2012; Brown & Deem 2014). Significantly, and exceptionally in the Australian political landscape, the 1993 map has also been adopted by other State and federal governmental agencies.

The RDCs’ existence has contributed to the consistency of the 1993 map and, accordingly, they reproduce its bounded territories, in line with Paasi’s (2010, p. 2300) expectation that, when a region becomes established, it ‘often achieves a sort of immanent capacity for reproducing itself’. In addition, and consistent with
the Paasi (1986, 2002) mid-term analysis of the Finish regions, the current Western Australian regional map developed as a consequence of a process and this has reinforced its stability. Nonetheless, there have been small changes post-1993. For example, the Mid West RDA Committee has amalgamated with the Gascoyne (Figure 8), and the Peel, in planning terms, is currently part of metropolitan Perth. The findings of this study suggest that the RDCs have had a critical role in fulfilling the different stages of the Paasi ‘regional institutionalisation’ model. The RDCs have augmented the symbolic dimension; the identity and consciousness of the regions. A case in point is regional names, which have been actively promoted and marketed by the RDCs. This has not been without criticism, as was evidenced by the debate regarding the Mid West regional name in the late 1980s. Following Agnew’s (1999) perspective, the arguments for and against the ‘regional capitals’ being present in regional names, arguably, have political and economic significance, particularly in terms of grants and investment (Tonts 1999). The pivotal function of the RDCs in regional institutionalisation is evidenced by the extensive list of institutions participated by the RDCs (indeed, some are R4R-funded) and encompassing a wide range of topics (economy, culture, sport, environment, strategic planning, etc.) (see Table 3). These regional institutions are consistent with those expounded by Paasi (1986, 2009b) and Keating (1998).

The State government also makes a contribution to the production and reproduction of regional symbols as ‘identity of a region’ in the sense given by Paasi. Critical discourse analysis of textual and visual materials (Fairclough 2010), especially pertinent in the maps used for planning (Dühr 2015), confirms this. The imagery in the State Planning Strategy (WAPC 1997) portrays the State as a heterogeneous composition of different regions, each one with its own symbols and policies (Plate 1A, B). Furthermore, the social and economic practices attributed to each region in Plate 1C echo the ‘internally cohesive, homogenous regional economies’ described by Bristow (2005), the ‘parochial regional economies’ defined by Lagendijk (2006).

Table 3. A survey of regional institutions: two examples for each region

| • Gascoyne Aboriginal Heritage and Cultural Centre |
| • Gascoyne Food Bowl Initiative Local Consultative Committee |
| • Arts and Edges—Regional Arts Summit |
| • Goldfields Tourism Network |
| • Albany Entertainment Centre |
| • Great Southern Festival |
| • Kimberley Aboriginal Artists |
| • Kimberley Economic Forum |
| • Mid West Indigenous Arts Industry Strategy |
| • Mid West Strategic Infrastructure Group |
| • Peel Chamber of Commerce and Industry |
| • Peel Community Foundation |
| • My Pilbara Adventure |
| • Pilbara Dialogue |
| • Roads to Export—Infrastructure Investment Plan |
| • South West Strategic Plan 2010–2025 |
| • Wheatbelt Aged Support and Care Solutions |
| • Wheatbelt Natural Resource Management |

Source: RDCs’ websites.
and the ‘cartographic anxiety’ suggested by Painter (2008), three critical observations assessed when judging the new regionalist literature. This sentiment is reinforced by the vision underpinning the 1997 State Strategy:

Western Australians will continue to choose where they want to live. The vision of this Strategy does not counter these decisions but seeks to
widen the choice by improving the amenity of towns and cities beyond Perth to give future generations opportunity to be part of smaller, more independent communities. (WAPC 1997, p. viii)

In the current interlinked global arena as described by Massey (2004) and Macleod and Jones (2007), imagining ‘smaller’, ‘more independent’ regions is untenable. Progressively, the WAPC’s support of regional distinctiveness is less overt. The imagery used by WAPC (2014) for the 2014 State Planning Strategy consisted of spectacular aerial photographs with no links to the regions. With the benefit of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2010), the images can be read as an expression of the immensity and endeavour of the State territory (Plate 2A, B). Rather than bounded regions as found in earlier WAPC publications (1995, 1997; Plate 1B, C), the WAPC publication (2014) conveys an unlimited State alongside global maps where the State as a whole is located in the global arena (Plate 2C). Instead of ‘more independent’ regions, the new vision proclaims:

**Plate 2.** Second State Planning Strategy imagery: (A) front cover; (B) pictures used in some of the pages of the publication; (C) map of Western Australia’s key trading partners (2012–13).
*Source:* WAPC (2014, front cover, and pp. 4 and 15), with permission of the WAPC and photographer Richard Woldendorp.
Encouraging cross-regional collaboration by embracing and aggregating the distinct identity and competitive advantages of each region [which] will offer greater choice for long-term global and domestic capital investment. (WAPC 2014, p. 20)

In a period where the R4R program and the 2009 Act have reinforced the regions and the RDCs’ roles, it seems that the planning authorities tend to prioritise a State-wide vision and the State’s position in the global arena. This subtly informs the schism between planning and regional development governmental departments (Haslam McKenzie & Tonts 2005; Glasson 2010), which persists despite the enduring efforts of inter-agency collaboration by the WAPC (1995) and the Government of Western Australia (2013). Moreover, regions themselves enhance their presence in the global scale through informal institutions, such as the Mid West Strategic Infrastructure Group (which gives a critical consideration to the regional exporting supply chain) and the collaborative ‘Roads to Export’ plan in the South West (Table 3). This is a relevant finding as it corroborates for Western Australia the observation that sub-State regional institutions are increasingly engaging internationally (Keating 1998; Lovering 1999; Merlin 2002; MacLeod & Jones 2007; García-Alvarez & Trillo-Santamaría 2013).

With regard to the ‘regional identity’ as distinguished by Paasi to the ‘identity of a region’, the best way to test its existence and acceptance is through surveys (Keating 1998; Brown & Bellamy 2010; Brown & Deem 2014). The Department of Regional Development conducted the R4R-funded survey ‘Living in the Regions’ in 2013. Although this survey did not directly ask whether people identified with their region, it provided results according to the nine RDCs’ regions. Interestingly, the Department of Regional Development (2013, p. 24) concluded that ‘[a]ll regions showed a greater sense of community compared to the metropolitan area’. What this means is imprecise; is this ‘sense of community’ regional, or local? Further, is this ‘regional sense of community’ more an aspiration or construction of some elites, in the critical sense posed by Scott (2000), Tomaney (2009) and García-Alvarez and Trillo-Santamaría (2013)? Nonetheless, the responses from the ‘Living in the Regions’ survey subvert the findings by Brown and Deem (2014, p. 9), who detected in Western Australia less sub-State regional sense of belonging than in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria; a difference that Brown and Deem (2014) attribute to a stronger Western Australia-State identity in relation to the national identity. Indeed, Brown (2007), Brown and Bellamy (2010) and Brown and Deem (2014) suggest that a State in Australia is a kind of region by international standards, hence their label ‘state-region’.

As a final consideration, we offer a further point of discussion regarding our analysis which challenges Paasi’s model. According to our interpretation of the process, 1984, 1993 and 2008 are critical junctures in region-building in Western Australia. In each case the political circumstances were exceptional, with narrowly disputed electoral results and hung parliaments. Paasi’s model suggests a regional process of ‘progressive self-consciousness’ with the development of symbols and a grounded identity led by regional stakeholders, particularly in the regions themselves. However, in practice, the Western Australian regions have been debated, decided and implemented from Perth. The hung parliaments have been instrumental in enabling rural-based MPs to have a decisive role. This practical observation is in accordance with the remark by Brown (2007, p. 14) when describing regionalisation
experiences in Australia: they are ‘more accurately […] a product of top-down “regionalisation”, than bottom-up “regionalism” based on political self-identification and/or cultural expression’. According to Scott’s (2000) distinction between formal and informal institutionalisation, Western Australia is fully formal. Our criticism of the Paasi framework in this respect is in line with the caution by Harrison (2006), MacLeod and Jones (2007) and Tomaney (2009) that the emergence of regions cannot draw attention away from the persistent role of the states.

Conclusion

The parliamentary debates cited in this paper raised notions such as devolution, centralisation–decentralisation, autonomy and establishment of regional governments, concepts explored in detail by others interested in regionalism in Australia (e.g. Beer et al. 2003; Brown 2007; Brown & Bellamy 2010; Brown & Deem 2014). Even if the result of the different waves of regional empowerment through the RDCs is relevant in the Australian context, an international comparison suggests that they are modest agencies for the purposes of regional development, similar to those developed in some centralised countries after the Second World War (Keating 1998; Merlin 2002; MacKinnon 2009). Devolution is defined as the widespread transfer of powers from the state to regions (Rodríguez-Pose & Gill 2003). This is not the case in Western Australia. Indeed, the implementation of a fourth level of government—the regional—in Australia has been disregarded by the Commonwealth (Brown 2007; Collits 2012; Collits 2012) and proposals for replacing the present States by regional states are mere aspirations (Beer et al. 2003; Drummond 2007). Systematically in Australia the regions are conceived as an arena for governance (Everingham 2009; Brown & Bellamy 2010) through which flexible arrangements between stakeholders and different levels of government are negotiated, rather than a potential new, tier of government.

This paper uses Paasi’s model to investigate the region-building process in Western Australia. However, this model is limited in examining power relations with regard to devolution and regional autonomy. And these seem to be transcendent in our case study for explaining the regions:

I do not believe that the real key for regional development […] lies simply in the quantum of money that we put into these areas. […] It’s not about the money. It’s about the control. […] [T]here needs to be a radical rethink of […] the way in which we devolve more responsibility for determining which services are delivered and how they are delivered in these communities; and until we do that, we will not make a transformative difference. (Hon. MacTiernan, Assembly Hansard 24 September 2009)

Indeed, it seems cynical to transfer funds and responsibilities for regional development to regional agencies without, in parallel, devolving real decision-making powers, enabling federal and State governments to abrogate liability when desired outcomes do not materialise. When discussing R4R policy in 2009, many people in rural areas considered that it was ‘about time the regions were recognised’. However, it can be argued that the recognition of the regions is not complete.

The use of Paasi’s model in this paper makes an important contribution to transferring this political geography approach to the Australian scholar community investigating
regional economies. In particular, we evidence how the regions are processes holding a collective dimension and not taken-for-granted realities, nor personal beliefs. By doing this, we offer a practical justification for regional researchers to critically interrogate the regions as an object of study (Harrison 2006; Lagendijk 2006; Paasi 2010). We show that Western Australia is an exception in Australia for its process of regionalisation and regional consistency, despite the process being largely top-down and State-driven. And Australia is also an exception in the understanding of regions around the globe: as this paper confirms, the regionalisation discussion remains herein mainly circumscribed to rural areas. This is despite the political and policy significance of urban regions and despite criticisms by scholars such as Gleeson (2007) and Brown (2007, p. 15), who argue that this equalisation is a ‘bastardised political synonym’.

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NOTE


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