

## CHAPTER 6

# Governance for a surprising world

Graham R Marshall

### Abstract

Investment in the robustness of Australia's governance systems is required if they are to cope with an increasingly uncertain and surprising world. Attempts to transform these systems in response to the challenges faced since the 1970s have been constrained by persistent modernist beliefs encouraging a confidence in the predictability of social–ecological systems that can rarely be justified nowadays. A case is made in this chapter for making governance systems more robust by transforming them towards polycentric systems (i.e. comprising multiple centres and levels of decision-making that retain substantive autonomy from one another). The role of the principle of subsidiarity in guiding this transformation is highlighted. Although vested interests and 'locked-in' modernist beliefs pose formidable obstacles to this transformation, the time is long gone when resistance could plausibly be justified by the adage, 'if it ain't broke don't fix it'. Politicians and officials need to begin experimenting with polycentric arrangements of such scale and scope that the risks are affordable to them, the experiences gained provide the confidence and public trust they require for more ambitious experiments and the needed transformation can gain momentum. Further, we need to challenge outdated belief systems by inspiring the public imagination with ideas based on the best science available for the world we inhabit today.

### Introduction

Australians have been grappling with serious challenges to the robustness of their governance systems for at least four decades. Before proceeding to consider these challenges, it may be useful to consider what 'robustness' means and why it is used in this chapter instead of 'resilience'.

The term 'robustness' is now used frequently by institutional analysts in referring to governance systems that behave as complex adaptive systems. The term has been defined as 'the maintenance of some desired system characteristics despite fluctuations in the behaviour of its component parts or its environment' (Carlson and Doyle 2002, p. 2538). Applied to a governance system, therefore, it focuses on the capacity of the system to adapt in response to disturbances and thereby continue to deliver the outcomes desired from the system.

Robustness is similar to the concept of resilience, but this latter concept can be difficult to apply to systems like governance, in which some components are consciously designed (Carpenter *et al.* 2001). While the theory of resilience offers important insights, the robustness