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**Shortall, S. and M. Alston. 2016. To rural proof or not to rural proof: a comparative analysis. *Politics and Policy*. 44 (2)**

**To rural proof or not to rural proof: A comparative analysis**

**Abstract:**

This article is concerned with the question of policy transfer between England and Australia. It relates to the concept of 'rural proofing', a well-established practice in England, and one not yet implemented in Australia, although it is increasingly being called for by rural advocacy groups and State Ministries. Recently concern about the perceived rising inequalities between rural and urban areas has led concerned groups to call for rural proofing in Australia. We argue that while rural proofing intuitively feels like a positive development, there are many complexities to importing a policy designed for a different social and spatial context. We contend that rural proofing in itself is a flawed policy; cultural factors affect how a nation views and treats nature; and the spatial context of Australia is almost certain to render attempts to implement the English rural proofing concept futile. We contribute to the literature on policy transfer by arguing that in addition to considering the political, legal and institutional suitability of policy transfer from one society to another, it is necessary to consider the spatial suitability of transferring rural policy concepts. We conclude by identifying some complex questions that need to be addressed by Australian policy makers before designing place specific rural policies.

**Introduction**

In the late 1980s, the European Union began to question the singular focus of its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) on the agricultural industry. While the belief had been that a

thriving agriculture would lead to thriving rural areas, this in fact had not happened and instead a dysfunctional and market distorting agricultural industry had developed while rural areas declined (Tracy, 1993; Bryden, 2009; Bryden et al, 2010; Shucksmith et al, 2005; Shortall, 1996; Copus et al, 2006). The EU broadened the CAP to include a rural development programme (European Commission, 1998). This programme had an area based focus and acknowledged that many social, cultural and economic activities unrelated to agriculture take place in many rural parts of Europe. The rural development programme was designed in a flexible way to allow local action groups in different parts of Europe to pursue activities tailored to the needs of their local areas. Tripartite funding between the EU, Member States and local areas financed initiatives, with the EU the largest contributor. Considerable research has assessed the merits and demerits of this policy development (Shortall and Shucksmith, 2001; Bock, 2004; Special Issue of Sociologia Ruralis, 2000). One unintended consequence of this European shift was that Member States also began to scrutinise their own rural policies, and a shift emerged where Ministries began to consider rural policy more generally beyond the EU rural development programme (Shortall, 2012; 2013). England in particular led the way and since 2000, has developed concepts and policies relating to rural proofing, rural mainstreaming and rural champions (Atterton, 2008).

Rural mainstreaming involves a review of all policies, not only rural ones, to ensure that people in all parts of England receive comparable policy treatment by government. Rural proofing is the method used to ensure that rural mainstreaming is correctly carried out and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Areas (Defra) is charged with being the 'rural champion', and ensuring that other government departments have fulfilled their rural mainstreaming duties. The OECD (2011) noted that England is unique in OECD countries in

the way in which it has developed rural proofing and mainstreaming. It is not the norm. But England has never been the norm in terms of its relationship with its rural areas.

Some other countries have toyed with the idea of rural proofing, mainly Commonwealth countries. New Zealand has copied the English model of rural proofing. In the UK only Northern Ireland has fully adopted rural proofing, and has almost entirely aped the English approach. Recently there are calls from Australian bodies to introduce rural proofing there.

When undertaking comparisons of Australian rural policies with European rural policies, it is much more common to turn to the Nordic countries (Saltzman et al, 2011; Bjorkhaug and Richards, 2008). In terms of population density and geography, these are more appropriate comparisons, although these studies highlight the different social, cultural and ideological contexts of Nordic countries compared to Australia. In this article, we contribute to the literature on policy transfer by comparing England and Australia and what the transfer of the concept of 'rural proofing' might mean in the Australian context. We do this because Australian lobby groups, advocacy groups and some State Ministries are calling for the introduction of an English styled rural proofing policy. In Northern Ireland, the introduction of rural proofing followed on from exactly such calls and lobbying by advocacy groups. The ability of such groups to successfully demand and shape the implementation of policies is well recognised (Stone, 2000; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Dolowitz, 2012; Shortall, 2013).

The Australian National Rural Women's Coalition is calling for rural proofing; 'The 2013 National Rural Women's Summit in February has called for the 'rural proofing' of all future government policies and programs, a practice already successfully employed in both the United Kingdom and New Zealand'. They go on to explain exactly what they want and use the English rural proofing checklist to explain how it operates in practice (<http://www.nrwc.com.au/Projects/RuralProofing.aspx>). Legal advocacy groups are also

calling for rural proofing. In their joint submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Access to Civil Justice, the Centre for Rural Regional Law and Justice and National Rural Law and Justice Alliance (2013) call for rural proofing: 'There is insufficient regional engagement in law and policy, that is, law and policy is not sufficiently well 'rural-proofed'. A recent Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry called for all policy and legislation to be 'rural-proofed' by a state government-established independent rural proofing advisory body. In other words, there needs to be a check on how policy and legislation impacts on rural and regional Victorians and how well it reflects and responds to the diverse needs of rural and regional Victorians' (p.7). The Rural Doctors' Association of Australia have produced a position paper advocating for rural proofing. In it they say 'The RDAA calls on the Australian Government to undertake formal rural proofing of all proposed health policies and programs to ensure they are sensitive to the probable significant differential impact in rural and remote Australia. Rural proofing is shorthand for a process that involves assessing how policies will work for rural people and places, and, so, ensure that the policies are implemented fairly and effectively' (Rural Doctors' Association of Australia, 2010, p.1). The Regional Policy Advisory Committee of Regional Development Victoria has undertaken a review of rural policy frameworks and practices with a view to implementation in Victoria Regional Development Victoria, 2012). Although not yet implemented, it is clear that the concept of rural proofing is in the Australian air. Our intention is to contribute to 'policy learning' before 'policy transfer' occurs (Dolowitz, 2012).

At one level, it is not surprising that rural groups and Ministries are calling for rural proofing policies. Australian scholars have long highlighted the lack of a policy framework addressing the myriad social and economic difficulties faced by rural and remote Australia (Alston, 2012; Gray and Lawrence, 2001; Herbert- Cheshire, 2000; Argent, 2011). Other research has argued that a romantic connection to the idealised notion of 'the bush' continues, resulting

in disproportionate and unquestioned economic support for rural areas (Botterill, 2006) Botterill (2009) argues that most urban dwellers have a poor understanding of rural issues and rural policy but tend to be generally in favour of policy support for rural dwellers. This would make a very favourable environment for the implementation of rural proofing. Rural proofing is in many respects how Cohen (1985) described community; it is a 'feel-good' idea, and hard to see how anybody could be against it. However, we argue that rural proofing is in fact a flawed concept, and it can potentially lead to the marginalisation of rural issues.

In this article we offer a critical analysis of rural proofing, and question how applicable it could be in the Australian context. We argue that while rural proofing intuitively feels like a positive development, there are many complexities to importing a policy designed for a different social and spatial context. We begin by offering an overview of some of the policy transfer literature which informs this article. Next we discuss the comparative analysis method, and make some observations about national comparative analysis and explain how and why we have undertaken this comparison. Then we interrogate the concept of rural proofing and find that in itself it is a flawed policy. Next we look at how cultural factors affect how a nation views and treats rural space. Comparing the English and Australian cases demonstrate stark contrasts in this respect. While scholars talk about 'rural' Australia, it is not a concept that is used in Australian policy. Rather variations of regional and remote are the concepts used, and we argue that the romanticised relationship with the 'rural bush' relates more to regional areas than remote ones. We consider how the spatial context of Australia is almost certain to render attempts to implement the English rural proofing concept futile. We conclude by identifying some of the complex questions that need to be addressed by Australian policy makers before designing place specific policies.

## **Policy transfer: what the literature tells us**

Dolowitz (2009) defines policy transfer as the process by which ideas, policies and practices in one political system are fed into and used in the policy making arena of another system.

The occurrences of policy transfer have increased over the past twenty years due to globalisation; technological advances have made it easier for policy-makers to communicate with each other and as a result, policy instruments are transmitted across national boundaries (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Lowe, 2012). A huge body of academic literature has developed examining the practices and some of the hazards of policy transfer. Some literature has considered the reasons and mechanisms behind policy transfer, such as coercion (for example, Member States must implement European Union policies), competition, learning or mimicry (Di Maggio and Powell, 1991). Others have argued that sometimes policy transfer can be an empty gesture or be purely symbolic policy (Pawson and Hulse, 2011).

There are many categories of political actors engaged in the policy transfer process.

Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) identify nine groups including elected officials, political parties, bureaucrats/ civil servants and pressure groups. Other scholars have also underlined the importance of pressure or lobby groups in shaping public policy. Their motivation and organisation is such that they can have a disproportionate influence compared to their size (Stone, 2000; Burnstein and Linton, 2002; Shortall, 2012).

Dolowitz (2012; 342) distinguishes between policy learning and policy transfer. He argues that learning can occur in the absence of transfer, and transfer can, and often does, occur in the absence of learning. Transfer is the adoption of a policy from a different political and national context, and it can be active or passive depending on whether it is forced, as in the

European Union case, or followed because of a belief that it will be effective. (Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) and Dolowitz (2012) present learning as a much more nebulous concept, and argues that it has to be an active process with those involved in the policy process engaging in exchanges of knowledge and learning about the political, cultural and institutional context of the other. The literature following Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) also considers policy failure and what contributes to the failed transfer of policies from one context to another. They identify three key factors that have an impact of policy failure. First, is a process of uninformed transfer, where the borrowing country does not understand how the policy operates in its home country. Second, is incomplete transfer, where critical components of the policy central to its effectiveness are not adopted. Third, is inappropriate transfer, where the differences between the economic, political, social and ideological contexts are not given sufficient consideration (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; 17-18; Pawson and Hulse, 2011).

Following Pawson and Hulse (2011), we consider the question of policy transfer in an environment where there is a move toward transferring a policy from a different environment but it has not yet been transferred. We argue that engaging in this process contributes to a policy learning environment that can inform processes of policy transfer. We present a case that suggests a policy transfer of rural proofing would likely lead to policy failure because it would constitute an uninformed transfer and an inappropriate transfer of policy. Pawson and Hulse (2011) argue that most research on policy transfer has focused on welfare reforms and labour market policies, and they contribute to the literature by looking at housing policy transfer. While there is an enormous literature on rural development policies and its implementation, there is little research on rural policy transfer, and this article is a contribution to that literature, highlighting the importance to attend to the



spatial context as well as the economic, political, social and ideological contexts when transferring rural policies. Before turning to an analysis of rural proofing, we make some observations about national comparative analysis and explain how and why we have undertaken this comparison.

### **The comparative method**

The material in this article is based on a comparative analysis of rural policies in England and Australia, and more specifically, the growing call in Australia to implement the rural proofing policy developed in England for its rural areas. The definition of 'rural' is much contested itself (Shortall and Warner, 2012), and its understanding varies from place to place. Lowe (2012) observes that comparative research on rural Britain and rural America suggests that we see more commonalities in the rural in each place than differences, but this actually begs the question about whether we share a common conception of 'rural'. The same issue applies to a comparison of English and Australian rural policies; the understanding of rural is different in each place. This is discussed in detail later in the article but here it is worth noting that the process of comparative analysis allows us to consider what is universal and what is particular to different situations or locations. Of course, as Hantrais (1999) warns, comparative analysis needs to be wary of making universal claims, but also of becoming mired in national uniqueness and particularism. The role of the social sciences is to discern what is general and what is specific in order to judge whether and how knowledge gained in a particular context can be applicable elsewhere (Lowe, 2012). This is the purpose of this article; through comparative analysis we are considering whether the English concept of rural proofing is applicable in an Australian context, where lobby groups and interest groups are calling for its implementation. This is an important exercise, for as Lowe (2012; 20)

notes, 'knowledge applied out of context may be disruptive or simply inappropriate'. It is the case that concepts developed in the West, and particularly in English, tend to dominate comparative analysis (Holmwood, 2007). At a European level, it has been noted that researchers from England have a disproportionate influence on the language and concepts that develop because of the dominance of English as the working language, and it can create a new form of imperialism (Hantrais, 2009; Lowe, 2012). Comparative analysis helps us to identify the possibility, but also the potential folly of borrowing policy lessons and narratives from other places. It is to this task that we now turn.

### **What is rural proofing?**

As the OECD (2011) notes, rural proofing is a policy approach unique to England in the OECD countries, although the devolved government of Northern Ireland has since 2002 closely followed England's rural proofing policies (DARD, 2015). The OECD also notes that it is a much more complex idea than it initially seems.

Rural proofing is a broad term often used to incorporate rural mainstreaming, championing rural policies, and auditing to ensure mainstreaming has occurred. Mainstreaming is meant to ensure that people in all parts of England receive comparable policy treatment by government. The policy becomes one of 'rural mainstreaming'. The idea is not to develop specific rural policies, but rather to review existing and new policies to ensure that urban and rural residents receive equitable access to a common set of policies and programmes. While it is recognised that there are some distinctive aspects to the delivery of policy objectives in rural areas, and indeed the policy is premised on some notion of rural

disadvantage, it is believed that these issues can be addressed during the design and development of general policies (see OECD, 2011; 21/22).

In order to ensure rural mainstreaming and rural proofing, a 'Rural Champion' is needed. In both England and Northern Ireland this is the relevant Ministry; Defra in England, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in Northern Ireland. As part of its role as rural champion, the Ministries provide expertise to other government departments and train civil servants to think rural and how to assess policies to determine if they will have a differential impact in rural areas. Civil servants must complete an Impact Assessment for policies assessing how they may have a differential impact in rural areas and how this will be addressed. If at the outset no direct or indirect impacts on rural areas are identified, then the policy is screened out. A screening out statement must be completed. The rural champion produces an annual audit of the rural proofing process across government. Rural proofing sounds positive for rural areas, or at the very worst, innocuous. We turn now to a more critical analysis of this policy concept.

Rural proofing presumes little difference between urban and rural areas. It replaces specific rural policies, and even in a country such as England where most rural areas are urban adjacent, this can be problematic. Demographic differences, different determinants of economic success and the significantly higher price of houses in rural areas require tailored policies.

Similar to gender mainstreaming, rural proofing very much focuses on training, procedures and auditing (see for example, DARD 2015; Defra 2015). Nowhere are goals of rural proofing identified, targets set, or the desired outcomes spelt out. When civil servants are asked what it is that rural proofing will 'fix', they cannot answer the question<sup>i</sup>. How a single check-

list can deal with the diverse issues faced by rural areas has been raised, and who informs the checking of this list – civil servants tick boxes about rural needs and issues, but there is no rural voice. Rural communities are not consulted (Atterton, 2008).

Numerous studies and reviews show myriad problems with the implementation of rural proofing. In England, there is a patchy understanding of the rural dimension of policy and confusion about responsibilities for proofing. The OECD (2011; 25) identified four recurring unaddressed policy problems with its implementation. First, there is a lack of systematic application across government departments; second, it becomes the responsibility of junior staff – thus senior staff are unaware of the need to carry out rural proofing; third, there is a lack of consistent leadership to champion the needs of rural areas across government; and fourth, there is a lack of effective monitoring of the delivery of policies. More recently Defra (2015; 14) undertook a review of Impact Assessments across government and notes that over half showed no consideration of rural proofing or rural issues even though policy would impact on rural areas; over a third described rural issues but did not analyse the policy impact; and only eleven percent provided any robust evidence on rural proofing or how it had been used to inform policy design. Few incentives to undertake rural proofing exist. Defra's review also observes that an emphasis on rural proofing was lacking, and it was evident that a 'tick box' mentality prevailed in some government departments. Similarly in Northern Ireland (DARD, 2015; 11) problems with implementing rural proofing were identified. They found the application of rural proofing 'disappointing', in particular its ability to influence policy making. They also found difficulties with the mechanics of undertaking rural proofing and using it as part of policy development.

Despite reviews that regularly highlight the shortcomings of rural proofing, the policy tendency is to reinvigorate it, slightly revise the training and impact assessments that have been found not to be effective, and restate the rural champion role which has also been found wanting. Interestingly both England and Northern Ireland are currently in the process of revising and reinvigorating rural proofing. Both places are facing elections in the near future, and reinvigorating rural proofing is likely to be a key element of the relevant Ministers' election strategies. In England, a Stakeholders' Forum is proposed which is a new development and intended to give voice to rural communities in the rural proofing process. But the fundamental limitations and flaws are not seriously considered and one wonders if the reinvigoration is motivated more by what the intuitive 'feel good' factor of rural proofing will contribute to electoral success than any commitment to rural areas. As we now turn to examine, it is imperative for English political parties to express support for rural areas given the national cultural importance attached to the countryside.

## **Cultural norms and rural space**

### ***England***

By the OECD's definition, England has no predominantly rural regions and is above the OECD average for intermediate and predominantly urban regions. Yet the rural dimension is a very important component of the English psyche (Phillips, 1993; Shucksmith, 2012). The landed gentry of England held a privileged position in society and were seen as educated and genteel. This was particularly obvious with the development of the industrial revolution and the status differential between the landed gentry and the 'nouveau riche' who made their money from industry. The rapid development of English industrialisation also meant the

emergence of a romanticised notion of the 'rural idyll'; an imaginary image of a pure and simple life in the countryside very different to the harsh realities of newly developed industrial cities. This affinity with rural places remains very strong for English people, so much so that the OECD adopted the English 'cultural' definition of the rural dimension because their own statistical definition does not classify England as rural (OECD, 2011; 47). The OECD argues that one stereotype is the classic image of the countryside with pastoral views and rustic cottages. This image includes people. Rural places in England are populated ones. More so than in many other countries the ideal life for most English people takes place in the countryside.

England is a densely populated country with a population density of 413 per square kilometre (ONS, 2014). Socio-economic indicators are stronger in England's rural areas than in urban ones (OECD, 2011; 42). In addition, rural dwellers are powerful political figures. While they still occupy a much diminished presence in the House of Lords, wealthy titled English people have important roles in the multitude of rural preservation organisations and lobby groups such as Action for Rural Communities England, the Rural Coalition, Lake District Planning Board, National Farms Attractions Network, The Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, The Campaign for the Protection of Rural England and many more. These cultural norms and values regulating rural space and preserving it for consumption by rural elites and urban dwellers, brings a particular set of social problems (Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011; Gkartzios and Shucksmith, 2015). It is the rural discourse of the powerful that dominates, and rural spaces are preserved, maintained and desirable places to be. This leads to a situation of housing 'apartheid' where the ability to live in rural areas is increasingly a restricted option for the wealthy (Gkartzios and Shucksmith, 2015). It has also

led to studies that have identified social exclusion (Shucksmith, 2002) and poverty linked to exorbitant house prices (Gkartzios and Shucksmith, 2015; Milbourne, 2010).

Rural England is unique. There is very little rural territory that is not part of some functional region that has a major city at its core. There is almost no wilderness. There is very strong interaction between urban and rural areas (OECD, 2011; Champion et al, 2010). Rural areas are generally economically strong and have very strong political champions, notwithstanding the problems these political champions may inadvertently cause for some rural groups. Rural proofing may be an ineffective policy in England, but reinvigorating the policy reminds voters that the government is committed to the rural, and with or without this policy, rural areas are unlikely to decline.

### ***Australia***

If England has no predominantly rural regions by the OECD's definition, Australia is completely different. The Australian Bureau of Statistics and other policy documents (ARIA, 2001) argue that rural makes little sense in their context, and instead use a five point scale from very accessible to very remote. The categories used are major cities of Australia, inner regional Australia, outer regional Australia, remote Australia and very remote Australia. Rural is not an official statistical term. While Australia is the sixth largest country in the world a great deal of the land mass is sparsely populated and there can be immense distances between the many small towns spread across the vast inland regions. Nearly 85% of the country's population lives within fifty kilometres of the coast making the remoter regions of the country very isolated indeed.

The idea of the 'rural idyll' may exist in some urban adjacent parts of Australia, but for the most part the remote and very remote parts are seen as vast, far-reaching places where

social interactions may be limited and where services and infrastructure may be difficult to access resulting in remote Australians having poorer health and welfare on a number of critical indicators (Vinson and Rawsthorne 2015). Vinson and Rawsthorne mapped disadvantage across Australia on a number of indicators including school retention rates, unemployment and health to reveal that rural areas were critically over-represented amongst the most disadvantaged areas of the country. Many remote and very remote areas battle with economic and social viability (Dunphy, 2009) and this has not been helped by policies that distribute services based on critical population mass rather than need (Alston and Kent 2004 and 2006). As a result there are severe problems with access to services, infrastructure, employment and declining incomes and health (Dunphy, 2009; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006). Many rural areas are experiencing declining populations, caused in part by the “brain drain” of young people to cities (Alston and Kent, 2001) and the greater outmigration of young women (Alston and Kent 2006). In many rural communities populations are aging at much faster rates than the cities or urban areas (Alston and Kent 2004; 2006). In addition to these social problems, many welfare dependent people are moving to rural areas because they cannot secure employment and these places provide affordable housing (Alston and Witney-Soanes 2008). This in turn brings additional economic and social problems to remote parts of Australia. Some research has shown that there is a romanticised notion of rural Australia and ‘the bush’ that means urban dwellers are prepared to disproportionately fund rural crises compared to urban ones (Botterill, 2006; 2009; Cockfield and Botterill, 2012). It is argued that there is little public critical analysis of rural policy in Australia and this is because of a romanticised notion of virtues and idealised characteristics associated with agrarian life and ‘the bush’ (Botterill, 2009). However it seems that this romanticised rural idyll relates more to the regional and outer



regional parts of Australia rather than the remote and very remote regions. Botterill (2006; 29) quotes a chat show host who was warmly welcomed at the New South Wales Farmers' Association Drought Crisis Summit for arguing that 'most of Australia was unaware of the crisis in the bush and too much money was being spent by governments on other issues, whether it was the Aborigines or overseas aid, rather than the water question'. This quote suggests that the rural or 'the bush' is different from remote or very remote where the majority of Aborigines reside. Similarly, Baxter et al (2011) take on the task of distinguishing family life in the city, the country and the bush. However they say that given the higher proportion of the population that is indigenous in remote and very remote areas, this information is presented in separate factsheets about indigenous Australians. The rural idyll seems to relate to white Australians.

Indigenous people are amongst the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised people in Australia, and are most concentrated in remote and very remote regions. Whereas only 1% of the population of major cities are Indigenous, this increases to 2% and 5% in inner and outer regional areas, 12% in remote areas and 45% in very remote areas (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006). Indigenous Australians experience very significant disadvantage, with health and social indicators considerably lower than for the Australian population as a whole (Dunphy; 2009).

Thus the make-up of rural and remote Australia is very different to that of rural England. The same terminology would seem inappropriate. Most striking is the lack of any significant power base for remote voices in national politics, which together with differential social and economic outcomes, result in a critical lack of policy attention to remote places and spaces.

The National Party has traditionally been the rural party, but once again, this does not seem to be the champion of remote and very remote areas and their inhabitants.

What then does a growing call to implement an English rural proofing policy in this context mean? What might it mean? Is it potentially positive for the neglected remote and very remote regions of Australia? It is to a consideration of these questions that we now turn.

### **Policy transfer and policy lessons: can rural proofing work in Australia?**

The OECD (2011) argues that the premise of rural proofing in England rests on the similarities of rural and urban areas rather than the differences; the same policies can be applied in each place, subject to some review to ensure equity, and have the same consequences. The idea of trying to apply such an idea to Australia seems to represent classic examples of uninformed policy transfer and inappropriate policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). Australia is one of the largest countries in the world, and larger than the whole of the EU. It has always been unusual in that the nation state is also a continent. England is 130,395 km<sup>2</sup>, with 413 people per km<sup>2</sup>. Australia on the other hand, is over 7.5 million km<sup>2</sup>, with an average population of 2.9 people per km<sup>2</sup>. This average hides huge variation; the population is .02 people per km<sup>2</sup> in the Northern Territories, and 24.51 per km<sup>2</sup> in Victoria. Even at its most populous, Australia is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, and completely different in terms of population settlement to England. In such a vast country, with such sparse population, it is impossible to imagine that similar policies will be applicable in urban and rural places.

Another crucial difference between Australia and England, is what rural means, both culturally and normatively. In England, people have a strong identity with their rural areas. They consume their countryside, and the public rights of way to walk and cycle in the countryside are protected in law. The countryside is seen as 'real' England (Halfacree, 1996), and it is perceived to be good for your health (Watkins and Jacoby, 2007) and a better place to bring up children (Valentine, 1997). There are innumerable organisations protecting the environmental, cultural and historical legacy of then English countryside. It is also unusual in that house prices are higher in rural areas than in urban ones (Shucksmith, 2012). In Australia on the other hand, rural and remote is a problematic conjecture, bringing images of a vast, sparsely populated land, where social and economic difficulties are evident and political power is limited. There is no conception of remote and very remote areas as ones that need to be protected for public consumption.

One immediate problem to the idea of rural proofing in Australia is the lack of a rural/remote champion at the Federal level. The vast differences between the inner regional and the very remote areas means that a single term of 'rural' cannot cover the widely divergent spatial needs in the country. Within Australia, the focus on rural tends to be restricted to agriculture, and how to increase the productivity of agriculture. It is a market orientated, neo-liberal approach (Bjorkhaug and Richards, 2008). England on the other hand, has a government ministry that states 'rural affairs' in its title; has a large, diverse and powerful rural lobby; has urban support and is more broadly situated in an EU policy framework that has a strong commitment to a living countryside across Europe. While the various Australian States have regional development ministries, this cannot compensate for the lack of a Federal commitment. Even if such a ministry did exist at the Federal level, rural proofing would be an ineffectual policy in the Australian context.

A genuine commitment to rural and remote areas would require a policy more similar to the Nordic countries than England. Taking Norway as an example, Norwegian rural policy is underpinned by a commitment to having a living Norway, meaning all of its territory, and supporting people's right to live where they choose. The Norwegian Department of Local Government and Regional Development (2013; 2) states that; 'It is the Government's aim for all of Norway to be in use. It will continue to build the country for future generations. A proactive rural and regional policy has created a Norway to be proud of. The Government will continue to develop commerce and industry, as well as the welfare system, and adapt our rural and regional policy to meet future challenges. The challenges may change, but one important vision remains the same: the good life throughout the country'.

This is a country deeply committed to its rural and remote regions. The more remote the municipality, the higher the total indirect and direct transfer per inhabitant to the municipality. Remote areas have subsidised infrastructures, reduced tax rates, gradations of subsidies for agriculture with the highest subsidies for the most remote regions, and greater health care subsidy for remote regions (Refsgaard, 2008). Norway has a spatial dimension to its welfare state that Australia does not. While States may address the rural and remote needs of their States, without a Federal level, there cannot be redistribution across the nation. A committed and effective rural and remote policy in a sparsely populated country demands centralised policies underpinned by an ethos of equity (Bryden, 2011). This is what Australia lacks, not rural proofing.

## **Conclusions**

This article uses the policy transfer literature which considers the processes by which ideas, policies and practices in one political system are fed into another and are used in a different policy make system. We examined the increasing call for rural proofing by Australian State Departments and rural advocacy groups in Australia, and analysed what the policy transfer of an English rural policy into the Australian context might mean. We argue that such a policy transfer would likely lead to policy failure because it is an uninformed transfer, there is little Australian understanding of how the concept works, and it would be an inappropriate policy transfer, because of the vastly different spatial contexts in each place.

Rural proofing was developed in the English context, and subsequently adopted by the devolved government of Northern Ireland. We argue that the evidence base suggests rural proofing has never been effective. There is a lack of commitment across government to the policy, and the tendency for policy makers is to argue that rural proofing is not pertinent to the policies reviewed, and no consideration is given to rural needs. It is the responsibility of junior civil servants and the policy focuses on process rather than outcome. The focus is on training civil servants to think 'rural', and to complete the appropriate paperwork. There is no consideration of appropriate targets, outcomes or goals. What it is that rural proofing is supposed to achieve or change is never made clear. What the policy does do is state a government commitment to the rural, and it is a policy usually reinvigorated before elections.

It is a policy development unique to England, and we discussed how the English rural context is also unique. We argue that rural England is in a very strong position, socially, economically and culturally. The OECD notes that all of rural England is in a functional area, within a reasonable distance of a metropolitan settlement. House prices in rural areas are

higher than urban, and it is where people wish to live. We detail the multitude of rural organisations seeking to preserve social life, the environment and heritage areas. Most importantly, these organisations have powerful voices, are English elites are strong champions of rural areas. Where rural proofing has been adopted elsewhere, it has just resulted in policy mimicry, with no changed policy targets or goals adopted. It is what Pawson and Hulse (2011) describe as empty gesture or purely symbolic policy.

By contrast with England, Australia is enormous and very sparsely occupied. There is no Federal Australian Ministry with responsibility for rural or remote areas. A rural idyll or romantic idea about remote areas of Australia does not exist at the Federal level. Rather, it is a vast and sparsely populated area, with almost no urban – rural interlinkages. People in these areas tend to have economic and social difficulties. Their political power is limited, and they do not have any elite groups acting as champions on their behalf. We argue that rural proofing is an ineffectual policy, but even if it were not, it makes no sense in the Australian context. Rural and remote Australia needs specific and tailored policies similar to those developed in the Nordic countries. We argue however that there are some complex questions that need to be addressed by Australian policy makers before designing place specific rural policies. It is to these questions we now turn by way of conclusion.

The Nordic rural policies are effective because of the deep social and political commitment to maintaining the environmental and social fabric of their remote areas. We considered Norway's commitment to ensuring all of the country is in use, and to facilitating people's choice to live in any part of Norway. Hence there is public acceptance of the disproportionate subsidies to remote parts of the country. We have argued that the Australian rural idyll relates to inner and outer regional areas, and not the remote or very

remote areas. There is little evidence that Australia sufficiently committed to maintaining the environmental and social fabric of its remote regions to pursue a Norwegian styled redistributive policy. Rural proofing is not relevant to Australia's spatial inequities, rather it requires a welfare state that has a spatial dimension to the redistribution of wealth. This requires an ethical debate at a number of levels and facing difficult questions with a clear position and vision in relation to rural Australia and what are the national commitment to environmental and ecological challenges in remote area, the indigenous population in remote areas, and welfare reform in these places. We argue that a Federal approach is required because this could allow for a spatial dimension to the welfare state similar to the Norwegian model. A policy transfer of the concept of rural proofing from the English to the Australian context is likely to result in policy failure. It might assuage the concerns of lobby groups and give the perception that rural issues are being addressed. However in this case it is not just the economic, political, social and ideological contexts that must be considered before policy transfer occurs. The spatial context also needs to be considered. It is in the remote and very remote parts of Australia that robust policies are needed and the transfer of the English model of rural proofing will not help address these public policy needs.

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