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Rhetoric in Municipal Amalgamations: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: *There is a large literature that seeks to evaluate municipal amalgamations ex post, but a relative dearth of scholarly inquiry into the practical political task of persuading the public to accept amalgamations ex ante. We address this important gap in the literature by conducting a rhetorical analysis to ascertain what types of arguments are believed to be efficacious for persuasion on amalgamation. We find evidence to suggest belief in the efficacy of persuading the public through recourse to various projected dreadful consequences, particularly amongst opponents of amalgamation. We conclude by considering some of the reasons behind the observed rhetorics and briefly outline one possible solution.*

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Introduction

There is a large body of scholarly work that empirically analyses local government amalgamations, mostly on an *ex post* basis (see, for example Dollery and Grant 2013; Reingewertz 2012; Sancton 2005; Andrews 2015). Generally, the evidence has focussed on the potential for scale efficiencies to improve financial sustainability and the results have been rather mixed. By way of contrast, there is a relative dearth of scholarly inquiry regarding the rhetoric of amalgamation – that is, how amalgamations are ‘sold’ to the general public (notable exceptions include Savitch et al. 2010; Drew et al. 2016). This is a somewhat surprising gap in the literature because ultimately successful implementation of local government amalgamation comes down to the act of persuading key stakeholders (Grant and Drew 2017).

Rhetoric is the art of ‘discover[ing] the means of coming as near such success as the circumstance of each particular case allow’ (Aristotle 2012, 7) and in classical times was broadly defined to include the study of *ethos* (the character or portrayed character of the rhetor), the *pathos* (the emotions of the listeners and rhetor) and the *logos* (the reasoning through speech required to prove a truth or apparent truth). Recent scholarly inquiry has defined rhetoric more narrowly as ‘an economics of language, the study of how scarce means are allocated to the insatiable desires of people to be heard’ (McCloskey, 1988, xx) or ‘of how men (sic) succeed or fail in discovering together, in discourse, new levels of truth (or at least agreement) that neither side suspected before’ (Booth 1974, 11) but has largely continued the pre-Socratic tradition of studying rhetoric through comparison of important exemplars (Riker, 1991). Moreover, contemporary rhetorical analysis has largely focussed on the *logos* – with great emphasis being placed on discovering the types of ideas that are most likely to persuade in disputatious public policy debates (see, Hirschman 1991).

The most effective methodology to discern what types of rhetoric are believed to be persuasive is to catalogue the rhetorics actually employed (Savitch et al. 2010; Riker, 1996). The syllogistic reasoning for this type of rhetorical analysis was set out by William H. Riker (1991) who sought to develop a theory of rhetoric on the foundational tenet that experienced politicians, who are skilled rhetors, would act rationally to persuade the public. Thus, he argued, the frequency with which rhetors employed a particular type of argument could be used as a reliable proxy for the type of rhetoric that was believed to be efficacious. Moreover, Riker (1991, 57) noted that by studying rhetoric in widely different contexts and circumstances one might reasonably expect to discern the types of rhetoric that were ‘widely believed to be persuasive’. Indeed, Riker (1991, 59) used this methodology to hypothesise that ‘unlikely dreadful consequences’ would prove most persuasive in public policy debates and justified his position according to the well-known evidence on negativity bias (the idea that people are more likely to feel aggrieved by real or potential losses, than gains of the same magnitude, and act on such grievances; Tversky and Kahneman, 1979). Indeed, recent scholarship suggests that ‘just as negative frames can be more powerful than positive frames in shaping peoples judgements, they can also be “stickier” than positive frames’ – suggesting that grievances arising from predictions of dreadful consequences might be held longer and

thus be acted upon even when action must be deferred to the end of a lengthy political cycle (Boydston et al. 2017, 2).

Around the same time that Riker was setting out his founding principles for the development of a theory of rhetoric, another eminent scholar, Albert O. Hirschman, was also exploring the intricacies of public policy rhetoric. By studying rhetoric in a wide variety of contexts Hirschman (1991) proposed that all persuasive arguments could be described by just six theses. Notably four of his theses worked through unlikely dreadful consequences, but the typology of Hirschman (1991) demonstrated that there were distinct genres within this group which were founded on quite different world-views and thus worthy of individual attention by practitioners and scholars. Moreover, Hirschman (1991) claimed that the six theses, taken as a whole, were employed to frustrate more fruitful deliberative public policy rhetoric that ‘makes people think...makes people see things in new ways...conveys information and knowledge, and makes people more reflective’ (Chambers 2009, 335).

This paper addresses two important questions that have thus far largely escaped scholarly inquiry with respect to municipal amalgamations. First, what types of rhetorical arguments are believed, by rhetors, to be most effective for amalgamation debates? And second, given rhetor’s beliefs, what can be done to foster a more fruitful rhetoric (for instance, one that does not employ predictions of unlikely dreadful consequences)? Indeed, the public policy prescriptions for eliciting more deliberative rhetoric are particularly important because they point the way to how the vast extant literature on amalgamations, that have hitherto been largely contained to debates amongst scholars, might be brought to bear in the practical political task of persuading stakeholders on municipal amalgamation.

To answer the questions regarding what types of rhetorical arguments are believed to be efficacious for persuasion on amalgamation and what can be done to improve the fruitfulness of rhetoric, we first briefly review the remit of local government in each jurisdiction and the nature of recent structural reform debates. Next, we examine the rhetoric of amalgamation proponents according to the nuanced typology of Hirschman with a view to identifying the types of arguments commonly believed to be efficacious. This leads us to propose what appears to be a missing element from the typology. Thereafter we explicate on the lines of opposition rhetoric with respect to our amended typology. We conclude by considering some of the reasons behind the observed rhetorics and briefly outline one possible solution.

Comparative perspectives

Hirschman’s *Rhetoric of Reaction* (1991) is based on a number of historical case studies derived from Europe and America. The strength of this approach is that the theses were tested in a variety of contexts which is a necessary pre-requisite for drawing generalisations regarding the types of rhetorics that are widely believed to be efficacious. We mirror this approach by examining amalgamation rhetoric from three Westminster-style local government systems (all with roots in the British tradition), that have very different spatial structures and remits, which have experienced disparate outcomes from amalgamation

debates. To contextualise our analysis, we now provide a short account of municipal amalgamation debates in each of the three countries.

Australia

Australia is a federation of six states (and two territories), which independently regulate their respective local government entities according to legislation (the exception is the Australian Capital Territory which does not employ a system of local government). Local government in Australia has a limited remit relative to its peers in Israel and Wales – with a historical emphasis on the provision of road infrastructure, solid waste disposal and (in some instances) supply of water and sewer services. In recent times, the scope of Australian local government has been expanded to include important roles in economic development, promotion of cultural cohesiveness and public order and safety. This increased remit has arisen as a combined result of higher tiers of government vacating important mandates, increased responsiveness to citizen demands and the need to address local market failure. Indeed, since the end of the 1993 financial year aggregate Australian local government spending has increased by an average annual rate of 8.68% p.a. (Grant and Drew 2017). Partly in response to the financial sustainability problems engendered as a result of rapidly expanding municipal expenditure, successive state governments have proposed and executed a number of forced local government amalgamations (Abelson and Joyeux 2015). Thus, in 1994 the state of Victoria reduced the number of municipalities from 210 to 78, in 2008 Queensland reduced the number of councils from 157 down to 73 and in 2016 the state of New South Wales (NSW) reduced the number of municipalities from 152 down to 128. For the purposes of our analysis of rhetoric we will focus on the most recent Australian amalgamations – the NSW amalgamations prosecuted by the governing Liberal-National party coalition which is situated on the right of political ideology. Because local government is not recognised in the Constitution it is generally held that state governments can force amalgamation subject to the constraint of the common law principle of procedural fairness. However, it would be quite wrong to assume that the state governments have executed the municipal forced amalgamations without consequences – Australia has experienced five cases of de-amalgamation (one in Victoria and four in Queensland) and more are likely in view of the promise of the political opposition in NSW to allow de-amalgamation if it is successful in securing power at the 2019 state elections (Grant and Drew 2017). Moreover, the political parties executing forced amalgamations have suffered significant voter backlash – which in the most recent example contributed to the political demise of the Premier and Deputy Premier of NSW. Therefore, it can hardly be said that the amalgamations have proved to be an unmitigated success.

Israel

Israel is a rather centralized unitary state with only two levels of government: central and local. The share of local government in public spending is only about one-half of the figure for the UK. It is higher than in Australia, but the rest of public spending in Australia is split between state and federal levels whereas in Israel it is concentrated at the unitary central state. Local autonomy in Israel is also rather constrained – a legacy of the socialist roots of

the state, the British colonial roots of local government legislation, and apparently also of the perpetual Israeli-Arab conflict. Economic stagnation and diminishing dominance of central state leaders led to de-facto political decentralization in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by reforms influenced by neoliberal conceptions in the early 2000s (Razin and Hazan 2004). The dependency of Israeli local authorities on self-generated revenues, particularly on the profitable non-residential property tax, grew immensely in the mid- 1980s, although central state grants and transfers remained close to 40 percent of local government revenues.

The establishment, abolition, boundary change and amalgamation of local authorities in Israel is the prerogative of the Minister of Interior, who only has to appoint a municipal boundary commission and study its recommendations before making the decision. Rulings of the High Court of Justice have practically constrained the absolute power of the Minister. Moreover, high political barriers for local government reforms are a product of centralization that diminishes the perceived urgency of reforms, the links between local and national politics in a multiparty coalition government structure and ethno-religious heterogeneity (Razin 2004).

Municipal amalgamations have occurred occasionally on an ad-hoc basis since the establishment of the state in 1948. A reform discourse linked to rational comprehensive planning and welfare state logic evolved in the late 1960s, evident primarily in a failed attempt to establish an upper-tier metropolitan municipality for the inner parts of the Tel Aviv metropolis in 1973 (Razin 1996). Neoliberal ideals of efficiency and reduced burden of a bloated public bureaucracy on the private sector inspired renewed interest in amalgamations since the 1990s. The economic crisis during the second Palestinian *Intifada* (uprising) served as a window of opportunity for Israel's Ministry of Finance to implement long-pursued neoliberal reforms, among them a 2003 municipal amalgamation reform imposed – by the ruling Likud Party (which is situated on the political right) – through emergency legislation. The reform was promoted solely as an efficiency measure assumed to save a substantial amount of money to the public purse by reducing the number of local authorities from 266 to 150-200. The final move was modest, but still unprecedented, both in scope (12 amalgamations that involved 27 local authorities), and in the mechanism applied (legislation rather than a lengthy boundary commission procedure). However, the Knesset later on de-amalgamated four of the 12 amalgamated municipalities – all Arab and Druse ones – caving in to political pressures, bringing the number of local authorities in Israel to 257 in 2016. Evaluations did hint at modest cost savings (Reingewertz 2012); nevertheless, economies of scale have been substantial in Israel up to a population size of between 7,000 and 10,000.

Wales

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the pendulum of local government reform in Wales has swung from the creation of a small number of county councils and urban boroughs responsible for all local services in 1888, their replacement by a comprehensive two-tier structure in 1974, and back to the re-creation of 22 large unitary authorities during the 1990s (Chandler 2007). Following devolution in 1998, a marked divergence began to emerge between the English and Welsh approaches to local government structure. In England, further municipal amalgamations occurred during the 2000s on a voluntary basis. By contrast, while

there was a widespread perception that Welsh local governments were too small for the efficient and effective delivery of key strategic services, there was a reluctance to indulge in compulsory or voluntary reorganization. In part, this reflected a preference for shared services models (Welsh Government 2004), but also the political dominance of the Labour Party (located on the political left) at the local and national levels.

While proposals for reorganization lay dormant during the first ten years of devolution, debates about the appropriate structure for Welsh local government returned with a vengeance in the wake of the global financial crisis. These debates initially resulted in a review of the local government system which suggested that a rationalization of the existing number of councils might be necessary (Simpson 2011). However, rather than opting for a straightforward reduction in the number of Welsh councils, politicians in Wales initially chose to introduce regional delivery boards for the largest strategic services (education and social services) still under the sole control of local authorities. Nevertheless, calls for a reduction of the numbers of those authorities have persisted.

In 2013, a Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery was convened to review the provision of local public services in Wales. The Commission recommended reducing the number of local authorities from 22 to 10, 11 or 12 through a process of voluntary and forced mergers (Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery 2014). Subsequently, in 2015, plans were developed by the Welsh Government to reduce the number of local authorities from 22 to eight. However, the difficulties the Labour Party experienced in forming a new government following the Welsh Assembly elections of May 2016, including the ousting of the public services minister of the time by the Welsh nationalist party, led plans for full-blown reorganization to be withdrawn. As a result, the preferred option for local government reform is currently the establishment of combined authorities, with provision for voluntary amalgamation in exceptional circumstances.

Comparative Approach

It is clear that our comparison nations conducted debates in very disparate circumstances and this should therefore allow us to form robust judgements regarding the types of amalgamation arguments believed by rhetors to be efficacious.

Our analysis revolved around a survey of newspaper articles, television interviews and government promotional material (collected through an internet survey) for the years coinciding with the amalgamation debates under study (New South Wales Australia 2011-2016; Israel 2003; Wales 2013-2016). Methodologically the written materials were read and coded according to the type of rhetoric employed (see Tables 1 and 3 for definitions of the Hirschman (1991) rhetorical typology) and the major motivation for the article. We then constructed a ranking regarding the relative frequency with which the rhetorical positions were employed (Tables 2 and 4). Our approach was a more formalised version of the rich traditions of rhetorical analysis going back to at least pre-Socratic times, and also employed by contemporary eminent scholars such as Booth, Hirschman, Riker, Pollit and Hupe (2011), and Finlayson and Martin (2008) ‘who reject a restrictive Methodism that narrows human

reason to one particular fact and puts most facts and most reasons beyond reasoning’ (McCloskey 1998, p. 158).

Proponent rhetoric

The typology of Hirschman is most useful for analysing what kinds of arguments are believed to be most efficacious because it allows us to discern between different kinds of Riker’s (1991) dreadful consequence arguments. Hirschman would have referred to amalgamation proponent rhetorics as ‘progressive’ theses and opponent rhetorics as ‘reactionary’ theses. Collectively he referred to the six theses as ‘intransigent rhetorics’ (due to their use for frustrating more deliberative rhetorics) and made a somewhat feeble plea for rhetors to avoid same in favour of more helpful rhetoric, but failed to specify the conditions necessary to give rise to such rhetoric. We first review proponent rhetoric theses, providing what we feel to be the most representative exemplars of the typology (see Table 1) and noting how the common motivation of the first two theses (dreadful consequences) is delineated by the degree of confidence exhibited about the future ability of policy interventions to mitigate said dreadful consequences.

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

The Imminent Danger thesis emphasises the dangers of passivity in view of looming threats of one kind or the other. Moreover, the associated synergist claim asserts that the proposed reforms will complement past reforms (or indeed future reforms (Drew et al. 2016)). It thus, suggests a progressive camp imbued with an inordinate degree of confidence – confidence in the ability to correctly perceive future challenges and confidence in the efficacy of public policy interventions proposed. This line of dreadful consequence rhetoric was only rarely used in Australia, Israel and Wales (see Table 2). The reason why this might have been the case is that the world has proved to be a very unpredictable place – certainly in a public policy sense – since the turn of the third millennia (for instance, few saw the effect that looser public regulation on the banking industry in the United States would have on the Global economy). Thus, it is likely that the progressive camp have lost the requisite confidence in the predictability of public policy, which forms a necessary foundation for prosecution of the Imminent Danger thesis.

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

The second proponent rhetoric advanced by Hirschman (1991) was the Desperate Predicament thesis (and associated Fracasomania claim). Proponents of reform wishing to employ this argument typically paint a grim picture of public affairs and use this as motivation for proposing drastic intervention. Moreover, it is argued that in view of the grave outlook immediate action must be taken, irrespective of possible unintended side-effects. Notably proponents of reform employing this type of dreadful consequence argument demonstrate less confidence about the future and their ability to propose efficacious interventions, than do their political allies who might employ the Imminent Danger thesis. Moreover, in proffering advice to ‘progressives’ in 1993 Hirschman nominated this thesis as the most dispensable of the three extant theses, noting that it was likely to suffer from

diminishing returns. Given our observations regarding the unpredictability of public policy outcomes this millennia it is no surprise that this thesis was favoured in the Welsh context, and also performed an important role as catalyst for the Australian debates. If we might borrow from McCloskey's (1998) conception of rhetoric as the study of how to meet the insatiable desire to be heard, then we can see that a desperate predicament argument lends itself admirably to getting the attention of the press. It also, of course, taps into most people's inherent negativity bias, that Riker (1991) believed to be so critical for persuasion. This was particularly important in Wales and Australia for generating political will and public appetite for renewed proposals for structural change.

The last proponent thesis developed by Hirschman (1991) was the Futility of Resistance argument. This argument asserts that history is both linear in direction and inevitable, and therefore that attempts to resist the tide of change are futile and potentially knavish. Notably, whilst the Futility thesis shares with the Imminent Danger thesis a confidence in predicting the future, it eschews the idea that interventions can permanently alter the tide of history. Moreover, it differs fundamentally from the other two theses which present arguments to show that the public policy intervention is 'necessary' to avoid dreadful consequences – instead the Futility of resistance argument asserts that the intervention is somehow 'fated'. This is indeed a difficult argument to sustain in view of recent historical events. Notably, the thesis was not employed at all in the Israeli amalgamation debates – perhaps contradictory to a rather conflictual political culture that shuns compromises, particularly those concerning territorial identities. By way of contrast, the Futility of Resistance thesis was drawn upon with relative regularity in Australia – here, the argument was prosecuted in terms of the continued waves of municipal reform which have seen the number of municipalities almost halve from 1,067 in 1910 to just 537 today. In Wales, policy-makers continually sought to convey a sense of the inevitability of reorganization, pointing, in particular, to the distinctive Welsh social and economic environment and a sense that local government in the country did not measure up to its counterpart in England (points that have been strongly contested by the Welsh local government community itself).

It could be argued that the first two theses appeal more to anxiety than reason, whilst the latter eschews reason entirely in favour of resigning to fate. This leads us to believe that there might be room for an argument based principally on reason, one which shuns anxiety regarding dreadful consequences in preference to hope and adopts a belief that the future is made, rather than pre-ordained. By examining the rhetoric surrounding municipal amalgamations we have identified just such an argument – the thesis of which we shall call the 'Merely Good'. Thus, in Australia it was argued that the reforms would be efficient and hence result in better services and infrastructure for residents – this 'merely good' rhetoric was employed more often than any other argument. However, subsequent political failure would seem to suggest that the volume of 'merely good' rhetoric failed to win opponents of reform over to the policy intervention. In similar vein, 'merely good' rhetoric dominated debate in Israel – and, once again, the emphasis was on the efficiency implications for improved local government services. In Wales, 'merely good' rhetoric was the second most prominent line of argument and centred on questions of efficiency, effectiveness and strategic

capacity – with the implication being, yet again, the hope of better services for residents. Thus if we are to accept Riker’s (1991) reasoning it seems that proponents of amalgamation believed that ‘merely good’ arguments were likely to prove efficacious notwithstanding the fact that they also employed some dreadful consequence arguments of the Desperate Predicament type (for motivation).

Augmenting Hirschman’s (1991) typology with a merely good rhetoric is important because it largely points the way to the more deliberative rhetoric which Hirschman claims to favour (but fails to fully explicate). It would also seem to partly contradict Riker’s (1991) claim that unlikely dreadful consequence arguments would be most widely believed to be persuasive by experienced political rhetors rationally pursuing their policy. Moreover, because the thesis of the Merely Good requires a belief in the efficacy of public policy intervention, but does not rely on unlikely dreadful consequences to make a case for acting, it is unlikely to get the same sort of media penetration as the alarmist theses and probably requires a more sophisticated and attentive audience – an audience capable of understanding the argument in the light of the common good. However, the argument would not seem to be susceptible to diminishing returns (like the Desperate Predicament thesis), or to observations regarding the sometimes contrary nature of history (as are the Imminent Danger and Futility of resistance theses). Nor is the thesis of the Merely Good dependent on the circumstances surrounding its genesis – hence the belief in its efficacy – interventions which aim to improve matters for citizens can always be proposed, irrespective of extant policy conditions.

We now examine the lines of opponent rhetoric which might be drawn upon in response to the proponent arguments.

Opponent rhetoric

In the typology of Hirschman (1991) proponent rhetoric theses are assigned counterpoint opponent theses. Thus, there are two nuanced versions of dreadful consequence arguments and one fatalist argument in the extant typology (see Table 3 for brief descriptions and exemplars).

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

The Jeopardy thesis – which is the counter-argument to the Imminent Danger thesis – commences with an acknowledgement of at least some of the positive objectives for the proposed public policy intervention. However, opponents of reform seeking to defeat the Imminent Danger thesis in this manner assert that the positive outcomes are not worth the dreadful side-effects which will be brought about by implementing the proposal. This line of argument was most popular in Israel where it was asserted that larger municipalities might well lead to corruption and large deficits (see Table 4). In Australia (where the thesis was also prominently employed), the emphasis was mainly on the loss of community voice following amalgamation – particularly where amalgamations occurred between municipalities of disparate size. This argument was only occasionally deployed in Wales, where some commentators pointed towards the contrasting identities of the local authorities composing the favoured amalgamations of the Welsh Government.

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

By way of contrast, the Perversity thesis (which Hirschman describes as the foil to the Desperate Predicament argument) does not require any initial admission of likely positive outcomes arising from the proposed public policy intervention. Instead, the Perversity thesis draws on a world-view of an unpredictable and even chaotic future to suggest that the outcomes from the reform will be precisely the opposite of those predicted by the proponents of reform. As such, the Perversity thesis plays to the powerful rhetorical trope of irony thus making it ‘the single most popular and effective weapon in the annals of reactionary rhetoric’ (Hirschman 1991, 140). Indeed, the Perversity thesis was the most common rhetoric employed in both the NSW debates (the argument being that it would generate diseconomies and thus erode sustainability) and Wales debates (where the rhetoric of perversity was deployed by drawing attention to the transitional costs of making reorganization happen, especially at a time when budgets were shrinking anyway). Notably, this type of dreadful consequence rhetoric was only used sporadically in Israel – probably due to the alternate emphasis on Jeopardy rhetoric.

The Futility thesis is the final reactionary thesis proposed by Hirschman (1991). Hirschman (1993) was at pains to note that the Futility thesis should not be seen as a watered down version of its more prominent peer: Perversity. Rather Hirschman (1993) emphasised that the Futility thesis was motivated by an alternate world view that posited history as determined by inviolable laws. The fact that proponents of reform might attempt to meddle in the march of history creates room for the suspicion amongst opponents of reform that perhaps the intervention proposed is a mere smokescreen for an alternate and somewhat nefarious objective. The Futility thesis was only employed sporadically in Australia, where it was claimed that the amalgamations might be motivated by a desire of the state government to ingratiate itself with the developer lobby. The Futility thesis was more prominent in Israel, where the suspicion arose that the government was merely attempting to promote the interests of particular ethnic or political groups. Futility arguments were the least prominent reactionary rhetoric in Wales (where some opponents of reform asserted that plans for reorganization were an attempt to strengthen Labour’s local powerbase).

Given our development of the Merely Good thesis in section 2, we must also consider whether a specific counterpoint thesis is required to be added to the extant typology. The claim that an intervention should be pursued merely because it is good, may not necessarily require the development of a specific opponent counterpoint given that all of the extant opponent theses would seem to be suitable responses. For instance, the claim that amalgamation would lead to greater efficiency in Australia was, in fact, met with a counter-claim that the proposal would reduce efficiency (a Perversity argument). Similarly, Merely Good rhetoric in Wales (regarding the potential for savings) was disputed by Perversity arguments questioning projected savings and drawing attention to the likely costs of reorganisation, whilst in Israel (focussed on the potential for more capable leadership in large municipalities) it was met predominately with Jeopardy arguments (regarding diverse dreadful side effects). Thus, it is clear that a specific counter-thesis for Merely Good rhetoric is not *necessarily* indicated (nor does the Rikerian perspective require a counterpoint).

However, if we wish to have more deliberative rhetoric – consistent with the Aristotelian deliberation which focuses on ‘the weighing of factors relevant for choosing a course of action’ (Chambers 2009, 332) – then the dreadful consequence rhetoric of Hirschman (1991), despite being effective for winning an argument, will likely leave us unsatisfied. Indeed, Hirschman in expressing a hope for more fruitful dialogue might well have considered the possibility of what we might call Merely Not Good rhetoric. This type of rhetoric would seek to discover ‘new levels of truth’ (Booth 1974, 11) through subjecting *prima facie* good objectives to rational inquiry. For instance, the claim made in all three nations that larger municipalities are more efficient begs the question about whether efficiency is indeed an *ipso facto* good. When one reviews the rhetoric relating to efficiency one becomes immediately aware that efficiency is never an ‘end’ (in an Aristotelian teleological sense), but merely the means to achieving an ‘end’. For instance, in Australia, Israel and Wales, arguments asserting that amalgamations would be more efficient were invariably connected to the reasons for desiring efficiency – to provide better services and infrastructure for residents. Thus deliberative replies to the Merely Good arguments of enhanced efficiency might point to the fact that efficiency is little more than a means for obtaining wants and that these wants (better infrastructure and services) must be weighed against other (often competing) wants specific to government services, such as equity, due process, and responsiveness (Goodin and Wilenski 1984). In so doing, the debate would become more deliberative and cause people to reflect on what they really value in local government.

Conclusion

A review of amalgamation rhetoric in three widely different contexts employing the methodology of Riker (1991) through the interpretive lens of Hirschman (1991) suggests that both proponents and opponents believe that some of the most efficacious arguments for persuasion certainly include recourse to rather unlikely dreadful consequences. For proponents of amalgamation it seems that there is some belief that arguments of dreadful consequences arising from a chaotic and unpredictable public policy environment would prove effective. On the other hand, opponents of amalgamation believed that dreadful consequence arguments, founded on a world-view of unpredictable futures, would prove most effective (although in the context of Israel the future was according to a world-view of predictability and orderliness). Fatalist theses were shunned by both proponents and opponents of amalgamation in Australia and Wales, but only by proponents of amalgamation in Israel – suggesting that there was generally a belief that fatalist perspectives were unlikely to persuade in this particular type of disputatious public policy.

However, both the predictive typology of Hirschman (1991) and the hypothesis of Riker (1991) failed to predict that Merely Good rhetoric – which shuns both dreadful consequences and fatalism – would be held to be persuasive among proponents of amalgamation. Moreover, it seems that this giving of reasons, set apart from fear regarding relatively unlikely dreadful consequences, seems to be the type of more fruitful rhetoric that Hirschman (1991) offered a closing plea for in his seminal work, but failed to specify. However, a Merely Not Good rhetoric was eschewed by opponents of amalgamation thus curtailing the

kind of fruitful deliberative dialogue that scholars believe would give rise to better policy outcomes (see, Chambers 2009; Macedo 1999).

The question naturally arises regarding why opponents of amalgamation clung so tightly to dreadful consequence rhetorics, despite a proffered pathway to a fear and fatalism free dialogue. Part of the answer seems to lie in the fact that proponents were in political power and therefore had the ability to ultimately force amalgamation onto the public. The fact that proponents attempted persuasion was probably due as much to a desire not to harm long-term political prospects, than a *need* to persuade in order to execute the reforms. By way of contrast, opponents could only hope to stave off amalgamation by persuading a very large proportion of the population to feel exceedingly aggrieved by the amalgamation and act on their grievance – and thus signal to incumbents that there would ultimately be a high political price to pay should they proceed with amalgamations. To persuade so many people to feel so strongly on a public policy issue requires that one be able to give strongly valued reasons, and as we have previously noted negativity bias suggests that people are more likely to act on grievances relating to large losses (with a high degree of stickiness), even when the probability of the dreadful consequence is relatively low (Boydston et al. 2017). Indeed, by emphasising relatively unlikely events the rhetor may well encourage auditors to over-estimate the probability of said event actually transpiring and thus cause more people to act on their perceived grievance (Riker 1991).

Another reason for why opponents may have favoured dreadful consequence rhetoric lies in the fact that amalgamation, like many political issues, is a contest set in the context of political scarcity – quite simply, everybody can't win (Riker 1988). Moreover, the distribution and severity of gains or losses are quite asymmetrical. For instance, it is a relatively wide group of local government taxpayers and resident consumers who stand to gain from amalgamation (through putatively cheaper or better services), but often in a rather marginal way. By way of contrast those who lose from amalgamation are, in the main, a relatively narrow group of political representatives and executives who stand lose in a profound way (most notably their jobs; Drew 2018). It is thus not entirely surprising to find that opponents of amalgamation employed somewhat strong rhetorics aimed at defeating the proposals, rather than more deliberative rhetoric aimed at finding good reasons for assent or compromise (Booth 1974). Otherwise stated, opponents of amalgamation may have been far more likely to have felt that dreadful consequences would arise for them personally, thus making them more inclined to employ rhetorics of this type.

It would seem remiss of us to neglect to outline at least one way in which more fruitful inquiry might be encouraged (notwithstanding the constraints of space). Perhaps the best known mechanism for doing so is through the use of mini-publics – citizen juries and the like – to hear and assess arguments made by amalgamation proponents and opponents (see, for example, Quirk 2006; Macedo 1999). The advantages of using a mini-public are two-fold and respond directly to the important elements of rhetoric identified in the work of McCloskey (2000) and Booth (1974) respectively – the insatiable desire to be heard and the search for new levels of truth. First, a mini-public is a captive audience and therefore no longer requires proponents and opponents of amalgamation to make exaggerated claims of dreadful

consequences in order to be heard. Instead, with attention secured, proponents and opponents of the reform may be more inclined to use Merely Good and Merely Not Good theses. Second, a mini-public allows for the interrogation of claims by ‘jurists’ – an opportunity to discover truth or new levels of truth (what is good or not good) – particularly if the mini-public is well resourced and has access to appropriate expertise. Indeed, where dreadful consequence rhetoric is of an unlikely nature, interrogation is likely to reveal the improbability of the claim, or allow for small adjustments to be made to mitigate risks (Riker 1991; for example, mechanisms such as ward structures might have been used to ensure that communities from much smaller constituent entities were not politically disenfranchised). However, for a mini-public to be effective there are a few conditions that must be met. In particular, the sample must be representative of the community (which requires that it be sufficiently large) and there must be equality of opportunity built into the process (Davidson and Elstub 2014). It is also critical that the deliberations be binding and that they are conveyed to the general public – otherwise the benefits might be restricted to only a small part of the population (Quirk 2006). Thus, mini-publics offer some promise for encouraging more fruitful inquiry in relation to local government amalgamations and this approach might profitably be pursued further by scholars in future research.

Given recent global trends to populism, and divisive and expensive (in both political and pecuniary terms) amalgamation debates, it seems more important than ever for us to consider the form and conditions necessary for alternate public policy discourses. We believe our identification that proponent amalgamation rhetors believe that Merely Good rhetoric could be efficacious, combined with our prescription to interrogate dreadful consequence rhetoric of amalgamation opponents addresses important gaps in the analysis of municipal amalgamations in the scholarly literature and thus gives us hope and a road map to fulfil Hirschman’s (1991, 170) plea for ‘a more democracy friendly dialogue’.

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Table 1: Progressive Rhetoric in Municipal Amalgamation Debates.

| Proponent Position | Australia | Israel | Wales |
|---|--|---|---|
| <p><i>Imminent Danger Thesis</i> Emphasises the danger of passivity and the need to act to avoid impending disaster.</p> | <p>Example: ‘In the next 20 years a further two million people will make the city their home, and most of them will settle in Sydney’s west ... To cope with this growth and Sydney’s emerging role as a global city, we need a modern, more connected system of government’ (Toole 2015, p. 3).</p> | <p>‘When one local authority provides free social activities for its residents, because it has the resources, while its neighbour’s welfare department collapses because of excessive demand and acute manpower shortage, it is hard to justify the opposition of the former to amalgamation’ (Rechter, 2003)</p> | <p>‘We have a once in a generation opportunity to reform and reshape our councils. The old ways of doing things will not work in the future. Our plans are ambitious and we must make the most of this chance to change’ (Welsh Government spokesperson, BBC interview, 14/06/2015)</p> |
| <p><i>Desperate Predicament Thesis</i> The old order must be smashed and the new rebuilt regardless of possible consequences.</p> | <p>Example: ‘This is an incredible \$1 million daily loss for local councils....this cannot be sustained’ (Hansard, 2014a)</p> | <p>‘The mayor is unable to expropriate land for the public good, to layoff unneeded employees or to recruit employees based on qualifications... In many municipalities expenditures on salaries amounted to 90% of the budget and no money was left for projects’ (Halabi, 2003).</p> | <p>‘We are well aware that what we propose will incur costs, and will be disruptive and controversial - but we are convinced that doing nothing would be worse’ (Williams Commission, 2014)</p> |
| <p><i>Futility of Resistance Thesis</i> Appeals to the historical inevitability of the proposed reforms.</p> | <p>Example: ‘[M]any of our growing suburbs are</p> | <p>None</p> | <p>‘Change is inevitable and essential so that our public</p> |

| | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| | constrained by boundaries that date back to the horse and cart days’ (Office of Local Government 2014, p. 4) | | services can become more efficient, effective, accessible and responsive’ (Carwyn Jones, First Minister of Wales, BBC interview 20/1/2014). |
| <i>Merely Good Thesis</i> (absent in Hirschman) This argument seeks to assert that the proposed reforms are merely good (as opposed to ‘necessary’ or ‘inevitable’ underlying the alternative theses). | ‘I encourage every council to back this program. It will deliver more resources to councils and create the efficiencies and economies that ratepayers deserve’ (Hansard, 2015b). | ‘Globally, large municipalities led by capable mayors provide better service than small ones. In large municipalities many of the resources are spent directly to the community, and are not wasted on unneeded jobs and cronyism, such as in many Arab municipalities’ (Asad, 2003). | ‘There is a real opportunity here for local government to make significant savings for taxpayers and if councils work together, plan well and involve their staff there is the opportunity for savings even greater than the £650m we have identified’ (Leighton Andrews, Public Services Minister, Welsh Government, 24/11/2015) |

Adapted from Grant and Drew (2017)

Table 2: Frequency with Which Proponent Arguments Were Employed

| | Australia | Israel | Wales |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Imminent Danger | Rarely employed | Rarely employed | Rarely employed |
| Desperate Predicament | 2nd most common | Rarely employed | Most common |
| Futility of Resistance | Rarely employed | Never | Rarely employed |
| Merely Good | Most common | Most common | 2nd most common |

Table 3: Opponent Rhetoric in Municipal Amalgamation Debates.

| Opponent Position | Australia | Israel | Wales |
|---|---|---|---|
| <p><i>Jeopardy</i> The program involves unacceptable consequences of one sort or another and is the reactionary response to the Imminent Danger thesis.</p> | <p><i>Example: 'we've found this an abhorrent thing for us to be forced to merge, it will have a huge impact on our community both in cost and in the loss of our community's interest' (Glanville, 2016)</i></p> | <p><i>'Small municipalities of less than 5000 inhabitants exist in other countries and are managed efficiently. Some large cities, in contrast, lack sufficient revenues and under incompetent and corrupt leadership created huge deficits' (Golan, 2003).</i></p> | <p>'It's the wrong time for a new map - we should be concentrating on services. How can we have one eye on shrinking budgets and another on re-organisation?' (anonymous Welsh Labour Paty source, BBC interview, 11/06/2015).</p> |
| <p><i>Perversity</i> Unintended consequences from reform including effects opposite to the proposed goal. This is the reactionary response to the Desperate Predicament Thesis.</p> | <p><i>Example: DEA evidence produced by Drew et al. (2015) to suggest that diseconomies of scale (and hence lower rates of technical efficiency) will result from proposed amalgamations</i></p> | <p><i>"Transition to "more advanced" party politics will make Arab society more proactive, but in some localities kinship-based politics may be replaced by ethnic politics (religion-based conflicts)" (Sweid, 2003).</i></p> | <p>'How are we going to pay for this? There are quite a lot of upfront costs. The work that we've done suggests something like £200m. Do we want to spend that £200m on reorganisation or do we want to spend it on services?' Steve Thomas, CEO of the Welsh Local Government Association, BBC interview, 21/01/2014).</p> |
| <p><i>Futility</i></p> | <p><i>Example: 'If the government</i></p> | <p><i>'Sometimes, an amalgamation</i></p> | <p>'Shoving together</p> |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| Proposed reforms will not improve the circumstances at which they are aimed; they are a smoke screen for a political agenda. This is Hirschman's (1991) suggested reactionary response to the Futility of Resistance thesis. | <i>could not cook the books to arrive at an impressive figure to demonstrate savings from merged councils, then it is fair to say that is not the reason they're being merged... This has created accusations that the process reflects a political gerrymander' (Saulwick, 2016)</i> | <i>justified by efficiency hides damaging improper motivations ... seemingly an efficient amalgamation of three small municipalities. Practically each can become more efficient by itself, but between them is one of the most beautiful areas in Israel that attracts real estate developers' (Golan 2003).</i> | existing councils in a botched party-political stitch-up serves no-one aside from the Labour party' (Peter Black, Liberal Democrat Welsh Assembly Member, BBC interview, 17/06/2015). |
|--|---|---|---|

Adapted from Grant and Drew (2017)

Table 4: Frequency with Which Opponent Arguments Were Employed

| | Australia | Israel | Wales |
|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Jeopardy | 2nd most common | Most common | Rarely employed |
| Perversity | Most common | Rarely employed | Most common |
| Futility | Rarely employed | 2nd most common | Rarely employed |
| Merely Not Good | Never | Rarely employed | 2nd most common |