

# **Common themes in community unionism in industrialised countries:**

## **lessons from long term coalitions in Australia and Canada**

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## **Abstract**

Union revitalisation strategies in industrialised countries include attempts by unions to reach out to community organisations and engage in community unionism. One form of community unionism is the long term coalition between unions and community organisations. This paper develops a definition of community and community unionism, identifying three key elements that vary coalition practice – organisational relationships, common concern and multi-scalar capacity. These elements are explored in a comparison of the public education campaigns in NSW and the Ontario Health Coalition in Ontario. I find that both case studies develop successful and sustainable forms of community unionism, while also reflecting stark variations in these three elements. I use these two case studies to speculate about how variations in community unionism operate. For instance I argue that there is an ‘agenda-participatory’ form of community unionism, evident in the public education campaign, where there was strong common concern and multi-scalar capacity without a strong structure of organisational relationships. I argue there is a ‘structure-participatory’ form of community unionism, in the Ontario Health Coalition campaign, where there was a strong organisational structure and multi-scalar capacity without a deep common concern connection. The paper highlights that while each of these forms of community unionism contribute to union power, they provide unions with different sources of power and achieve their success as coalitions in different ways.

The concept of community unionism is built on the idea that union connection to the community builds successful campaigns and strengthens unions. This paper investigates how and when this might occur, focusing first on achieving a concrete definition of community, second by establishing a framework for understanding the contours of successful community unionism and finally exploring this framework through a comparison of two case studies of community unionism from Australia and Canada.

The term community has entered union discourse as union density and power, particularly in the industrialised world, has diminished. While work between unions and community organisations is not new, theoretical interest in these relationships has surged in the last 15 years (Brecher and Costello 1990a; Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Reynolds 2004). Yet the scholarship on coalitions has some limitations, often focusing on best-practice case studies and assuming rather than proving if and how coalitions are a source of power for unions (Tattersall 2005).

This paper argues that coalitions can be understood as one example of a broader concept of community unionism. By defining the term community, and then using this definition as a conceptual tool, this paper explores key elements of coalitions and how those elements vary coalition success and form. In doing so, it does not seek to develop a strict benchmark definition of community unionism, where some magic threshold of engagement or campaign success represents an ideal type of practice. Rather it argues that community unionism is a deeply variable concept and by breaking down its elements, we can understand significant variation and success through concepts such as the kinds of common interest, organisational relations and multi-scalar campaign capacity present.

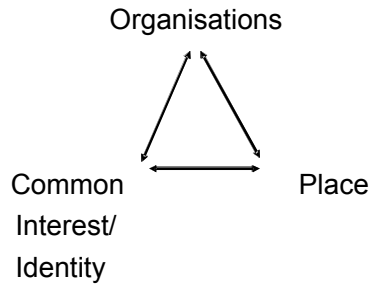
Furthermore, the paper argues that there is a progression of forms of power that community unionism can concretely provide unions, stretching from an instrumental to a deeper, more politically transformative power. Firstly, community unionism provides an instrumental form of power – complementing union capacity by increasing a union's

financial, physical and human resources, providing expertise and enhancing the number of union supporters (Frege, Heery et al. 2004). Secondly, community unionism provides a legitimising form of power, where union action is framed as a ‘sword of justice’ with broad community support and not simply the vested interest of unions (Flanders 1970). Thirdly, community unionism can assist unions to build an agenda for change (Reynolds 1999; Tattersall 2006b). Finally, community unionism, by creating influential relationships between unions and community organisations and by mobilising union members on a variety of issues can create change in unions themselves – community unionism may be an agent of union revitalisation (Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Tattersall 2005; Turner forthcoming). I argue that the forms of power that community unionism offers unions vary as the success and interdependent relationships between unions and community organisations deepen, thus this paper argues that there is a connection between the capacity of community unionism and the source of power that community unionism provides unions.

### **1. Community and Community Unionism**

Community unionism has a contested and uncertain meaning, in part due to the ambiguity of the term ‘community.’ The ambiguous use of the term community makes it difficult to assess what community unionism looks like. However, while the term community is loosely deployed across union renewal literature, there are some consistent themes (Tattersall forthcoming a). Most commonly, the term community is used as a surrogate for community organisation, for example in the term union-community coalition (Brecher and Costello 1990a; Tufts 1998; Tattersall forthcoming a). Secondly community is used to describe a group of people who have common interests or identities, such as a community of women or environmentalists (Cranford and Ladd 2003; Fine 2005). Thirdly, community is used to mean place, as in a defined geographic area such as a local neighbourhood community (Ellem 2003). These three discrete definitions can be seen as complementary and supplementary, defining the attributes of community and providing a concrete anchor for exploring terms such as community unionism (Tattersall forthcoming a).

*Figure 1: The threefold dimensions of community*

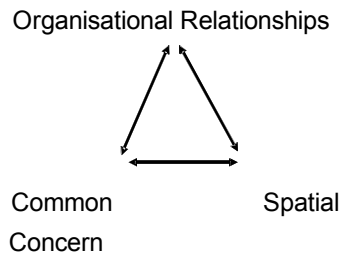


If community unionism describes the process of unions ‘reaching out’ to community, then it can include one of three different practices. It can include working with community organisations. It can include acting with a broad common ‘community’ or class interest or acting with people with a specific identity. Or, community unionism can include acting with a place-specific strategy where unions seek to work across a specific geographic area, using local support to enhance union influence and power (Ellem 2003). Thus, within this broad term, union-community coalitions are one form of community unionism.

This categorisation of community unionism can move beyond the definitional to be used as an analytical device to explore the variable elements of community unionism. After all, not all forms of community unionism or union-community coalitions are the same nor create the same forms of power for campaigns or unions (Tattersall 2005). If community unionism has three elements, then variations in these elements may be indicative of variations in success and power. The above definition points to three elements, a relational dimension, an element of common concern and a spatial dimension.

*Figure 2: Features of Community Unionism*

## Common themes in Community Unionism



Using these elements, we can suggest that community unionism may be more successful when these elements are interdependent; where there is a dialectic that enables both organisational unity and organisational autonomy – both organisational breadth and depth (Hyman 1975; Hyman 1989; Tattersall 2006b).

For the relational dimension, community unionism may be more successful when there are interdependent trusting coalition relationships between community organisations and unions. This may be made easier through the formation of structures such as coalition officers above the coalition members, the participation of individual bridge builders between organisations, the capacity and commitment of participant organisations, and narrowing coalitions to hand picked partners, rather than having a come-one, come all structure (Rose 2000; Lipsig-Mumme 2003; Reynolds 2004; Tattersall 2005).

For the element of common concern, community unionism may be more successful when the common concern between the organisations is in the mutual interests of each of those organisations while also engaging those organisations in a process of learning more broadly about the interests of other organisations (Brecher and Costello 1990b; Clawson 2003; Frege, Heery et al. 2004; Obach 2004). Common concern will help create powerful community unionism if the issue of common concern is equally connected to the experiences and interests of union and organisational members, and framed as a social concern rather than a vested, narrow interest (Flanders 1970; Carroll 1992; Tattersall forthcoming).

The spatial dimension of community unionism demonstrates the importance of opportunity structure and the geography of power for achieving successful outcomes and internal organisation. Community unionism increases its success if it is presented with political opportunities from employers or the state (Tarrow 1994; Turner forthcoming). It is also may be more successful if it is able to act at multiple scales, such as the local, city, state, the national and the global (Walsh 2000; Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 2003; Castree, Coe et al. 2004; Ellem 2005). Multi-scalar capacity is particularly important at the local, and may be assisted through the formation of local ‘broker’ organisations that can operate at a local scale in partnership with a city or state-based coalition (McAdam, Tarrow et al. 2001; Tattersall 2006b).

This framework identifies key elements of community unionism, and in particular coalition practice, and argues that variations in those elements are responsible for variations in community unionism success. In defining success, I am not only referring to successful outcomes, but also the ability to sustain union-community relationships and to successfully engage the capacity of participant organisations. While the framework recognises that the political and economic environment shapes opportunities for the formation and operation of community unionism, there is significant strategic agency within coalitions themselves that allows community unionism to be successful in varying national political contexts (Turner forthcoming). I argue that variations in the organisational alignment of community unionism as opposed to the political opportunities of the national context in liberal market economies, are the more important variable for the ‘success’ of community unionism.

This framework is explored through a comparison of two examples of community unionism – two long term union-community coalitions in NSW and Ontario. In NSW, my research on the Public Education Alliance involved 42 interviews with union and community organisation representatives, participant observation of coalition and union meetings and a review of internal union documents and newspapers. In Ontario, my research of the Ontario Health Coalition involved 34 interviews with union and

community organisation representatives, participant observation of coalition meetings and assemblies, a review of coalition archives and newspapers.

## **2. The Public Education Alliance**

The public education campaigns that culminated in the 2003 Public Education Alliance were initiated by the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), formalising a series of variable, episodic coalitions between teachers, parents and principals in NSW. The NSW Teachers Federation formed the Alliance as a result of a process of internal reform, where the union decided to prioritise campaigning on public education broadly, rather than the narrower concerns of teacher salaries or ad hoc issues (interview, O'Halloran, NSWTF, 2004). This reform process included the establishment of a Public Education Fund, which now collects over \$1 million a year from union members to campaign on public education, and a series of Public Education Lobbies, which created locally-based alliances between parents, teachers and principals (Zadkovich 1999). While the Public Education campaigns between 2001 and 2003 represented an attempt by the union to 'do things differently' (interview, O'Halloran, 2004), campaigns on issues beyond wages and conditions were not new for the union – it had a rich history of speaking about public education issues and issues such as peace and women's rights (O'Brien 1987).

The public education campaigns, and the union's process of internal reform, were provoked by a crisis in public education funding and the union's inability to be able to change it. During the 1990s there were significant budget reductions for education (Currie 2002). This in part was caused by the Federal Government's support of private education, and also the NSW Government's desire to reduce its deficit through school restructures and the reduction of recurrent expenditure – particularly teacher wages (Watson 2004).

The public education campaigns between 2001 and 2004 occurred in several waves, with each wave operating quite differently (Tattersall forthcoming a). This case study focuses on only one smaller period of this campaign, from 2001 to 2003.

In June 2001, in response to a series of repeated attempts at school restructures by the NSW State Government, the NSWTF and the Federation of Parents & Citizens (P&C) began an independent Public Inquiry into Public Education (Vinson 2002). The idea for the inquiry came from the NSWTF's rank and file executive meeting, where, in response to a discussion on how the NSWTF was pressing for a Government Inquiry into school restructures, one school teacher exclaimed 'why don't we just do a review ourselves' (interview, Simpson, former NSWTF President, 2005). Yet, while the union had the resources to undertake an inquiry with its new Public Education Fund, it knew 'for political reasons' that they could not do the review alone (interview, Gavrielatos, NSWTF, 2005). As Angelo Gavrielatos, then NSWTF Deputy President argued 'if you have the (Teachers) Federation and the P&C both commissioning this, it would make it that little bit harder for our political opponents to dismiss it (interview, Gavrielatos, 2005).

Thus, the Vinson Inquiry was coordinated as a tight coalition between the P&C and the NSWTF, organised through a formal independent structure. The structure had two components, first, a coordinating group with a senior representative from the NSWTF, the P&C and the Inquiry Head, Tony Vinson, an Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Sydney (interview, O'Halloran, 2004). Second, there was a separate Inquiry office with staff, including a research team, administrative assistant, a separate office with control over discretionary funds, provided mainly by the NSWTF but also by the P&C (interview, Vinson, 2005). The Inquiry's independent status enhanced its authority with the Government and education stakeholders. Vinson independently sought out a constructive relationship with the ALP Government and the Department of Education (interview, Vinson, 2005). The Inquiry's independent status also allowed it to sit above its stakeholders, and focus on their common concerns and not conflicts of interest (interview, Vinson, 2005). This was particularly important given the sometimes tense relationships between the two public education unions (the NSWTF and Public Sector Association (PSA)) and the different priorities of teachers, parents and principals (interview, anon. PSA representative, 2005; O'Halloran, 2005)

The Inquiry was simultaneously a research team and a site for escalating a participatory public education campaign. The goals of the Inquiry were to prepare a report on the future of public education for the 'education community', while also providing a medium for increasing awareness and engagement in a public education campaign in the lead up to the 2003 State Election (interview, O'Halloran, 2004). Consequently, Inquiry events were mass-based; submissions were advertised in daily newspapers and the Inquiry was launched through a Sky Channel meeting (a live satellite television broadcast played in over 40 locations). In total, 772 submissions were received and the Inquiry held 28 public meetings and school visits across the state (Vinson 2002). Moreover, the activities of submission writing and public hearings were locally and collectively organised. NSWTF organisers recalled school groups gathering to discuss and plan 'their vision for public education' as part of the submission process (interview, NSWTF Organiser 1, 2005). As Simpson notes 'it is a more engaging collective process to write a submission, compared to a strike which can be organised in an individualised way ... this was deeply collective and participatory' (interview, Simpson, 2005).

The Inquiry's hearings became organising opportunities for teachers and parents around the state, as hearings were staged throughout regional NSW and in metropolitan Sydney. The hearings lasted for over six months and were staged as local mobilisations, organised by regional NSWTF organisers, local Teacher Associations and local P&C branches (interview, NSWTF Organiser 2; P&C representative 2, 2005). The hearings were a different form of political activity from usual union events like rallies; as Maree O'Halloran commented, they 'touched the middle teacher that doesn't get involved in their union' (interview, O'Halloran, 2004). The Inquiry asked teachers and parents to air their grievances and make recommendations, rather than just being a passive participant (interview, NSWTF Organiser 3, 2005). Indeed, the Inquiry's process connected the broad frame of public education to people's specific issues of concern, intermixing broad interest and specific issues at an individual level to the common concern of the state based coalition.

Moreover, the inquiry events became a stage for major media attention on public education issues around the state, as Gavrielatos noted ‘there was hardly a day where there was not a story about public education (interview, Gavrielatos, NSWTF, 2005). This media attention was achieved because of the local organisation that supported the coalition’s activities. As one organiser working in regional NSW at the time describes:

I contacted the schools, I contacted the media ... I picked him up... Tony we’re going over to this school, now we’re going to visit the Area News, which is the local newspaper in Griffith. At 11 o’clock, you have got a television interview with WIN ... And then we’re visiting another school and by the way, we have got a meeting at the RSL Club this afternoon at 6 o’clock, and we’ve invited the P&C and local parents and community groups to come along and teachers to talk about the Vinson Inquiry (interview, Irving, NSWTF, 2005).

At the completion of the hearings, the public education campaign shifted from the Vinson Inquiry to the activities of the Public Education Alliance, where a more political campaign emerged in the lead up to the 2003 State Election. The Public Education Alliance formally launched in May 2003, at a press conference to announce the first of three Vinson Inquiry reports for the future of Education. The Alliance consisted of six organisations – the NSWTF and the P&C were joined by the Federation of School Community Organisations (FOSCO), the Primary Principals Association, the Secondary Principals Council and the Public Schools Principals Forum.

The Alliance evolved out of the deep relationships between parents and teachers strengthened through the Inquiry, and more episodic relationships initiated with the Principal organisations during a 2001 Federal Election campaign (Tattersall forthcoming a). It sought to create a ‘united front ... of parents, teachers and principals speaking with a united voice’ (interview, Principal Representative 1, 2005). The Alliance held irregular, constant meetings at the NSWTF, attended by senior representatives from each organisation (participant observation, April 2005; O’Halloran, 2004). There were no dedicated ‘Alliance staff’, rather, the work between meetings was undertaken by the participant organisations. Participants explicitly put aside their differences within the Alliance space, as one noted ‘I wouldn’t say we are close now as individuals, but when it

comes to a public face ... for public education, well then we are buddies (interview, Principal representative 2, 2006).

Decisions of the Alliance were a product of negotiation and exchange, with the initial focus being the formulation of a series of United Demands, which the Alliance would campaign for during the election. These six demands, which would be the campaign issues for the election, aimed to balance the specific issues that concerned individual organisations within a broader concern for public education. They included the NSWTF and FOSCO's concern for smaller class sizes, the P&C's concern for school maintenance and principals' concern for professional development funding (interview, O'Halloran, 2004; Allen, FOSCO, parent representative 3, principal representative 3. 2005). The balance of demands allowed the broader frame of public education to connect to the specific priorities of each constituent organisation, binding them to the campaign through their own self-interest.

Yet, there was some disagreement about the issue of salaries. The NSWTF wanted the demands to mention 'wage justice' while parent organisations were adamant that a focus on the issue of salaries would distract and dominate the other Alliance priorities (interview, parent representative 3, 2005; NSWTF Official 1, 2005). This was eventually resolved with the NSWTF compromising on the language of the wage demand, expressing it as a concern for attracting and retaining teachers. Yet the issue of salaries remained an unresolved tension. In a later meeting with the Premier, a parent representative was 'appalled' when the NSWTF leaders explicitly raised salaries as a concern of the Alliance (interview, parent representatives 3, 4, 2005). Yet, the NSWTF felt responsible for the issue of salaries, given 'there were members who wanted us to run salaries as the issue during the state election' (interview, NSWTF Official 1, 2005). This tension over salaries in part demonstrates the tension over organisational needs, and the competing needs of autonomy and coalition unity, which in this case was compromised but not settled (Hyman 1975; Hyman 1989).

The Public Education Alliance staged a series of events focused on the scale of the state and the leaders of two major political parties in NSW. Thus, while school signs were displayed and there was some local lobbying of Members of Parliament, the focus was on events in the CBD that would gain media coverage and escalate pressure on the political parties, particularly the NSW Premier. This targeting brought success when the Opposition leader came out in support of the Alliance's demands over class sizes in November 2002 (Totaro 2002). This pressure helped the Alliance gain a meeting with the Premier in January 2003, an incredible achievement given that the coalition members alone had not met with the Premier in years (interview, O'Halloran, 2004). The key event was a Public Education Forum at Sydney Town Hall on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2003. It was planned jointly by the Alliance, who designed the speakers list and equally divided who would ask questions (interview, parent representative 2, 2005). Teachers and parents were bussed into the forum from around the city (interview, NSWTF school rep 1, 2005). The event intensified pressure on the Government, with the Education Minister, John Watkins a focus of the questions and discussion (interview, NSWTF Organiser 4, 2005). This escalation of the public education campaign created political success, when two weeks before the election the Government announced support for reduced class sizes and increases in funding for professional development. The broad campaign of setting an agenda for public education successfully translated into a political campaign for policy changes in public education.

### **3. The Ontario Health Coalition (OHC)**

The Ontario Health Coalition has coordinated a variety of campaigns in defence of Medicare and against the privatisation of Health Care over the last 25 years. It was reformed in 1995 by the Ontario Federation of Labour, yet it was originally formed by a group of service-based community organisations and unions in 1980 (OHC 1980; Tetley 1995). From 1995, the Coalition has had paid staff, an office space in the Ontario Federation of Labour building, and it has run campaigns linked to a mandate focused on the issue of health care and opposition to privatisation (interview, coalition participant 1,

2005; OHC 1996). The OHC consists of the eight main health care unions, seniors groups, the Council of Canadians and a series of local health coalitions.<sup>1</sup>

During the late 1990s, the OHC undertook two key structural changes – it created a formally structured, decision making administrative committee and supported the creation of locally-based Health Coalitions, focused in regional areas of Ontario. Until 1998, the OHC met as two different structures – an administrative committee and open ‘member’ meetings, which were open to individuals and organisations (OHC 1996). As one participant described ‘it was a disaster ...it was not a formal structure, it was chaotic and difficult to get things done’ (interview, coalition participant 1, 2005) Several constituents, including the union and community co-chairs, decided to initiate a discussion to close the structure to a select but equal number of unions and community organisations, so decisions could be more predictable and trust between organisations could be built (interview, coalition participant 1, 2005). In addition, to ensure that the coalition still remained open to the participation of interested individuals as well as organisations, the OHC supported the formation of local health coalitions which had already begun forming in union towns such as Windsor, Hamilton and Kingston, in small, regional towns such as Thunder Bay and in the city of Toronto (OHC 1996; OHC 1997a; OHC 1997b). These local coalitions run by two co-chairs, one union and one community, were a mechanism that enabled interested individuals to get involved in the health care campaign. These groups soon were included as representatives on the Administrative Committee, and in mid-2000 Natalie Mehra, a local coalition representative from Kingston was appointed as full-time coordinator (OHC 2000).

Like the public education campaign, the health campaigns of the Ontario Health Coalition operated in waves between 2001 and 2005. This study focuses on one campaign – the Save Medicare campaign between 2001 and May 2002, a similar time period to the Public Education Alliance case study.

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<sup>1</sup> The health care unions include professional unions, such as the Ontario Nurses Association, specialist unions such as the Ontario Public Sector Employees Union, non-clinical health care unions such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Service Employees, International Union, privates sector unions which now have health care members, such as the Canadian Auto Workers and the Steelworkers.

The Save Medicare campaign evolved in reaction to a Canadian Royal Commission into Health Care. The Romanow Royal Commission was established by the Liberal Federal Government as an attempt to manage a political debate about the sustainability Medicare (Mehra 2005). In early 2002, a public campaign for two-tier, private and public, health insurance intensified, with repeated statements by Conservatives and think-tanks that Medicare was unsustainable (Mackie 2000; Fraser 2001; Kirby and Le Breton 2002). The Royal Commission sought to balance the push for privatisation with the popularity of Medicare through a fact-finding Commission (Boyle 2001a).

The Save Medicare canvas campaign was the product of the Coalition deciding that it needed to do ‘something extraordinary’ in order to save Medicare (interview, Mehra, OHC, 2005). The genesis of the plan came from Ross Sutherland, who was a member of the Kingston Health Coalition and an active member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). He suggested that the Coalition should go ‘door-to-door’ in defence of Medicare, using the electoral strategies of lawn signs and doorknocking in a non-electoral period as a mechanism to get petitions signed and build community awareness (interview, Sutherland, 2005). This idea was immediately supported by Mehra, who was similarly interested in a campaign that did more than repeat the tried and limited tactics of street marches. Sutherland, as a bridge builder between a community coalition and CUPE, took the idea to the CUPE leaders to get union backing. Sid Ryan, CUPE’s President was open to the suggestion: Sutherland was a ‘trusted activist’ and the idea was consistent with Ryan’s beliefs that political campaigns needed to work to build wide scale community support (interview, Ryan CUPE, 2006). CUPE led the push for a Province-wide canvas in the Administrative Committee, and despite some initial opposition from some unions who thought it was too ambitious, the idea was supported (interview, Harris 2006; coalition participant 2, 2006).

The framing of the campaign was the cause of some discussion within the Administrative Committee, over whether to focus on Medicare, privatisation or health care more broadly. While the negative phrase of ‘opposition to privatisation’ had been a focus of previous

campaigns, the Committee discussed the need for a ‘positive campaign around Medicare’ (interview, Sutherland, 2005). There was also a debate about using the term Medicare or health care, with the group eventually settling on Medicare because ‘it was so tangible ... Medicare touches people’ (interview, coalition participant 3, 2005). The slogan eventually became ‘Yes National Public Medicare.’

Raising money for the campaign was a ‘much more challenging task’ than deciding to do the campaign (interview, union participant, 2005). The Coalition secured an ad hoc campaign budget through ‘begging and borrowing’ from the unions (interview, coalition participant 2, 2005). This was used to pay for all the materials and to hire additional staff. This commitment was supplemented by many union locals and Labour Councils who subsidised the purchase of lawn signs for their local area (interview, union participant 3, 2006). Unions also made in-kind support, such as printing large numbers of leaflets for the coalition. However, this was not without controversy. One of the unions put their union name on a set of leaflets produced on behalf of the Coalition, which caused great tension and saw many other unions and local groups taking the time to put stickers over the union label before distributing coalition material (interview, coalition participant 2, 4, 2006).

A campaign plan was developed and then taken to an Assembly of all the local coalition, community organisation and union members to gain commitment and approval. The plan was locally focused, consisting of January planning meetings, followed by a February public launch, public activities such as getting local council support, and then the launch of a canvassing operation during April. The plan was taken to an Assembly which provided a space for people to contribute ideas and suggestions from the floor (participant observation, 2005). However it did have some limitations. The Action Plan had been ‘signed off’ by the Administrative Committee, and so contribution from the assembly floor was limited. As one participant said ‘it was so clear that everything happened outside ... I said I am wasting my time ... it might be useful to rally people, get them motivated ... but it was all really decided before’ (interview, local coalition participant 2, 2005). While the Assembly was an attempt to include greater participation,

its effectiveness was confronted with a perpetual tension between the need for the coalition to be simultaneously accountable to organisations and to participants; the dilemma of achieving organisational unity while respecting the involvement of growing numbers of new participants.

The implementation of the plan saw the escalation and creation of a Medicare ‘social movement’ across the Province between March and May 2002 (interview, union participant 1, 2005). During that period the number of local groups grew enormously, from approximately 15 planning meetings in January to over 53 coordinated canvas operations by the end of May (OHC 2002b; OHC 2002e). The movement was most active in regional towns, where the small local coalitions could coordinate ‘door knocking campaigns of every house’ (OHC 2002j). The coalitions sustained volunteer participation through a structure of sub-groups that maximised participation; local coalitions divided volunteers into groups who organised publicity, outreach and logistics for the canvas (interview, local coalition participant 2, 3, coalition participant 2, 2005). Campaign offices were established, often in local union halls to give people easy access to the campaign, and retired volunteer coalition activists and union book offs worked full-time as coordinators (interview, coalition participant 2, 4, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Having local coalitions operate as relatively autonomous campaigns allowed the coalition to balance and accommodate the sometimes parochial will of the local groups. For instance, as a Kingston activist described ‘Kingston is very independent ... people regularly changed campaign materials if they came from Toronto ... they really wanted to have control of the campaign’ (interview, local coalition participant 1, 2005).

Union participation in the local canvases was somewhat limited, as engagement in coalition activities was more focused in union offices than in union workplaces. In the local coalitions, union engagement was greatest at a leadership level. Where there was some bridge building between a union and a coalition, for instance through an active union co-chair or regular union participation in the coalition meetings, then engagement

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Book offs’ refer to union member activists who are taken off the job by the union at full pay to allow them to organise for the coalition.

was amplified. For instance, in Durham and Kingston, union bridge builders connected the coalition to workplace activists (interview, local coalition participant 1, 5, 2005). Yet, where there was no strong union participants in the local coalition, such as in Brampton, union engagement was extremely limited (interview, local coalition participant 4, 2005; 5, 2006). Generally, local union support was resource-based, ‘they gave us money, they put some staff on full time release to support the canvas and union staff gave time to the local committee’ (interview, local coalition participant 1, 2005) However support ‘didn’t go deep’ to union activists or members (interview, coalition participant 2, 4, 6, 2005). Sometimes that engagement was self-selecting, where ‘busy union activists’ were unable to participate (interview, local coalition participant 1, union participant 2, 2005), and other times it was blocked, such as one book-off volunteer not being given permission to call through a union list to try and find volunteers for the canvas (local coalition participant 2, 2005).

Union engagement was assisted by a dedicated union campaign track, where awareness materials were distributed internally within health care unions. This involved health care committees planning the distribution of materials and organising for petitions to be signed within hospitals. However, like the local coalition campaigns, these events were only successful where there were already engaged health care activists, and in those cases, interested unionists focused on the local coalition canvas which had the greatest number of volunteers and local momentum (interview, local coalition participant 5, union participant 2, 2005). Indeed, as several union Administrative Committee members made clear in interviews, while ‘we used every opportunity to push those issues ... we are focused on bargaining (interview, union participant 2, 2005).

The campaign also had a parallel National track that sought to influence the national Royal Commission. The Canadian Health Coalition (CHC) provided in principle support to a national canvas and lawn sign campaign, endorsed at a national conference in October 2002 (CHC 2001a). However, the national campaign was not implemented until after Ontario’s campaign ‘was well under way’ (interview, coalition participant 2, 2005). The national campaign built through peer-to-peer contacts from Ontario to other

Provinces, ‘we are all on email together anyway so people were requesting materials and designs ... it ended up being a national campaign pushed from the Provinces’ (interview, coalition participant 2, 2005).

In addition to the local canvases, there were two Province-wide events – a rally at the Royal Commission hearings in Toronto and a National Medicare Day rally in May. These events were ‘energising’ for participants, but both quite small, and the second received little media. It was local coalition activities on the same day that got the greatest media attention (DailyMercury 2002; Muhtadie 2002).

Coalition representatives agreed that the campaign was a successful sustained mobilisation that shifted the terms of the Royal Commission, and contributed to its strong statements in support of universal access to Medicare (interview, coalition participant 1, 2, union participant 1, 2, 3). The numbers speak for themselves: the coalition collected over 200 000 signatures of petitions, door knocked over 250 000 houses and organised 57 municipal councils to pass supportive motions. However, the campaign was more focused on the ‘general message’ of Medicare, than any specifics of the health care industry. The release of the Romanow Report in November was a double-edged sword, opening the door to the privatisation of health care facilities while also closing the door on two-tier health insurance (interview, union participant 1, coalition participant 2). The Coalition moved on to focus on the issue of privatisation and public-private-partnerships for the following four years, having not yet achieved a significant victory to stop it.

#### **4. Comparison and Evaluation**

By comparing the two case studies in light of the elements of community unionism we can both draw out some lessons for coalition success and variation.

Firstly, comparing the relational elements of the coalitions, each of these coalitions were closed, with hand-picked partners. This process of hand-picking organisations restricted some of the potential conflicts over issue selection and cultural differences that often plague more ‘simple coalitions’ (Tattersall 2005). For the Public Education Alliance,

pre-existing ad hoc relations through ‘The Federations’ meetings meant the organisations were familiar with each other, and for the health coalition, the coalition’s long history established familiarity. Each of the coalitions underwent structural change and capacity building before embarking on these successful campaigns. Each of the coalitions operated for a period with a separate coalition office – the Vinson Inquiry team and the staff of the OHC provided a separate resource base for the coalition that helped to moderate potential conflicts between groups and allowed the intense activity of the Inquiry and canvas to operate alongside day to day organisational concerns. Also, each of the coalitions was subject to some informal union dominance, often a product of their unequal resource base.

However, relationally there were differences between the coalitions. While each coalition went through preceding, formative structural change, the organisational basis of those changes was different. For the public education campaign, the structural changes were based in the union, and the coalition later evolved specifically as a union-initiated structure. In contrast, for the OHC, while it was union-initiated, it was the structural changes in the coalition itself that changed its organisational capacity. These differences demonstrate some variation over where the coalition’s agency was anchored – for the public education campaign it was anchored in the capacity of the NSWTF, whose organisers and delegates were the key local actors in the later campaign. For the OHC, it was anchored in the capacity of the local coalitions, structures initiated separate to the Provincial coalition partners.

The coalitions’ structural forms were also different. The public education alliance was relatively informal, meeting on an ad hoc basis and did not have dedicated coalition staff. This informality and reliance of the coalition on its participant organisations, particularly the union, meant that there was little autonomy for the ‘coalition’ aside from the organisations. In contrast, the OHC had a very formalised structure – community and union co-chairs, and an equal numbers of community and union representatives on a formal Administrative Committee that met regularly. This difference relates to an obvious structural variation between the coalitions, in that the public education campaign

only had one union in its coalition whereas the OHC six different unions involved. The larger number of participants created a greater role for consensus building at the centre of the OHC. Consequently, the OHC invested in a formal coordinator, a separate coalition office and eventually a large number of local coalitions. It was this relative autonomy and capacity that allowed the OHC to pursue the canvas strategy even without a specific organisation or union willing to commit major resources.

Secondly, comparing the common concern aspects of the coalition there again were some basic similarities, with organisations in each case study having a direct mutual-interest engagement in the issues at the heart of the coalition. This was particularly strong for the unions. Each of these case studies was a defence or attempted expansion of the public sector. It was in this public sector arena that unions and a broader public were able to create a sustained common interest (Johnston 1994; Tattersall forthcoming). The unions were not engaged simply by their altruism, but because they had a direct interest in the development of public education and health care. This direct interest not only created a strong organisational long-term bond with the coalition, but also created a basis on which members could be mobilised. Similarly, community organisations were oriented to the coalition through self-interest. For seniors organisations 'health care is the number one issue because we know that we need it' (interview, coalition participant 5, 2006). There was a variation between the kinds of partners in each study, with the public education campaign focused on allies who were service users (parents), whereas the health campaign's main community constituency was locally based individuals in health coalitions, and the only sustained 'service user' ally was seniors (Tattersall 2006a).

Yet, the case studies varied in their degree of union engagement, mobilisation and commitment. Although health care is broadly an issue of concern for health care unions, Medicare does not directly affect employment conditions. While the union leaders stressed that health care workers have a broad passion for the role of public health institutions, they acknowledge that it is often easier to mobilise members on issues of direct interest such as bargaining (interview, union participant 1, 5, 2006). In contrast, in the public education campaign, there was less of a gap between the political concerns of

public education broadly and the wages and conditions of teachers. The Vinson Inquiry asked parents and teachers to raise issues they were concerned about, which brought issues such as lack of pay to the forefront. Similarly, the negotiated united demands sought to not separate the ‘economic and the political’, raising important conditions such as class-sizes, teacher retention and broader professional issues. Usefully, the main concern of the public education campaign – class-sizes – had a mutual base for both parents and teachers. Consequently, the depth of interest connection played a significant role in assisting union engagement with the public education campaign. However, as the NSWTF tried to connect salaries to the coalition, there was a greater potential for conflict, and an increased need for mutual learning and respect. This issue remained an unsettled tension between parents and teachers, and the teachers unsuccessfully and insufficiently sought to educate the parent groups about the need to connect salaries with coalition campaigning. These difficulties demonstrate the challenges of mutual-self-interest – it is not a simple linear interconnection that develops between organisations and engagement, but a dialectic of organisational autonomy and unity, that requires a process of organisational learning to occur for tension to be managed (Hyman 1989; Obach 2004).

The case studies also provide a comparison in how to frame issues. Each used a broadly positive frame – ‘for’ public education or ‘for’ Medicare. However the transformative breadth of those frames was different. The public education frame was used in the context of a comprehensive research agenda to plan the future of education. Then, during the election campaign, the frame was concretised as six positive demands. These were transformative frames that shifted the basis upon which policy formation was developed. In contrast, while the Medicare campaign was positive, it remained relatively abstract. Medicare usefully connected to individuals, however it related narrowly to health insurance rather than public health policy. The framing issue would always be difficult for the OHC, because focusing on the health system rather than Medicare would have reduced personal impact of the campaign (interview, union participant 4, 2005). However, unfortunately the Medicare frame did not provide a mechanism to transform the way in which health policy was formed or to establish a positive policy agenda for

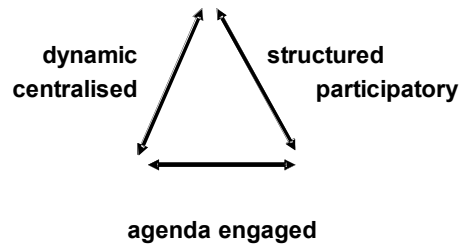
health care. Nor did it interrupt the Government's agenda for the privatisation of hospitals that later became a focus of the OHC (interview, coalition participant 2, 2006).

Finally, in terms of the spatial dimensions, both of the case studies demonstrate the important role of political opportunities for creating coalition success (Tarrow 1994; Turner forthcoming). In Canada, it was the opportunity of a Royal Commission that helped build commitment to the Medicare campaign, and also created an opportunity to successfully gain a policy commitment to universal insurance. In Australia, the absence of a government inquiry pushed parents and teachers to create an opportunity of their own through an Independent Inquiry. However, this Inquiry was not abstracted from the external political structure as it was organised to coincide with the electoral cycle, with its reports and the Public Education Alliance's campaign designed specifically to influence the election outcome.

Both case studies similarly used multi-scalar coalition structures. The OHC's broker organisations came from within the coalition, with local coalitions cultivated to undertake locally based canvases, which combined, created activity that acted at the scale of the province. It was these local coalitions that provided the movement capacity for the coalition at its peak, as they enabled individual volunteers to play an active role in coalition activities as well as organisations. However, as local coalitions developed, a tension between centralised organisational decision making and local participation in campaign planning did arise. In addition, the OHC was able to push outwards through other provincial coalitions to support a national campaign. The public education campaign both engaged the local public education lobby groups, and deeply relied on the internal decentralised structures of the NSWTF to mobilise at both the local and state scales. It was the union's restructure, commitment, and its large number of regional organisers, teacher associations and school based delegates that created its multi-scalar activity. Usefully, the comparison highlights multiple routes to multi-scalar coalition capacity, either through multi-scalar coalition structures established and resourced by a coalition office; or through a multi-scalar organisation, such as a union, externalising its structures in support of a coalition's campaign (Tattersall 2006a).

These two case studies were different but successful examples of community unionism. The comparison highlights that their success relied on each of them harnessing a spatial capacity, while the Australian case study had a strong common concern engagement and the Canadian case study had a strong set of organisational relations. Not only does the comparison highlight that the three elements of community unionism usefully explore the pattern of community unionism success, but the comparison also demonstrates how the elements can vary. If we plot the three elements onto a triangle, these two case studies can be understood to run on two alternative axes.

**Figure 3: Types of Community Unionism**



Thus one type of community unionism, evident in the public education campaign, features strong multi-scalar capacity and common concern but a weaker set of organisational relations. Using the axes, this form of community unionism could be labelled ‘agenda engaged’ community unionism, where a coalition’s capacity to create a transformative agenda and act at multiple levels are its key features.

A second type of community unionism, evident in the OHC, features a strong multi-scalar capacity and a strong set of organisational relationships but a weaker form of common interest. Again, using the axes of community unionism, this could be labelled ‘structured participatory’ community unionism, where the coalition’s capacity to engage a broad number of organisations, and campaign at multiple scales are its key features.

These types of community unionism attempt to place analytical categories on actual existing community unionism practice, to highlight their strengths and weaknesses. These categories could possibly be used to categorise and measure coalition practice more broadly. For instance, the characteristics of agenda-engaged community unionism look similar to the union dominated, but social movement qualities of some of the US Justice for Janitors campaigns (Savage 1998). The ‘structured participatory’ community unionism of the OHC shares similarities with the brief, multi-scaled capacity of the Walk against the War coalition and local peace groups in NSW (Tattersall forthcoming b).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to introduce a series of analytical concepts into scholarship on coalitions and community unionism. It seeks to demonstrate how common concern, organisational relationships and spatial dimensions are important variables for understanding coalition success. However, I do not argue that these elements are black and white factors achieved by a certain standard of practice, rather I argue that each are variable elements whose variation affects coalition success and sustainability.

There is an intimate connection between the success of community unionism and the source of power that coalitions provide unions. At the beginning, I outlined four forms of power that community unionism offers unions – instrumental power, legitimising power, relational power and the power to renew. The basic forms of instrumental and legitimising power were clear in these case studies, with the NSWTF acting as part of a public education community through an inquiry and campaign for reduced class sizes, and the health care unions defending the role of public health care in unity with a broader constituency of community organisations and volunteers.

However, each of these case studies varied in terms of the sustainable relationships they build and the impact they had on the unions. The OHC more successfully created a framework for deep organisational relationships. The formal structure and independent coalition office allowed the OHC to broker relationships and manage potential conflict between the organisations. For the public education campaigns, the coalition was more a

sum of its parts, without the relative autonomy of a separate coalition office assisting to manage inter-organisational conflict. Yet, the opposite is true when it comes to the impact that these coalitions had on the participating unions. The common interest connection and decentralised union structure of the NSWTF created a deeper connection to the public education campaign, and it was the union's involvement that was critical to the campaign's success. In the OHC, the union engagement was less deep, relying instead on local coalitions. The greater distance between unions, particularly local unions and the coalition meant that there were fewer opportunities for impacting the unions through the Medicare campaign (Tattersall 2006a).

This paper has argued that coalitions are strategic actors, whose organisational relationships, common interest engagement and spatial capacity vary significantly, and vary the form of community unionism. By identifying a series of analytical concepts that explore this variation, this paper aims to contribute to scholarship that identifies and measures the elements that support coalition, and community unionism success.

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