Thinking strategically in Federal policy: defining the attributes of high-level policies

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Abstract

Governments frequently develop policies that are strategic in nature. Strategic issues at the national level are those requiring long time-frames for impact, coordinated approaches across multiple tiers of government, are cross-sectoral and require systemic approaches to design and implementation. Yet the process for how national strategic policies are developed and implemented in Australia is unclear, and largely unattended in the literature. This paper provides a foundation to understanding the characteristics of strategic policies and approaches to their development. Five national policies are compared (National Competition Policy, National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development, the Strategic Roadmap for Australian Research Infrastructure, Australia in the Asian Century and the National Food Plan) and discussed. An analytical framework is constructed and key attributes of strategic policy identified.

Keywords: Strategic policy, strategic policy attributes, strategic policy development, metapolicy, policy comparison.

1. Introduction

Governments frequently invest considerable time and resources in developing policies that are strategic in nature, variously titled as ‘frameworks’, ‘strategies’, ‘plans’, ‘initiatives’, ‘roadmaps’, ‘agreements’ or ‘arrangements’ (Pittock et al. 2015). Strategic policies seek to address problems such as those relating to climate change, water reform, national

productivity, sustainability, health, regional development and disaster management. How these policies are developed, framed and implemented is however variable and unclear.

Strategic policies are poorly defined in the literature (Nicklin 2012). This study undertakes a foundational step in identifying the characteristics of 'strategic policies', by illuminating the attributes of 'strategic policies', thereby creating opportunities for further critique and analysis of this policy category. A sample of established (> 20 years since formulation) and more recent policies (< 5 years) are assessed to give definition to strategic policies. The term 'strategic' in this paper refers not to national defense and security policy matters as is commonly applied, but rather to a macro-level, framing or guiding policy (See for example Coffey 2013; Nicklin 2012).

Strategic policies at the national scale share many of the following attributes:

- (i) Targeted at cross-sectoral issues, applying across society and the economy;
 - (ii) Pertain to problems that generally exhibit characteristics of wicked problems. The nature of the problem may be contestable, and resolution is impacted by multiple interdependencies with potential for unseen consequences (Australian Public Service Commission 2007) and span beyond the control of government alone;
 - (iii) Systemic approaches to policy development are required but are difficult to achieve given the need for adaptive governance and social learning approaches (Ison et al. 2012). Multi-criteria analyses, identification of tradeoffs, articulation of uncertainties and vigorous stakeholder engagement processes (Walker 2000) are required;
 - (iv) They require sustained, long-term implementation timeframes (Marsh 1999; Kiser & Ostrom 2000) over multiple electoral cycles (Blanchard 2010);
 - (v) Implementation typically requires both horizontal and vertical policy integration (Pittock et al. 2015). Bipartisan political support as well as endorsement by State and Territory governments is often required, with requisite funding, reporting and review arrangements;
- and

(vi) Strategic policies generally signal emerging matters of national significance, and are thus typically principles-based, with the detail of implementation being left to a hierarchy of subsidiary policies, programs or plans as a means to legitimate the strategic policy (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Schematic of National Water Initiative As a Strategic Policy and Its Relationship to Subsidiary Policies

A description of strategic policy attributes and analysis is lacking in the public policy literature. Pittock et. al (2015) provide an introduction to the characteristics of strategic policies. Stewart (2004) identifies that strategic management in the public sector is poorly represented by theory and that it is unclear how strategic frameworks inform policy and management activity, but notes that strategic approaches are required to resolve problems identified as challenging or require change.

Strategy is discussed in the context of business and management practice, with some clear overlaps in attributes. Liedtka (Liedtka 1998) for example identifies that strategic thinking has elements of systems perspectives, nimbleness to intelligently stray from the strategy when needed and to be guided by an informed sense of the future. A deeper analysis of the

management literature may provide insights that better inform strategic policy design and implementation.

Strategic plans (McMahon & Phillimore 2013) are differentiated from strategic policies in that strategic plans are administrative tools. They serve as a coordination and reporting tool across all or most government agencies and departments. Strategic policies on the other hand are thematic, they apply to topics related to particular problem areas such as water, climate change, industry policy etc. An agency developing a strategic policy may ordinarily have to comply with the respective governments strategic plan at an operational level, in much the same as it would need to meet financial accountability reporting for example.

Here, following a clarification of terms and concepts, a comparison of five strategic policies is conducted and a heuristic presented to better understand the diverse nature of strategic policies.

2. Strategic policy as a high-level metapolicy

Strategic policies share attributes that are common to ‘metapolices’, a term that has evolved in meaning from its origins and is applied inconsistently. Dror defines metapolicy as “policies on how to make policies” referring to “the characteristics of the policy-making system including structure, processes, patterns, personnel, inputs and stipulated outputs” (Dror 1970b, p.1). Dror further defines ‘megapolicy’ as “strategies, overall goals, basic assumptions, conceptual frameworks, policy instruments and similar into policy directives” (Dror 1970b, p.2) which are noted as “belonging to the level of metapolices” (Dror 1970a, p.143). Both metapolicy and megapolicy in their original context represent *approaches* to policy formation.

More recent use of the term metapolicy infers an *ideology* for achieving desired outcomes such as decentralization (Hupe 1990) or privatization (Greenaway et al. 2004). These

contemporary applications have some commonality to strategic policy attributes such as being cross-sectoral, high-level, principles-based policy statements. However they need not be systemic in reach, nor complex (but possibly complicated), and may be implemented in relatively short periods of time with clear implementation pathways.

Strategic policy can be considered a particular type of metapolicy in the contemporary application of the term. Strategic policies pertain to *issues of national importance* such as welfare, health, education or environment. While defense issues are often coined as ‘strategic matters’ in national policy discourse, it is not considered as ‘strategic policy’ as defined by the attributes of strategic policy above, on account that in Australia’s federated system, defense is exclusively a Commonwealth government responsibility.. State and Territory governments are not required to develop their own subsidiary defense policies to meet national defense objectives. This is not to say that defense issues are not complex, nor that they are devoid of State or Territory collaboration.

It is not the intent of this paper to rule in what is strategic policy and what is not. Rather, it is to provide an opportunity to open up scrutiny of this policy category given that governments have, and will continue to, develop and implement policies that share many of the attributes that define a ‘strategic’ approach to policy.

Figure 1 presents a heuristic of the relationship between strategic policies and lower-order policies, noting that the hierarchical relationships are not always clearly delineated nor always present. Neither are the drivers for strategic policies always evident but generally they are conceived because of external pressures. For example the National Water Initiative (NWI) was stimulated through the need for liberalising water trade, hastened by the urgency of severe drought, catalyzed through the National Competition Policy (NCP) as depicted in Figure 1. Australia’s pursuit of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) was driven by international policy advance. Pittock et. al (2015) suggest that strategic policies can be nested,

with ESD being a higher-order strategic policy under which climate change adaptation and water reform sit as sibling strategic policies.

Figure 1. Schematic of National Water Initiative as a strategic policy and its relationship to subsidiary policies.

The difference between strategic policies and subsidiary policies and programs is that the latter focus on sectoral elements of the higher-order strategic policy, with detailed implementation pathways. The development of lower-order policies may take several years to materialise, with the potential risk that with the passage of time, the original objectives of the higher-order policy may be forgotten or at best notionally referenced (e.g. ESD, below). What is not clear is whether the relationship is always a top-down hierarchical model of policy formulation or whether a suite of pre-existing subsidiary policies can alert policy makers to the need for a higher-order, coordinating strategic policy.

3. Strategic policy comparison

The processes for strategic policy formulation, design and implementation lack exploration in the literature. Strategic policies are formulated by government through diverse processes including by committee, green and whitepaper processes, stakeholder engagement, expert panel or a combination of these. The rationale for why one approach is chosen over another is unclear and, as noted later, may have little consequence for implementation.

Systemic relationships are inherent in strategic policies and they need to be made and adjusted with constraints in time and under imperfect knowledge, ripe for a ‘muddling through’ approach (Lindblom 1959). But the attributes of strategic policy demand closer attention to more systematic and deliberative approaches to policy formulation. Questions of ‘who’ ‘what’ ‘why’ ‘when’ and ‘where’ require due consideration but are not always evident.

A strategic approach demands clarity on who is responsible for what, a clear articulation of the policy objectives and intended benefits and clarity on monitoring, review and implementation mechanisms.

A well considered policy implementation framework can clarify responsibilities within government and across tiers of government with due regard to the principles of subsidiarity (Fenna & Hollander 2013) and governance. In the case of national scale governance, there is a need for the state in functions of meta-governance including goal setting, coordinating implementation across jurisdictions, information provision and resourcing implementation (Bell & Quiggin 2008).

A sample of policies are compared below: a framework policy (National Competition Policy), a strategy (National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development), a roadmap (Strategic Roadmap for Australian Research Infrastructure), a whitepaper (Australia in the Asian Century) and a plan (the National Food Plan). While these policies share many of the attributes of strategic policy, they also represent diversity in the problems being addressed, span a mix of new and old policies, and reflect different impeti and formulation approaches. The number and diversity are deemed sufficient for an initial exploration.

The characteristics for comparison draw upon Stewart and Ayres (2001) and Hupe (1990), focusing on: (i) the drivers for policy formulation, (ii) policy focus, (iii) target audience, (iv) consideration of systemic relationships, (v) endorsing agency, (vi) consideration of institutional arrangements for implementation, (vii) incentives for implementation, (viii) stakeholder engagement during formulation, (ix) policy champions, and (x) review processes.

National Competition Policy (NCP)

The NCP is a principles-based framework. It had a singular, though broad ranging objective of promoting and enhancing competitive forces in the Australian economy, to increase

economic efficiency and productivity and produce benefits for community welfare and living standards (Hilmer et al. 1993). A key target for NCP was the systematic review of government legislation at all tiers of government, and the dismantling of government monopolies (Banks 2012; Althaus 1996).

Competition policy remains an active policy arena nationally as evidenced by the most recent review (Harper et al. 2015). Its ongoing success (Banks 2012; Harris 2014) can be attributed to establishment and ongoing political support of institutions for negotiation through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the COAG Reform Council; research and advisory functions in the National Competition Council (NCC); consumer law regulated and reviewed by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) and legal review functions residing within the Australian Competition Tribunal. At the jurisdictional level, each State and territory established its own Competition Policy Unit to coordinate the implementation of NCP obligations (Deighton-Smith 2001).

Implementation was underpinned through binding agreements between the Commonwealth and jurisdictional governments, linked to tranche payments to the States (Hollander 2006) amounting to \$16 billion to 2005 (Deighton-Smith 2001). Adopting a principles-based approach allowed governments to incorporate local needs and priorities (Hollander 2006; Hilmer et al. 1993; Productivity Commission 2005). Bipartisan support politically and between Commonwealth and States was an important factor in ongoing implementation and changes to competition policy.

NCP was established through a consultative process with governments and industry (Hilmer et al. 1993) which ensured implementation was a shared responsibility (Deighton-Smith 2001). NCP implementation was driven by the presence of policy champions and risk takers (Harris 2014) and having undergone several reviews exhibited the capacity for adaptation and incorporation of learning. Hollander and Curran (2001) for example, note that with

subsequent reviews of NCP, environmental factors were included, notably reforms in water trade and pricing driven by a looming ecological crisis in the Murray-Darling Basin. Finally, NCP owes its success to its comprehensiveness (Harris 2014) with only a few sectors remaining immune from competitive forces.

Despite its successes, competition policy initially failed to consider the systemic relationships of economic activity on the environment. Foremost amongst this is the impacts of liberalisation of the electricity grid. While the formation of a national electricity grid is recognized as an unexpected benefit from competition policy, the resultant decrease in electricity prices increased electricity consumption, dominated by coal-fired power generation, and a subsequent rise in greenhouse emissions (Hollander & Curran 2001).

National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSED)

The NSED was endorsed by COAG in 1992 following an extensive consultation phase with government, community and business representatives. It owes its genesis to the global sustainability agenda driven by the World Conservation Strategy and consequent National Conservation Strategy for Australia, and most significantly the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (Commonwealth of Australia 1992).

The NSED was informed by reports from ten widely representative sectoral working groups and a further intersectoral report, all overseen by three eminent Chairs. An intergovernmental ESD Steering Committee (ESDSC) was established to consider the recommendations within these eleven reports to provide advice to Commonwealth Heads of Government. A draft strategy was released for a two month public comment period prior to finalisation (Commonwealth of Australia 1992).

The NSED has clearly stated, high-level objectives and guiding principles accompanied by more detailed sectoral and intersectoral objectives and deliverables. The strategy was “to play

a critical role in setting the scene for the broad changes in direction and approach that governments will take to try to ensure that Australia's future development is ecologically sustainable (Commonwealth of Australia 1992, p.14)". Despite this ambition, it lacked an implementation pathway and the responsibility for monitoring implementation was notionally assigned to the ESDSC which was short lived. The lack of institutional arrangements necessary to manage such a significant change in the direction of Australia's future and the minimalist consideration for monitoring, suggests that systemic relationships were not considered at a cross-sectoral level. Perhaps not surprisingly, political support for implementation was short lived (Harris & Throsby 1997, p.13) given the enormity and ambiguity of the policy challenge.

Legislatively, the promotion of ecologically sustainable development at the national level rests primarily within the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act* (1999) administered by a federal environment agency that constitutionally has limited powers to manage natural resources (Hollander 2010) and lacks policy power within the hierarchy of public sector agencies (Dovers 2002; Vernon 1996).

Despite a lack of political support, sustainable development occasionally emerges from periods of policy dormancy (Holden et al. 2014) as evidenced by the Australian Government's first and only Sustainable Australia Report (National Sustainability Council 2013), published twenty one years after the NSESD. Over this period, only one formal assessment of ESD implementation by government has occurred, undertaken by the Productivity Commission (1999) following in the footsteps of an inquiry in to ecologically sustainable land management (Industry Commission 1998). The PC review pointed to a number of weaknesses in ESD implementation, recommending improvements in cross-government coordination mechanisms, enhancements in cross-agency policy integration and formulation and improved audit and evaluation capability (Productivity Commission 1999). There remains no policy framework that promotes a sustainable development agenda

(Productivity Commission 1999) and only vague inclusion of ESD in State and Federal policies and legislation.

Australia in the Asian Century (AAC)

The AAC whitepaper was released in October 2012 by the Gillard Labor government and was developed by a committee chaired by former Treasury Secretary, Ken Henry. The paper is framed predominantly within an economic development paradigm with scant coverage of environmental (Gittins 2012) social or cultural contexts.

It is somewhat unique amongst Australian government whitepapers in that no opportunity was provided for public submission through a prior green paper. It was endorsed, as submitted, as the government's policy position on Asia (Jennings 2012). The AAC whitepaper is promoted not as an Australian government initiative but rather a policy of the Labor Government (Australian Government 2012, p.iii) indicating a party-political positioning rather than a bipartisan policy. It was promptly ignored by the incoming Abbott Liberal government in 2013.

The policy is a cross-sectoral attempt to connect with a growing Asia on aspects as diverse as human and capital resources, in institutions, cultural links, skills and education, taxation and regulatory reforms, and security. The whitepaper was an umbrella strategy beneath which were to be respective country-specific strategies (See for example the China Country Strategy - Australian Government 2013a). The National Security Strategy (Australian Government 2013c) and the National Food Plan (Australian Government 2013b) are positioned as policies nested under the higher-order AAC whitepaper. Specific deliverables in the policy were a scattering of pre-existing and new initiatives, some unfunded and lacking commitments by State and Territory programs.

Strategic Roadmap for Australian Research Infrastructure (SRARI)

The SRARI (Australian Government 2011) is explicitly a national strategy pertaining to research infrastructure. It was developed through consultation with the research community and through a specialist Expert Working Group. The SRARI draws upon the Strategic Framework for Research Infrastructure Investment, a principles-based framework produced by the National Research Infrastructure Council (NRIC). The NRIC was established in 2009 to provide strategic advice on Australian research infrastructure investment, and disbanded in 2012, giving way to the Australian Research Committee (ARCom), whose functions were to develop a National Research Investment Plan as well as advise on national research infrastructure (Department of Industry n.d.). The SRARI is underpinned by an economic imperative of innovation from which Australia would see productivity and competitiveness advantages from strategic research while addressing national and global challenges (Australian Government 2011). The 2011 roadmap builds upon earlier research infrastructure roadmaps produced in 2006 and 2008, which received investments through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy, the Super Science Initiative and the Education Investment Fund of >\$2 billion. Expenditure was guided by roadmap priorities. The 2011 roadmap comes with no financial commitments noting that “Future funding for national, collaborative research infrastructure will be subject to Australian Government budget decision processes” (Australian Government 2011, p.1). The SRARI recommends that “roadmapping is undertaken approximately every three years” (Australian Government 2011, p.7) though in the absence of any investment streams and thus implementation pathways, this may be a moot exercise. Given that the roadmap identifies strategic impacts across twelve capability areas, a lack of dedicated investments to manage these impacts suggest that the strategic impacts are not significant bottlenecks to Australia’s productivity and competitiveness. The roadmap recognizes that research infrastructure is closely coupled to research support and funding as well as research capacity and skill, but these elements are considered through alternative policy pathways.

National Food Plan (NFP): Our food future

The NFP (Australian Government 2013b), in-part a standalone policy, is presented as a policy nested within the Australia in the Asian Century whitepaper. Its development was informed by the National Food Policy Working Group (Dunn 2010) dominated by representation from the food industry and retail sector. The NFP was pre-empted by a green paper that sought public comment, guided by targeted chapter-specific questions. While this process more typically results in a 'whitepaper', in this case it produced a 'plan'. At the same time, the opening paragraphs of the forward state that the NFP is "a roadmap for the future of Australia's food industry" setting out "a framework that will guide the food industry, the community and governments for years to come" (Australian Government 2013b, p.3).

The objectives of the NFP while multifaceted are superficial in their assessment of the challenges that face the food and agriculture sector. For example, the Victorian Food Supply Scenarios (Larsen et al. 2011) suggest considerable challenges arise to food production from global changes including climate change, peak oil and phosphorus and increasing population growth. The NFP while cognizant of these challenges assumes an optimistic outlook to 'feeding Asia' based on aspirations rather than in-depth analysis.

The NFP clearly has ambitions to reap economic rewards from a growing Asia to assist Australia's economic growth. The dominance of a duopoly in the retail food sector (Validakis 2012), concerns about Australia's food processing capacity (Balinski 2012) and the variability of Australia's climate are flagged as issues requiring further policy development, currently lacking in the NFP.

Like the AAC whitepaper, the NFP was set aside by the Abbott Liberal government in 2013. While the NFP was developed through a consultative process with community, industry and government, this did not guarantee it political longevity, being dismissed in under one year from its public release. It too was promoted as a Gillard Government plan (Australian Government 2013b, p.3) rather than an Australian Government plan.

The NFP was broader than the needs of the agriculture sector alone, with sixteen goals being identified as priorities for investment in the food system to 2025. The long-term goals were to be achieved by short-term five-year goals with statements identifying implementation pathways, with five yearly reviews.

The plan recognized that food production is intrinsically linked to matters of health and nutrition, resource use, regional employment, infrastructure and international development. However, it is not evident how the NFP was to influence decisions of portfolio agencies with responsibilities in these domains (e.g. health, environment, foreign affairs, industry). The NFP identifies billions of dollars of investment towards implementing the NFP but the financial commitments are a mixture of existing commitments, such as \$30.4 billion for a national broadband network, or commitments that could potentially be supported regardless of a strategic NFP. For example, \$411 million was to be invested in 2013/14 for improving global food security, but this may well be a pre-commitment under the Official Development Assistance budget. What constitutes new funding commitments and what are pre-existing commitments outside of a strategic approach is unclear.

Table 1 presents a comparative summary of the five strategic policies reviewed, from which a heuristic is presented to shed light on strategic policies.

Table 1. Comparative summary of strategic policy types

	NCP	NSED	AAC	SRARI	NFP
Formulation year	1993	1992	2012	2011	2013
Principles based	Yes	Yes but includes sectoral deliverables	A mix of principles and specific deliverables	Yes	Primarily principles-based
Policy driver (catalyst)	Enhance economic efficiency and productivity	Global sustainability awareness	Economic opportunism	Increasing productivity from R&D investments	Economic productivity

Focus	To improve community welfare and enable broader social and economic goals.	Sustainable development tempered by economic imperatives	A vision towards economic prosperity by capitalising on a growing Asia	Innovation in order to respond to national and global challenges	Predominantly to grow economy and increase value of food exports
Target audience	State and territory governments	Primarily Australian governments but participation urged from all Australians	Wide ranging and unstructured – articulated through ‘pathways’	Research sector	Support to the agri-food business sector
Systemic considerations	Limited consideration initially, environmental and energy policy considerations included later through NCP reviews	Not considered at the higher order strategy. Detail in sectoral and inter-sectoral reports	No clarity of how implementation pathways were singled out	Investments in research infrastructure considered in isolation to research capacity and funding	Emphasis on business sector development with limited consideration of environmental and social constraints
Endorsing agency	CoAG	CoAG	Labor government only	Not evident apart from approval by Labor party when in government	Not evident apart from approval by Labor party when in government
Institutional arrangements	Well considered, including legislation, oversight mechanisms, incentives and reviews	Poorly considered, defaulting to federal environment portfolio	A mix of existing funded initiatives interspersed with unbudgeted ‘policy announcements’	Little to no consideration	Central coordination through food council & five-yearly state of food systems report
Implementation incentives	Tranche payments to State and Territory governments totalling \$16B	No coordinated investments or efforts - disaggregated to sectoral subordinate policies	Aspirational targets identified but no articulation of budget requirements or lead responsibilities	Subject to un-prescribed budget decisions	Significant financial apportionments - not clear which are new commitments and which are existing commitments

Stakeholder engagement at inception	Extensive over 2 years with representative stakeholders	Extensive over 2 years with representative stakeholders	Confined only to formulation by expert committee	Limited to research community. States excluded	Public contributions sought through Green Paper
Policy champions	Bipartisan and multijurisdictional support	Hawke government with support from industry and NGOs	Gillard government	Gillard Government	Labor party with retail sector support
Inbuilt policy review	Yes. Varying elements listed for review with a notional role for NCC	Yes but never implemented	None	Every three years	Every five years

4. Towards a strategic policy heuristic

The descriptors ‘whitepaper’ ‘plan’ ‘roadmap’ ‘strategy’ and ‘framework’ are generic and interchangeable and do not communicate any specific intent. For example the NFP is a “roadmap for the future of Australia’s food industry” providing a “framework that will guide the food industry, the community and governments for years to come” (Australian Government 2013b, p.3). Similarly, NCP is described as a “framework of principles, processes and institutional structures” (Hilmer et al. 1993, p.v). The NSESD “sets out the broad strategic and policy framework under which governments will cooperatively make decisions and take actions to pursue ESD in Australia” (Commonwealth of Australia 1992, p.17).

The above policies are oriented towards economic ideals of prosperity, growth or productivity. The target audience for the policies is quite variable and generally vague with the exception of NCP, which was targeted towards State and Federal government legislation. The NSESD identified many prospects for subsidiary policy but lacked implementation specificity to the point where subsidiary policies, if pursued, lacked coordination or

prioritisation. Principles-based approaches may well be advantageous in that they offer flexibility for implementing parties. Correspondingly, lack of clarity of implementation pathways and institutional considerations present opaqueness for implementing parties and a convenient opportunity for governments or agencies within them to withdraw from a policy.

NCP stands out in terms of reaching a balance between flexibility and mandating delivery (Curran & Hollander 2002). Institutional mechanisms and incentives are a key element of the policy, while allowing flexibility for each jurisdiction in undertaking reforms. Policies such as AAC are vague in their audience and identifying pathways for implementation. However, country-specific strategies, like the China Country Strategy (Australian Government 2013a) provide insights to the types of initiatives that would give effect to the AAC, but require long timeframes for policy development that are inconsistent with the vagaries of budget and electoral cycles and party-political preferences.

While the five policies share the attributes of strategic policies, a heuristic is presented below to explore the differences between them, drawing upon mechanisms for policy development and implementation, clarity of objectives, consideration of systemic relationships, resourcing implementation and legislative underpinnings.

Policy catalyst and implementation

In general, strategic policies are developed due to a stimulus that may have historical build-up, with the exception of AAC, which appears to be based on capitalising on an Asian economic boom. A majority of the policies have sought input from stakeholders during development but the level of engagement is variable, ranging from lengthy and rigorous consultative processes with political, industry and community representation (e.g. NCP, NSESD) to limited engagement only with those most impacted (e.g. SRARI). In the case of AAC, there appears to have been no consultation either with Australian or Asian

stakeholders; the policy being developed by an independent committee and then endorsed by government.

Extensive community consultation nor COAG endorsement are not necessarily a factor for policy success. Both NCP and NSESD were developed after significant and wide-ranging consultation including final endorsement by COAG, yet implementation of NSESD has been found wanting (Productivity Commission 1999). Agreement by State and Territory governments is not always sought on national policies, even where State and Territory collaboration is instrumental in effective policy implementation, such as in building and maintaining national research infrastructure or in food policy.

One can assume that strategic policies are of national interest – otherwise why have them? They are developed in response to perceived national need, and so the absence of a response would presumably result in a loss of social, environmental or economic productivity or welfare or failure to seize opportunities. If this is indeed the case, endorsement by State and Territory governments should be (a) mandatory if considering implementation pathways and (b) require multi-jurisdictional agreements given Australia's federated system and limited policy levers at the federal level on cross-cutting issues. Apart from NCP, none of the other policies considered have binding commitments upon any tier of government. In Australia's federated system, this indicates a weakness in the way strategic policies are formulated and subsequently implemented.

Australia lacks a systematic and coherent process for developing and implementing strategic policies. Newig and Koontz (2013) discuss a mandated participatory planning (MPP) approach to strategic policy in the European Union. Drawing upon the implementation of the European Water Framework Directive, they describe a top-down policy model of institutionalised participatory planning. MPP mandates the creation of plans, produced at the required level of governance which must be meaningful rather than symbolic.

It is difficult to ascertain how meaningful any of the strategic policies are. NCP is by far the most entrenched policy amongst those compared, suggesting that it is fulfilling national interests, with the most recent review of competition policy occurring in September 2014 (Commonwealth of Australia 2014).

It is possible that not all strategic policies are meant to be implemented. Some may be developed as purely communication tools to test public opinion or signal a national policy preference (e.g. AAC) or appease influential actors (e.g. NFP) or may be party-political posturing rather than truly nation-building policies. Which policies are for what purpose can be difficult to ascertain. Public participation in policy formulation can be trivialised if policies are dissolved upon a change of government (e.g. NFP), leaving open the possibility of apathy or cynicism in subsequent participatory policy approaches.

There are no clearly established intergovernmental institutions for strategic policy development in Australia (see for example Phillimore & Botterill 2014) and the processes for multi-government participation in strategic policy development are weak. The COAG Reform Council, an independent body publicly reporting on COAG reforms, was abolished in the 2014. Further, the timing and content of COAG meetings are at the discretion of the Prime Minister who also controls the secretariat (Phillimore & Botterill 2014) meaning that it is not a collaborative process for national policy setting or negotiation.

Clarity of objectives and purpose

All policies investigated have an underlying imperative to improve notions of 'welfare', 'wellbeing', 'productivity' or 'innovation'. These terms are usually poorly defined and attributing any gains to a specific policy is problematic. Even the NSESD with its strong environmental underpinnings is to be implemented while maintaining Australia's

international competitiveness, using improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms and not unequally burdening any particular regions, sectors or groups.

On the whole, all policies have clearly stated objectives, though they vary from very high-level objectives stated as principles, but in addition may include more prescriptive and specific objectives, usually lacking guidance to inform implementation. For example, the NFP has a prescribed objective to publish a State of the Food System report on a five-yearly basis (Australian Government 2013b, p.11) but no clarity on the implications of not producing such a report for national decision making.

Of the policies reviewed, only the NCP considered implementation pathways in sufficient detail regarding institutions, legislation and incentive mechanisms.

Figure 2: Indicative scatter plot showing relationship between stakeholder representation in policy formulation against clarity of purpose

In Figure 2, we propose that those policies that had stronger stakeholder representation during policy formulation tend to deliver policies that are clearer in their objectives. While difficult to confirm from a small sample size, it can be proposed that stakeholder contribution to policy formulation will sharpen the focus of strategic policies.

Consideration of systemic issues

As policies that seek to establishing 'frameworks', and given the long-term, complex nature of strategic policies, it is argued that strategic policies would benefit from close attention to systemic issues where multiple sectors and inter-linkages are involved.

As reflected in the NFP, the systemic relationships of food production to human health, environment and industry should result in policy congruence amongst those agencies who are mandated to deliver sectoral outcomes. But there are no identifiable mechanisms that influence the decisions of allied government agencies or private sector actors, nor for that matter how lead government agencies are to give effect to the policies. The detail, so necessary for implementation, lacks guiding frameworks and it is proposed that subsidiary policies, programs and projects nested under a strategic policy risk disconnection from the parent policy, or at the least will invariably fail to deliver against the high-level objectives as a result of improper consideration of systemic relationships, or that the objectives are so high-level as to be meaningless for implementation and evaluation purposes.

Government commitment and financial backing

Aside from the NCP, all other policies are vague on committing financial and other resources for implementation. Three of the strategic policies assessed were initiated by the Rudd – Gillard governments, of which two, the AAC whitepaper and NFP were promptly abolished by the Liberal government upon taking power in 2013.

Despite abolishing the AAC, Asia as a region remains a priority for the incumbent Liberal government, represented by engagements with China, Japan and South-East Asia on foreign affairs, trade, energy, defense and immigration. This suggests that strategic objectives can be achieved in the absence of a 'strategic policy'. Thus, the circumstances under which strategic policies are developed appear to be subjective. In the absence of analytical frameworks for strategic policy development and implementation, are strategic government initiatives exposed to policy failures? What implications this has for matters of national importance warrants further investigation.

Legislative underpinnings

None of the policies studied are underpinned by singular legislation although some such as NSESD and NCP, have seen principles embedded in other statutes. The NCP is associated with consumer laws but these are not explicitly to apply the principles of competition policy in their entirety. At the national scale, this may be a result of constitutional limits to federal governance. To this end, that any attempts towards NSESD implementation have been enacted at all is remarkable as the federal government has limited powers over environment and natural resources. Thus, legislation may not be a key factor; rather that appropriate institutions for negotiation and implementation should be in place for participatory governance and deliberation between tiers of government in order to achieve national outcomes. It is postulated that strategic policies occupy a niche where legislation perhaps isn't a key enabling factor and mechanisms for coordination, provision of resources and clarity of purpose being more significant.

Political considerations

Further research is required to validate political dimensions to strategic policy development and implementation. A few observations can be drawn from this initial investigation of past and current policies.

The lack of bipartisan policy support has been mentioned previously as an impediment to policy implementation with both the NFP and AAC policies being retracted under a new Liberal government.

The five policies analysed in this paper have all been initiatives of the federal Australian Labor Party. One observation is that strategic policies by their nature require collaborative approaches to problem resolution. Strategic policies would not be favored by authoritarian governance models.

It is speculated that government's preference strategic policies once they have the benefit of at least one term in government. With the benefit of experience, one may realize that existing problems are inter-related, complex and systemic in nature and require enduring, collaborative arrangements to resolve. An incoming government would want to sure up its political credentials with quick wins, before embarking on problems that have a long-term dimension to them. This suggests at a bottom-up build to strategic policy as represented in figure 1. A top-down approach on the other hand may well be a communication exercise rather than a genuine attempt to address intractable problems.

No doubt that State – Federal action on strategic policies results in implementation effort if the Federal government is prepared to resource implementation including through funding arrangements but also coordinating national action as has happened with NCP, the National Water Initiative and Regional Forest Agreements for example.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides a foundational step in describing policies that set a strategic agenda. Governments frequently develop strategic policies and will continue to do so but the method by which these policies are developed and the driving forces behind them are not well

studied. The comparison of a selection of strategic policies identifies that there is considerable diversity amongst policies even though they share the same broad attributes.

The research identifies that the various titles given to these policies, such as frameworks, plans, strategies etc. do not convey meaning. One could assume that a plan or roadmap would convey a well-structured, systematic course of implementation towards a desired outcome but this is not evident in the NFP. On the other hand, a framework or strategy should identify critical parts of the system that need reform, while leaving the detail to subsidiary policies but in the NSESD, for example, the policy is peppered with specific deliverables amongst high-order principles. Diversity exists in the detail embodied within policies and in the way they are developed and resourced for implementation. Most importantly, as national cross-sectoral policies, the policies reviewed fail to consider effective governance and coordination mechanism for effective implementation, with the exception of NCP. Community engagement, often seen as a critical element for successful policy implementation serves to ensure objectives are clearly defined, but this does not in itself guarantee policy success.

It is postulated that if strategic policies are indeed of critical national importance, then the formulation, content, endorsement and implementation pathways of such policies requires careful consideration (Phillimore & Botterill 2014; Productivity Commission 1999) that befit the attributes including relevance over long-time frames, incorporation of complex and systemic inter-relationships, multiple sectors and adequate consideration of governance arrangements in Australia's federated system (Bell & Quiggin 2008). In the absence of analytical frameworks, it is unclear as to whether the policies are merely communication documents, attempts to test public appetite for reform on particular matters or indeed critical matters of national importance that if not implemented would lead to a decline in productivity or welfare or limit future opportunities. That only the NCP and to a lesser extent the SRARI have been implemented, can it be assumed that national welfare has been compromised by not implementing the NSESD, AAC and the NFP?

A more detailed investigation into a larger suite of strategic policies and their respective reviews or audits would draw out critical parameters for strategic policy development, implementation and success.

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