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Strategic policy, planning and assessment for sustainability: insights from Victoria, Australia

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Purpose

– The purpose of this paper is to assess recent strategic sustainability policy, planning and assessment efforts in Victoria, Australia.

Design/methodology/approach

– An interpretive approach to policy analysis provides the methodological foundation for the analysis. Evidence is drawn from the analysis of policy texts and semi-structured interviews.

Findings

– Sustainability attracted considerable policy attention in Victoria during the first decade of the 21st century, with stated ambitions for Victoria to become “the sustainable state” and “world leaders in environmental sustainability”. In pursuing these ambitions, Victoria's efforts centred on hosting a summit, articulating medium-term directions and priorities, releasing a whole of government framework to advance sustainability, and establishing a Department of Sustainability and Environment, and a Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability. However, the evidence indicates these efforts would have benefited from greater public engagement and input, stronger governance arrangements, and a broader conceptualisation of sustainability.

Practical implications

– The evidence presented highlights the implications associated with efforts to promote sustainability through strategic policy and planning processes.

Originality/value

– This paper provides an informed, yet policy relevant, analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and possibilities associated with pursuing sustainability at the sub-national level. It also highlights the ways in which policy objectives can be frustrated by failing to establish the solid
foundations necessary for building a robust approach to promoting sustainability. The value of progressing sustainability within a strategic improvement cycle is also highlighted.

Introduction

While the need for more sustainable forms of development is largely accepted, the means for bringing about such development remains a considerable challenge. Given the nature of the challenges involved collective action is required across a range of arenas: global, national, subnational, regional, sectoral, organisational, and individual. In relation to government, a core requirement is the establishment of policy frameworks and settings which provide a means for focussing policy attention and promoting more sustainable forms of development. The ongoing legitimacy of “states” can also be expected to be increasingly judged according to the extent that they are environmentally sustainable, in addition to their ability to provide for the economic and social needs of their constituents (Barry and Eckersley, 2005). Hence, there is a considerable need for the development and implementation of policy frameworks and associated processes that promote consideration of sustainability. While action is needed across all the above levels, the focus of this paper is on promoting sustainability at the sub-national level. International organisations such as the OECD provide assistance regarding strategies for promoting sustainable development (OECD, 2002b, c) although it is clear that there is much room for improvement, with the OECD (2002a) highlighting the importance of, among other things:

- a clear, widely accepted and operational definition and goal structure for sustainable development;
- a clear commitment within government at the highest level (with this commitment communicated) throughout the government machinery in order to support the development of a clear strategy;
- this strategy should be enforced by a “focal point” at the centre of government, and non-environmental policy sectors should be mandated to develop their own sectoral strategies in conformity with the overarching goals defined; and
- citizens should be encouraged to engage in decision making (OECD, 2002a, pp. 31-33).

Within this context, the beginning of the twenty-first century saw various state governments in Australia direct considerable attention to articulating the medium term strategic directions and priorities for their jurisdictions, with sustainability a central feature of some of these efforts. Different jurisdictions have embraced different mechanisms, including: the establishment of community based boards, undertaking of widespread engagement processes, establishment of sustainability policy units, and release of strategic plans and frameworks for sustainability. However, the adequacy of such responses is far from clear (Brueckner and Pforr, 2011), which means that there is a need for ongoing experimentation and evaluation of the adequacy of responses implemented. The case of strategic policy, planning and assessment for sustainability in Victoria, Australia, between 1999 and 2010 provides a useful case study, because of the concerted focus on setting broad directions for development. In doing so the intention is not merely to critique the efforts implemented, but to also indicate how they could be improved, and suggest a possible
conceputal cycle that could be used to guide future efforts. The case of Victoria is worthy of investigation in its own right, as well as because the sustainability challenges it faces are similar to those faced by other developed economies.

This paper explores these issues in the following manner: first section outlines key elements associated with strategic policy, planning and assessment for sustainability; second section provides an overview of the major strategic initiatives undertaken by the Victorian Government between 1999 and 2010; third section then provides an assessment of the adequacy of these efforts and suggests lessons to be learnt from the efforts pursued. In doing so, the discussion is arranged around the four major elements of a strategic government approach advocated by Gallop (2007), namely: strategic planning; a whole of government perspective to policy; promotion of sustainability; and public consultation and engagement. While the analysis is focussed on Victoria, the lessons drawn may have wider relevance.

**Strategic policy, planning and assessment for sustainability**

The idea of sustainability provides the dominant frame within which environmental policy is debated. Thus, for many, “sustainability” represents the best way to address the economic, social and environmental effects of the myriad environmental issues facing human societies, including biodiversity loss, soil erosion, pollution of waterways, ozone depletion and climate change. There are, however, widely divergent views advocated as to what sustainability means and what needs to be done to progress it (Dryzek, 2005). Some of the factors which influence what approach to sustainability a government may take include: understanding of the driving forces of issues; the embrace of different discourses and prevailing paradigms; and the comparative weight given to social and economic, compared to, environmental concerns (Yencken, 2002). Importantly, not all approaches to sustainability are equally useful, as is demonstrated by Hopwood and colleagues (2005) who distinguish between approaches which are business as usual, reformist, or transformative. This is further highlighted in Adams (2006, pp. 4-5) discussion of the importance of “integrated”, as opposed to “balanced” approaches to sustainability, because the balanced approach (three pillars model) “implies that trade-offs can always be made between environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability”, which ignores that “the environment underpins both society and economy”. By contrast, integrated approaches make it clear action needs to be undertaken in areas other than the environmental portfolio (Morrison and Lane, 2005) given the recognition that “the environmental sector will not be able to secure environmental objectives, and that each sector must therefore take on board environmental planning objectives if these are to be achieved” (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003, p. 1).

Approaches for promoting sustainability encompass green planning, institutional reform and social mobilisation (Buhrs and Aplin, 1999). Significant academic and policy interest has been directed towards the development of green plans (Kenny and Meadowcroft, 1999; Buhrs, 2000; Johnson, 2008) even though the adequacy of such plans may be contested (Selman, 1999). In a broad sense, green plans are concerned with strategic planning for sustainability, but also provide opportunities for institutional reform and social mobilisation. Development of such plans is viewed as necessary because it is difficult to conceive of sustainability being achieved in the absence of some form of planning (Meadowcroft, 1997). Support for the development of such strategies is forthcoming from
organisations such as the OECD (2002b, c). Furthermore, experience with sustainability policy and planning has progressed to a point where merely supporting sustainability as a general objective and progressing it in an ad hoc manner is no longer credible. For example, the literature highlights the importance of effective integration (Scrase and Sheate, 2002; Buhrs, 2009), institutionalisation (Dovers, 2001) and strategic thinking for sustainable development (Baumgartner and Korhonen, 2010). Put simply, integration requires that the environment is fully considered in all areas of policy and practice, institutionalisation requires that consideration of the environment is embedded in legislation and policy (as well as other institutional settings), and strategic thinking requires that a holistic rather than reductionist approach be embraced. Furthermore, there is growing interest in the design and implementation of mechanisms to actively bring about structural change, as is evident from the interest in “transitions management” (Smith et al., 2005; VoB et al., 2009) and the use of legislated environmental objectives (Edvardsson, 2004), which clarify what is to be achieved, as well as put in place requirements for implementation of sectoral strategies and mechanisms to track progress. This highlights the need for robust approaches to environmental performance review (Hajer, 1992; Rose, 2001) in addition to strategic policy and planning.

Within Australia, green planning has been undertaken at all levels of government, with the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) and Victoria's state conservation strategy Protecting the Environment (Victorian Government, 1987) being prominent examples. Interest in green planning at both national and state level declined in the middle part of the 1990s (Christoff, 1995, 1998; Buhrs and Christoff, 2006; Mercer and Marden, 2006), although re-emerged, at least for a period during the first decade of the twenty-first century. This renaissance occurred under the guise of state strategic planning, with such plans having been developed in Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria (Manwaring, 2010), with Victoria (Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), 2005) and Western Australia (Government of Western Australia, 2003) also releasing standalone whole of government state sustainability plans.

Explanations for this renewed interest have broadly focussed on a desire to overcome the failings of three interrelated agendas: neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005); new public management (NPM) (Hood, 1991; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993); and, managerialism (Considine and Painter, 1997). For Adams and Wiseman (2003, pp. 12-13) this renaissance is associated with three international trends concerning: an increasing recognition of the interdependence of policies; renewed expectations that government has a significant role in meeting the complex challenges of balancing freedom and security; and, the growing disillusionment with managerialism in light of practical experiences. Similarly, Manwaring (2007) aligns these developments with the re-emergence of new social democratic (third way) politics which he argues is an attempt to “re-configure the relationship between the state and wider civil society”, with Giddens (1998) being the most prominent proponent of such a perspective. Relately, Gallop (2007, p. 28) argues that such developments are a response to the failures of NPM, which he sees as a form of public management which embodies “a political economy and a philosophy of market liberalism”.
Gallop (2007, p. 29) considers that the future is to be found in “strategic government” which he argues is:

*[…] not just a renewed belief in the role of the state in our economy and society, but a renewed belief in social change as the desired objective of government action.*

Within this context, strategic government is manifested via a renewed interest in: strategic planning; a wider use of public consultation; a whole of government perspective to public management and policy objectives; and an increasing use of the principle of sustainability (Gallop, 2007). However, this raises the question of the effectiveness of such efforts, and highlights the importance of environmental performance assessment (Hajer, 1992). The compilation of State of Environment (SOE) reports are a prominent mechanism for undertaking such assessments, with these prepared periodically to consider the condition of the environment and report on progress, with such efforts often undertaken with a pressure, condition, response framework, or some variation of it (Yencken and Wilkinson, 2000). The preceding discussion highlights that strategic government provided the opportunity to reinvigorate efforts to promote more sustainable forms of development. Importantly, whether strategic government is a useful means for progressing sustainability at the sub-national level is influenced by the vision of sustainability it deploys and the adequacy of the mechanisms that it supports. Further, it is evident from the literature considered above that sustainability efforts should strategic, integrated, institutionalised, and able to shift the trajectory of development away from less sustainable forms of development.

**Approach to research/study area**

Victoria is a state within Australia’s federal system of government, with the formal distribution of political power articulated in the Australian Constitution. State government’s retain considerable responsibility for environmental matters, by virtue of their residual powers, despite the national government’s financial dominance and the impact of High Court decisions that increase its capacity to act on environmental matters (e.g. through Constitutional levers over external affairs, corporations law, and foreign investment) (Buhrs and Christoff, 2006; Crowley and Walker, 2012). This means that while state governments have considerable policy levers at their disposal, such powers are not limitless, which means that their capacity to promote more sustainable forms of developments is constrained. Nonetheless, the Victorian Government’s efforts between 1999 and 2010 provides an interesting case study in strategic government at the sub-national level. First, the change of government at the 1999 state election has been argued to represent the demise of, or at the very least a desire to move beyond, neoliberalism as an approach to public policy (Wiseman, 2005). This is in stark contrast to the neoliberal approach adopted by the preceding Victorian Government (Alford and O’Neill, 1994; Webber and Crooks, 1996; Zifcak, 1997; Costar and Economou, 1999; O’Neill, 2000). Second, the government was elected with a suite of policies that explicitly drew on ecologically sustainable development (ALP, 1999). Third, Victoria’s environment is degraded and lifestyle unsustainable, with the SOE report (Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability (CES), 2008, p. 3) indicating “Our way of life continues to be maintained and enhanced through the gradual degradation of our natural environment”, and the Premier’s foreword to the statewide strategy for environmental sustainability (DSE, 2005, p. 6) stating “If everyone in the world lived like Victorians we would require four planets”.

An interpretive approach to policy analysis provides the methodological foundation for the analysis. In broad terms, such an approach focusses on the meanings of policies, with Yanow (2000, p. 14) arguing that:

*An interpretive approach to policy analysis then, is one that focusses on the meanings of policies, on the values, feelings, or beliefs they express, and on the processes by which those meanings are communicated to, and “read” by various audiences.*

Further, under such a perspective, “the central question for the interpretive policy analyst is; how is the policy issue being conceptualised or ‘framed’” (Fischer, 2003, p. 143). In broad terms such an approach to policy analysis shifts the focus from a focus on “facts” to a focus on “meanings”, with such meanings having important consequences for the way in which issues are understood and subsequently addressed (Hajer, 1995; Yanow, 2000; Fischer, 2003; Bacchi, 2009).

The major sources of empirical data drawn on are documentary records and 26 semi-structured interviews. The documentary records include: governor's speeches at the opening of parliament; second reading speeches; government policy statements, strategies and associated reports; annual reports; corporate plans; and, media releases. Semi-structured interviews allow respondents to use their own voice to respond to a series of open end questions (Dunn, 2000). All participants interviewed were involved in environmental policy making within Victoria, Australia, between 1982 and 2006, with some involved for the whole period, while others were active at particular times. Interview subjects were selected by purposive sampling (Bryman, 2004) on the basis of the position they occupied. The list of interviews subjects collectively encompassed a range of actor positions (e.g. departmental heads, senior policy advisers, heads of environmental non-governmental organisations, etc.) and a range of areas of environmental policy expertise (e.g. agriculture, water, biodiversity, energy). The interviews, conducted between May 2004 and September 2005, were taped with the permission of interview subjects and then transcribed. The research was conducted with the approval of the relevant university research ethics committee. All participants were provided a plain English summary of the research project and an interview schedule to ensure that they understood the research project and the questions to be asked. Input from interview respondents is indicated by a unique number (e.g. Respondent 24) and presented in italics for clarity.

These two sources of data are complementary in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. Interviews are useful for providing interpretive accounts of policy debates, allow complex questions to be used (because of the presence of the interviewer to clarify issues) and offer flexibility in the way that they are conducted, whereas documentary records represent an authoritative source of information, allow retrospectivity, and are relatively accessible (Sarantakos, 1993). Second, using both policy documents and interviews contributes to a richer appreciation of policy processes (Jacobs, 1999a; Marston, 2000). The data collected was analysed qualitatively using a strategy of identifying insights and themes iteratively through engaging with issues in the literature and a close
reading of the views expressed in the interviews and documents. A full explanation of the approach to research is provided in Coffey (2010).

While a variety of criteria can be used to assess strategic government for sustainability, such as those used by Crowley and Coffey (2007b) this paper focuses on those proposed by Gallop (2007), namely: strategic planning; whole of government approach; approach to sustainability; and public consultation and engagement. In providing the analysis the focus is on strategic policy, planning and assessment for sustainability rather than the politics associated with such an undertaking (Coffey, 2011).

**Victoria’s approach[1]**

This section outlines major elements in Victoria’s approach to strategic policy, planning and assessment for sustainability, namely: release of Growing Victoria Together (GVT) (Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC), 2001); release of Our Environment Our Future (OEOF) (DSE, 2005); establishment of a DSE (Office of the Premier, 2002); and establishment of a CES (Minister for the Environment, 2003). In broad terms: GVT articulated the government's overall priorities (including sustainable development) and approach to governing; OEOF articulated the meaning of sustainability and the strategic directions by which it would be pursued; DSE was responsible for the overall carriage of the government's sustainability agenda; and the CES has responsibilities for assessing the condition of the environment, and hence the government's overall environmental performance.

**GVT: legitimating sustainability**

The Victorian Government’s most significant strategic policy making exercise was GVT, which Adams and Wiseman (2003, p. 11), consider was “developed to guide medium term policy choices, communicate directions to citizens and engage stakeholders to think collaboratively about the future”. Crowley and Coffey (2007a) summarise the core elements of the GVT exercise as including:

- A Summit in March 2000, involving 100 participants from a variety of public, private and community sector organisations.
- Communique, a statement released following the GVT, Summit (DPC, 2000a).
- 12 Months on and Beyond, a progress report released to mark the government's first 12 months in office (DPC, 2000b).
- Growing Victoria Together: Innovative State, Caring Communities (GVT), a major statement of the challenges, vision and priorities for Victoria for the next ten to 15 years (DPC, 2001).
- Growing Victoria Together: A Vision for Victoria to 2010 and Beyond (GVT II), a revision of the GVT (DPC, 2005).
GVT outlines medium term social, environmental and economic goals, and shows how they will be achieved. Sustainability was one of the core policy directions recognised, with “promoting sustainable development” and “protecting the environment for future generations” being two of the strategic issues identified (DPC, 2001, p. 6). As with the other nine strategic issues identified (education, community services, financial management, safety, transport and communications, jobs and industries, communities, and human rights and responsive government) priority actions and progress measures were identified as a way to move the government’s vision into reality.

OEOF: defining sustainability

OEOF was released in April 2005, with the Premier’s foreword stating he was “Making environmental sustainability a priority for our government” (DSE, 2005, p. 6). OEOF represents the most definitive public policy statement on sustainability released in Victoria, since 1987 when the Cain Government released Protecting the Environment: A Conservation Strategy for Victoria (Victorian Government, 1987) and as such represents a significant moment in Victoria’s environmental policy history. It was also accompanied by the release of a Ministerial Statement (Minister for the Environment, 2005). The decision to develop OEOF rested entirely with the government: there was no legislative obligation, national policy framework, or election policy commitment, which required the development of such a policy statement. Physically, OEOF is a 32 page colour booklet with pictures printed on A4 paper in portrait format, and split into distinct sections covering:

1. Outlining the challenge ahead.

2. Explaining what environmental sustainability is and why it is important.

3. Outlining the new approach encompassing three strategic directions:
   - maintaining and restoring our natural assets;
   - using our resources more efficiently; and
   - reducing our everyday impacts.

4. Putting the framework into action (DSE, 2005).
An indication of the government's stated ambition for OEOF was evident in the Premier's statement that “The Framework provides direction for government, business and the community to build environmental considerations into the way we work and live” (DSE, 2005, p. 6). In general, terms, OEOF is a whole of government policy statement that makes the case for environmental sustainability and sets directions for making Victoria more environmentally sustainable. OEOF also includes 13 environmental objectives and a series of interim targets, with this approach having some similarities with the environmental objectives process adopted in Sweden (Edvardsson, 2004). OEOF also indicates that Victoria has a long way to go before being able to claim that it is a sustainable state (DSE, 2005). The definition of sustainability used in OEOF is also that used in the Brundtland report (DSE, 2005, p. 16), rather than the nationally agreed definition of ecologically sustainable development (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992).

**DSE: administering sustainability**

The DSE was established following the 2002 state election, and involved bringing together the state's responsibilities for managing Victoria's natural and built environments to provide a strong policy focus on sustainability as a key objective of government. It was also expected that the department would help to achieve the government's vision of Victoria as a “World leader in sustainability debate and practice” (DSE, 2003, p. 10). This machinery of government reform involved transferring responsibilities for primary industries from the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) to a new Department of Primary Industries (DPI) (with responsibility for agriculture, mining, forestry, and fisheries) and adding the planning portfolio to non-commercial oriented responsibilities of the DNRE (which remained after the establishment of the DPI). The establishment of DSE was justified on the basis that it would “Deliver a systematic and long-term approach to improving the sustainability of the whole state – in the areas of conservation, water, recycling, greenhouse gases, industrial waste and planning” and that it would “Provide a seamless, whole of government approach to ensure the government can achieve its environmental goals into the future” (Office of the Premier, 2002). The establishment of DSE was the first time that “sustainability” featured in the name of a ministerial department within Victoria. Prior to this, “sustainability” (or related terms) had been confined to a division within the DNRE and a policy unit within the Department of Agriculture during the mid to late 1990s. Further, the announcement that the Deputy Premier would also be the Minister responsible for the environment portfolio helped to raise the profile of sustainability issues within the government.

**The CES: accounting for sustainability**

The establishment of an environmental commissioner was one of the then opposition party's commitments in the lead up to the 1999 state election. Once established under legislation, a Commissioner for Ecologically Sustainable Development would be responsible for providing an ombudsman type role for considering public complaints, tabling a SOE report in Parliament (that would review the objective scientific information about environmental quality and the progress made on improvement strategies) and, auditing compliance with environmental legislation (including the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act and native vegetation clearance controls) (ALP, 1999). The context for this initiative was a concern that the neoliberal orientation of the previous government had undermined institutions and processes to protect the environment, and removed environmental safeguards which opened the way for uncontrolled development (ALP, 1999). The
significance of this initiative is highlighted by the fact that the then Premier indicated that his government was prepared to be publicly accountable for its environmental management decisions (DPC, 2000a, b). The establishment of a Commissioner also served to “re-establish” SOE reporting in Victoria, which had been abolished in 1992, along with an administrative body whose functions had some similarity with those of the CES (Christoff, 1998). The first SOE report prepared by the Commissioner was released in 2008 (CES, 2008). The value of having a CES as a statutory body to undertake SOE reporting is that it provides a relatively independent means for regularly and systematically assessing and reporting on the condition of Victoria’s environment and the adequacy of the environmental management measures being implemented (Molesworth, 1998; Rose, 2001).

Assessing the strengths, weakness and implications of Victoria’s approach

**Strategic planning**

Strategic planning involves thinking long-term (five years or more) and considering what “business” an organisation or group of organisations (organisations across two or more ministerial portfolios) should be in, what its goals should be, and how it should get there (Corbett, 1992, p. 87). For Corbett, examples of such strategic planning include the economic strategy, social justice strategy, and conservation strategy, which were all strategies released by the Victorian Government during the 1980s. GVT and OEOF are similar types of strategic plans.

Within this context, between 1999 and 2010 the Victorian Government was committed to state level strategic planning as evidenced by the considerable effort directed towards the development and promoting GVT and to a lesser extent OEOF. GVT is significant as an attempt to articulate a coherent medium term vision of the future, and accompanying targets and priorities, within the context of the challenges faced, and resources and capabilities at hand. What is particularly noteworthy about GVT is that it represented a high profile attempt to identify the challenges facing the state, and then develop a relatively coherent response to these challenges, which would be pursued over the medium term. Politically, GVT has been viewed as “a signpost document that defines priorities and future directions”, as well as a means for addressing criticisms about the number of reviews it had initiated (Crowley and Coffey, 2007b, p. 55). Similarly, OEOF also represents a significant effort at strategic planning for sustainability, as it articulates a broad framework conceptual framework for understanding and subsequently taking action to promote environmental sustainability. Specifically, it: outlines the environmental challenges facing Victoria and summarises progress to date in responding to them; explains what environmental sustainability is, and why it is important: articulates three strategic directions which can be used to guide actions; and finally explains how the framework will be put into action (DSE, 2005). Further, both GVT and OEOF have an explicit focus on medium and longer term planning horizons which provide them with a strategic rather than purely tactical or practical orientation. Such an orientation is clearly useful for shifting development to a more sustainable path. The establishment of the CES, with responsibilities for SOE reporting, is also strategic, as it indicates a desire to regularly and systematically monitor the condition of the environment and assess the adequacy of environmental performance over time. More broadly, the fact that such initiatives existed is strategic as it serves to bring attention to long-terms challenges associated with sustainability.
More critically, the linkages between the four major initiatives considered in this paper were never fully realised, which for example meant that the objectives of OEOF were not reflected in the outcomes which DSE was to promote, or the environmental conditions which the CES was to report on. This is disappointing because conceptually these initiatives can be considered as core elements in a strategic improvement cycle by which to promote sustainability. Specifically, GVT provides a means for legitimating sustainability as a policy concept, OEOF provides a means for defining sustainability and articulating specific objectives to be met, DSE provides a means for coordinating and overseeing the implementation of actions to meet stated objectives, and the CES provides the means for regular systematic assessment and reporting on the condition of the environment and progress towards objectives. Adopting such an approach would have assisted in progressing the transition to less unsustainable forms of development, through connecting long-term objectives into short and medium term policy objectives, assessments of environmental condition.

Whole of government focus

A whole of government approach to addressing sustainability issues is critical (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003; Morrison and Lane, 2005). Biodiversity and environmental objectives cannot be met if the forest, agriculture, water and urban planning sectors do not fully consider those objectives in their activities. Clearly, sustainability is a whole-of-government (and whole of society) undertaking. The means by which such an approach is to be realised is through environmental integration which Buhrs (2009, p. 1) explains as “the integration of environmental considerations into all areas of human thinking, behaviour, and practices that (potentially) affect the environment”. What this highlights is that strategic planning for sustainability is as much the responsibility of the treasury, health, education, welfare and industry portfolios as it is the environment portfolio. Clearly, central agencies (particularly Premier’s departments) have an important role to ensure that integration is at least taken seriously.

GVT was clearly whole of government in scope, and strongly led by a unit within the Premier’s department. OEOF was also intended to be whole of government, but its development was led by a unit within the DSE, and its impact upon other government agencies limited. This had important consequences for the way that the sustainability agenda was positioned across government. In simple terms the debate about positioning sustainability revolved around where responsibility for sustainability issues should be located, within a central agency (i.e. the DPC), or within a line agency (i.e. the DSE). The view that sustainability should be progressed from within a central agency was expressed by a policy manager who stated:

I was very strongly saying to the people involved in DPC at the time that you've got a sustainability strategy, it's “Growing Victoria Together,” basically – that's the model you've already got and what you're really talking about is implementation of it in a stronger way, and working out the linkages between the important issues that you've got, rather than hiving them off as separate issues (Respondent 15).
For this respondent, the approach taken by the government meant that sustainability was interpreted as primarily the responsibility of the environment portfolio, rather than a whole of government responsibility, despite the fact that OEOF was presented as a whole of government strategy. Other respondents voiced similar opinions, with one stating that:

*One thing I've found disappointing in the current Government is that the sustainability agenda is seen as DSE's and it is not seen by the current [...] Government as something that should be driven out of the Premier's Department (Respondent 16).*

Further, another participant claimed that:

*The sustainability policy that the Government is now working on, as I understand it, is in all essence an environmental policy. It is not a broad ranging overarching policy of the kind that I am talking about (Respondent 5).*

That OEOF failed to be embraced across government is clearly evident by the lack of reference to OEOF or sustainability in a transport strategy released in 2006 (Department of Infrastructure (DOI), 2006), around one year after the release of OEOF and merely months after the announcement of initiative funding for sustainability (DSE, 2006). That the transport strategy was developed within the infrastructure portfolio indicates the limited extent to which sustainability was embraced across government, which indicates that integration did not occur in any systematic way. The critical weakness in the approach adopted is that limited attention was given to “process” in implementing a whole of government approach to sustainability (Morrison and Lane, 2005), most notably through the failure to effectively require other agencies to embrace sustainability in their policy, planning, programs and projects.

Therefore, in placing responsibility for developing sustainability policy within the environment portfolio (i.e. DSE) sustainability was positioned in a sectoral manner, such that a balanced approach to sustainable development could be pursued whereby economic, social and environmental objectives were partitioned along organisational lines. Therefore, while DSE brought together the government's environmental responsibilities in one portfolio in order to strengthen the government's focus on environmental sustainability, this reform had limited influence on policy making in other areas of government whose activities have important consequences for the environment, such as agriculture, mining, and transport portfolios. Furthermore, the sustainability focus of DSE effectively only lasted one term of government (approximately four years) with planning responsibilities transferred to a separate department following the 2006 election. This meant DSE effectively became a traditional standalone environment department, rather than a department with a clear mandate to promote sustainability across government. The preceding discussion highlights that having the development of OEOF led from within DSE served to position sustainability as primarily an issue of interest to the environment portfolio, rather than as a whole of government concern. Finally, that the CES reports through the Minister for Environment, rather than
the Premier’s department, or Parliament, also serves to position sustainability as a matter for the environment portfolio, rather than the whole of government.

**Approach to sustainability**

One of the reasons for the popularity and influence of the concept of “sustainable development” is that it provides a means for “reframing” the tensions between economic, social and environment objectives (Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 2005). However, there are many approaches to sustainability, each of which is based upon different traditions, assumptions and values (Hopwood et al., 2005). This means that sustainability can be considered as contested (Jacobs, 1999b) or a floating signifier (Laclau, 1990) in the sense that while the concept has broad public acceptance, its meaning at a practical level is contested. It is therefore important to consider how sustainability was understood in the initiatives undertaken by the Victorian Government. The discussion which follows focusses on overall ambitions and whether a “balanced” or “integrated” approach to sustainability is advocated.

The government’s stated desire to make Victoria “the sustainable state” and “a world leader in environmental sustainability” (ALP, 2002) was ambitious. It is also apparent that it is unlikely that the intent behind such a commitment was taken lightly, as highlighted by a policy manager who stated “You don’t use world leader kind of language unless you’re a little bit serious in this area” (Respondent 15). Within this context, the articulation of 13 environmental objectives is significant, having some similarities with the approach adopted in Sweden where a series of environmental objectives have been legislated, and arrangements put in place for regular evaluation of progress to meeting these objectives (Edvardsson, 2004). Unfortunately, Victoria’s objectives and associated evaluation processes were not enshrined in legislation which means that there is no legislative obligation to adhere to them, or to report on progress in achieving them. This reflects a failure to institutionalise sustainability (Dovers, 2001). Further, as indicated above a more explicit and concerted focus on transition management would also have been helpful (Smith et al., 2005; VoB et al., 2009). Transition management could have been promoted through the building of stronger connections between the four initiatives, along the lines discussed above in relation to strategic planning. For example, aligning the state’s vision for sustainability, with the environmental objectives of OEOF, and SOE reporting undertaken by the CES would have created a strategic improvement cycle.

Whether or not a “balanced” or “integrated” approach to sustainable development is pursued has important implications (Adams, 2006; Robinson, 2004). Balanced approaches focus on the need to balance economic, social and environmental objectives, such that giving too much consideration to environmental objectives is as bad as giving them too little consideration. Such an approach means that economic, social and environmental objectives are in conflict. This encourages decision makers to consider the “trade offs” that arise between the three objectives. In this respect “balanced” approaches to sustainable development merely continue existing practices, and dispositions, whereby environmental objectives are often traded off against economic objectives. By contrast, approaches that focus on integration emphasize the need for ecological objectives to be fully integrated into other arenas of decision making. Such an approach is more than merely seeking to identify “win, win, win” outcomes of triple bottom line approaches. Instead, integrated approaches require that decisions made in the economic realm fully consider the environmental and social
consequences of such decisions, with the effect that economic objectives may need to re-assessed: under an integrated approach to sustainability notions of development need to be re-defined. Put simply, all development should be environmentally sound otherwise it cannot be viewed as appropriate.

Unfortunately, while GVT acknowledged the need for broader measures of progress than economic growth alone (DPC, 2001, 2005), the focus was still overwhelmingly a “balanced” rather than “integrated” approach to sustainability (Crowley and Coffey, 2007a, b). However, it is apparent that the relative merits of an integrated versus balanced approach were debated within decision making processes. One clear example of this is in the typographical error evident in the communique released following the GVT summit, where it was stated that “A triple bottom line approach has been built into the process of policy making across government, to balance integrate sustainable economic growth objectives with social development and environmental stewardship” (DPC, 2000a, emphasis added).

The establishment of the CES was potentially a significant organisational reform, as it created a completely new institution. While this new organisation has enhanced Victoria’s system of environmental governance, it is also the case that the model adopted in 2003 was more limited that what was initially proposed, with both the name and the focus to be given to this office being altered. From being a Commissioner for “Ecologically Sustainable Development” the name changed to being the Commissioner for “Environment Sustainability”. In effect, this change served to situate the office within the environmental portfolio, rather than as a whole of government initiative. In terms of focus, this shifted from one of accountability for environmental performance to being more concerned with community education and behaviour change. First, the profile and powers of similar offices created in other jurisdictions are higher and stronger. For example, New Zealand’s Commissioner for the Environment is an Officer of the Parliament, whereas Victoria’s Commissioner reports to Parliament through the Minister for Environment, and Canada’s Commissioner for the Environment is part of the Office of the Auditor General and has extensive powers to obtain information, whereas Victoria’s Commissioner can merely request information (DNRE, 2000). Second, the functions to be undertaken are limited. When initially proposed one of the functions to be undertaken by the Commissioner was to “audit compliance with environmental legislation, including the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act (1988) and native vegetation clearance controls” (ALP, 1999). However, when the office was established, this function had been reduced to auditing departmental environmental management plans. Whereas the original initiative was framed as an institution to improve government accountability for its environmental performance, this role was much less prominent when the office was finally established. In effect, what was proposed as an institution for accountability became an institution for public education. Put simply, these changes reflect a shift from a more “transformative” to a more “reformist” approach to sustainability (Hopwood et al., 2005).

Public consultation

Gallop (2007, p. 29) suggests that “strategic government” involves wider use of public consultation and engagement in the development and attainment of goals and targets. Such an approach clearly represents an improvement on top down or bottom up approaches to policy and planning (Bridgman
and Davis, 2000). In some respects the approach advocated by Gallop is consistent with the view that policy and planning should be interactive (Akkerman et al., 2004) in the sense that it “involves the state reaching out to the community in partnership, rather than imposing on the community or having the community design policy on its own” (Crowley and Coffey, 2007b, p. 52). There is also a significant body of literature which highlights the value of participation deliberation and engagement (Arnstein, 1969; Syme, 1992; Beierle and Konisky, 2000; Ross et al., 2002; Reddell and Woollcock, 2004). Given this, efforts to involve the public in considering long-term directions and sustainability objectives would appear to be easily justified.

Unfortunately, OEOF, and to a lesser extent GVT, failed to consult with or engage the community. While some consultation occurred in the very early stages of the development of GVT, including the summit held in March 2000 and some consultation with peak stakeholders (Adams and Wiseman, 2003), there were no opportunities for substantive public input which limited opportunities for building engagement. Instead, Crowley and Coffey (2007a, p. 56) consider that GVT is better thought of as a “document rather than a process” as there were very limited opportunities for genuine public, as opposed to peak stakeholder, input. Further, in relation to environmental input to the GVT summit, only two of the 100 participants represented environmental interests (Crowley and Coffey, 2007a). Even less consultative was the development of OEOF. No background papers or draft strategy was released. In fact, the only way in which public input was sought was through a low key request for ideas on how the framework should be implemented (DSE, 2005). This lack of consultation and engagement is surprising given the extensive consultation that had taken place during the preparation of other sectoral strategies. Give the approach to sustainability articulated in OEOF the decision not to consult on its development is unlikely to be neutral, but instead designed to limit alternative visions of sustainability from being articulated. Such an approach is consistent with what would be categorised as “non-participation” on Arnstein’s (1969, p. 217) widely known ladder of participation, because it appears that the government’s objective was “not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programs, but to enable power holders to ‘educate’ or ‘cure’ the participants”.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed Victoria’s approach to strategic policy, planning and assessment for sustainability between 1999 and 2010. In doing so, the context within which such efforts took place was established, namely an interest in “strategic government” as a way to replace neoliberal, NPM, and managerialism inspired policy sector governance, with a broader, more inclusive, and more sustainability promoting approach to governing. The Victorian Government clearly devoted considerable attention towards promoting sustainability, as evident through the substantial initiatives introduced. In some respects, these initiatives encompass the elements of a strategic improvement cycle for sustainability. However, the full potential of the efforts deployed were not realised due to a number of reasons. First, the government failed to approach sustainability in a fully whole of government way. Second, sustainability was understood in a way that gave limited attention to transformative change and also focussed on a “balanced” rather than “integrated” approach to sustainability. Third, the government made a very limited attempt to engage the public in any substantive way in articulating a sustainable future and how it may be progressed. The failure to consider the above initiatives in a holistic and integrated way also meant that obvious synergies were overlooked. Together, these weaknesses mean that the approach to sustainability pursued did
not actively promote change, either through the imposition of requirements or the offering of inducements for change. Whether or not the idea of sustainability was embraced in government departments, or more widely, was largely a decision left to individual people or organisations. Politically, this suggests that the Victorian Government was not successful in moving beyond the neoliberal approach to public sector governance it inherited. Conceptually, it raises the prospect that sustainable government represents a “business as usual” rather than “reformist” or “transformative” approach to sustainability (Hopwood et al., 2005).

Fortunately, clear lessons and relatively simple solutions emerge from this experience. These include that: sustainability should be pursued in an integrated rather than balanced way; sustainability should be considered as a whole of government undertaking; the public should be engaged in an ongoing conversation about the importance of sustainability and how it can be progressed; and, there is merit in thinking of strategic policy, planning and assessment as a strategic improvement cycle. More broadly, if “strategic government” is to genuinely promote sustainability then greater attention to the conceptual underpinnings of sustainability and administrative and consultative processes are required. Embracing such lessons would be consistent with the advice of the OECD (2002a, b, c) and would at least represent a more robust approach to sustainability.

Notes

Aspects of the material that describes Victoria’s approach draws on Coffey (2011, 2010).
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About the author

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