

# STRATEGIC PLANNING: WHY WOULD POLITICIANS BE INTERESTED? SOME INSIGHTS FROM WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Lesley van Schoubroeck<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The adoption of high level strategic planning is gaining in popularity as the new strategic role for governments post New Public Management. Documents with state level goals supported to varying extents by strategies, actions and targets are apparent in jurisdictions in Australia, Canada and Scandinavia. Yet research is questioning whether or not politicians will take on the leadership role expected of them in this new process (see for example the recent work of Tilli on the Finnish experience). This paper will examine the adoption of state strategic planning in Australia and analyse views of political and public sector actors in executive government in Western Australia on their perceptions of these plans as a tool in public administration. Perceptions were gathered during interviews as part of broader doctoral research into coordination strategies introduced by the Gallop government in the period 2001 to 2005. While the concept is gaining popularity around the nation, it is too early yet to determine whether or not this is a passing fad or a new direction in public administration. It is argued that, in Western Australia at least, politicians and their advisors are more motivated to be “strategic by stealth,” maintaining a cautious approach to what they put into the public domain and can therefore be held to account for. Beyond-election targets do exist in specific policy areas but they are not systematically compiled nor are they developed in any whole of government sense.

## Overview

This paper examines the adoption of whole of government strategic planning in Australian states, with a particular focus on the experience in Western Australia. Since Wildavsky expressed his scepticism more than 30 years ago, different forms of “grand plans” have evolved. The Oregon model for instance has been widely debated and seen as a model in several Australian jurisdictions. Nonetheless, research is questioning whether or not politicians will take on the leadership role expected of them in this process and, indeed, if long term planning is possible in the issues driven environment common in democratic societies (Marsh and Yencken, 2004; Tilli, 2007). Research outlined in this paper reinforces this message - that Western Australia’s politicians are reluctant to commit themselves to longer-term measurable outcomes. There is evidence, however, that many of them and their advisors see the desirability of such an approach and, within discrete policy areas, beyond-election targets do exist. These are not, however, systematically compiled nor are they developed in any whole of government sense.

In this paper I provide a brief overview of the context and methodology for the research and describe the emergence of “whole of government” planning, particularly in Australia. I then describe the current situation in Western Australia and compare that with other Australian jurisdictions, most of which are more explicit in their longer term intentions. Based on interviews with participants in executive government in Western Australia in the period 2001-2005, I conclude that the political climate has created a very risk-averse culture where many actors are of the view that it is “too brave” or perhaps not possible to publish long term strategic plans that have any degree of specificity.

I argue that, in Western Australia at least, politicians and their advisors could be described as being “strategic by stealth.” They maintain a cautious approach to what is put into the public domain and they can therefore be held to account for, but there is evidence of a will to plan for the longer term behind in the scenes.

## Context of the research

Dr Geoff Gallop was elected as Premier of Western Australia on 10 February 2001 with a surprising and very comfortable majority. This “unlikely saviour of the Labor party” was Premier for the next five years, winning again four years later, until his sudden retirement due to ill health. This was the first Labor government since the 1992 so-called WA Inc Royal Commission which had resulted in the discrediting of the previous Labor governments of Brian Burke and Peter Dowding. Gallop had been closely involved in the Parliamentary debate on subsequent reforms and prior to entering parliament he had worked as a tutor and lecturer in social and political theory. Gallop’s long term commitment to politics and public administration resulted in the award as a National Fellow of the Australian Institute of Public Administration in 2003 and Gallop is the only political leader in Australia to receive such an award. He has subsequently returned to academia.

Gallop’s approach to public sector reform is therefore of interest to public administrators and this paper examines the issues arising from his commitment to develop a state strategic plan in Western Australia. Work on a plan had been progressing within the public sector for some time prior to his election with considerable discussion about a plan along the lines of the

Oregon Options. The first plan *Better Planning: Better Services* was released in 2003 as a “strategic planning framework for the public sector”. A revised plan, *Better Planning: Better Futures* was released in 2006.

## Methodology

Perceptions on the desirability and usefulness of these plans were gathered during interviews as part of broader doctoral research into coordination strategies introduced by Gallop in the period 2001 to 2005. The use of interviews, including interviews by ‘insiders,’ is supported by other research in the area of executive government (Painter, 1981; Campbell, 1983; Weller, 2001; Winkworth, 2006; Rhodes et al., 2007).

Role descriptions were assigned according to the most prominent role of the individual during the period while Gallop was premier, so that individuals who may have changed roles during that period were assigned only one role which best reflected the issues on which they commented. Descriptors of each role category are in Box 1.

### Box 1: Role Descriptors of Interviewees

Minister	Individuals who were a minister or parliamentary secretary in a Gallop cabinet
Ministerial staffer	Individuals who worked in ministerial offices as policy advisors or chiefs of staff; also other individuals employed in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet on a Term of Government contract.
Senior public servant	Directors general and other senior staff employed in the public sector, including individuals seen to be closely aligned with the Government of the day but not technically Term of Government employees, but excluding watchdogs.
Critical observer	Individuals such as academics, politicians other than cabinet ministers and parliamentary secretaries in a Gallop government, and consultants and watchdogs.

In all, 50 invitations to participate were distributed and 39 of those people participated in an interview between 1 September 2006 and 29 March 2007, a response rate of 78 per cent. The composition of interviewees is in Table 1. Among the ministers and/or parliamentary secretaries in the Gallop government who were approached, the response rate was lower at just under half (6 of 13 invitations were accepted). Ten (62.5%) of the 15 senior public servants interviewed were or had been a director general during Gallop’s term of office. Nine (23%) of the interviewees were women. While a number of the interviewees were happy to be identified, many preferred to remain anonymous. Accordingly none have been identified beyond their major role from 2001-2005.

**Table 1: Profile of Interviewees by role**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Total</b>
Minister	6 (15.4%)
Minister's staffer	7 (17.9%)
Public Servant	15 (38.5%)
Critical observer	11 (22.1%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39 (100%)</b>

## **Emergence of “whole of government” planning**

### **Overview**

Some 30 years since the widespread adoption of strategic planning as a management tool within government agencies, the last decade has seen the emerging role of formal whole of government strategic plans commonly termed “State Strategic Plans” in Australia. Increasingly governments in Australia and internationally are developing plans with broad goals across their jurisdictions. Most Australian states have developed jurisdictional plans to different degrees. The Commonwealth however has not (although the Rudd government elected at the end of 2007 has recently held a 2020 summit with 1000 invited participants to “shape a long term strategy for the nation’s future.”)<sup>2</sup> Internationally, several Canadian jurisdictions, Finland and other Scandinavian countries have followed the same route.

Whole of government planning is not a new phenomenon, nor is scepticism about its usefulness. There is evidence around the world of national plans that have largely failed (Wildavsky, 1973). The process of planning, and producing a plan as a product or evidence of that process, assumes the ability to change other peoples’ actions as a guide to immediate decision making or to influence resource allocation over time. It assumes that the planners have the power to influence the behaviour of others and accordingly, without the backing of leaders, planning is a futile exercise. Wildavsky gave a salutary reminder that planning and coordination take up time and questioned whether or not at least some of the planning undertaken by government was worth the investment. But he also noted that for some, planning is a faith – that is why for them the planning was not a failure, thus the planners must have been.

Painter (1981) also warned against the pitfalls of detailed planning. He argued that planning which included centrally devised plans with hierarchies of objectives with control and accountability systems would work only when there was certainty that goals could be defined and agreed as well as the best way to get there through concerted action. However, most policy problems are about facing up to the difficulties that currently exist, and potentially moving in several contradictory directions as a better outcome is sought. Overlap and duplication need to be addressed “in the thick of the battle, not on the drawing board” (Painter, 1981:277). He suggested that any central planning function should focus on argument and negotiation, not control. The challenge he put for central agencies was to get a

balance between whole of government positions that do not intrude on departments and could therefore become somewhat esoteric and the other extreme which is to get too involved in agencies' core business and create conflict by interfering too much. Painter had earlier noted in a study on the coordination of urban policies in Sydney demonstrated that it was his view that "strategic planning cannot be successful unless mid-range and day-to-day operational issues are wedded to it". At that time he saw limited incentives for forward planning and little political appetite for a process that may well draw attention to oversupply of resources or redistributive options. Such a plan, he noted, rarely appeases all voters (reported in Encel et al., 1980).

The primary purpose of a state strategic plan must be to assist in long term planning and in their recent publication Marsh and Yencken (2004) lament Australia's capacity for long term planning with the current political system. They argue there is an increased urgency to plan for the future for a variety of reasons including globalisation; international issues of terrorism, epidemics and the environment; social change from women and indigenous people redressing past discrimination; and gay rights to name a few. While it is not possible to predict the future, states can identify contingency plans for possible scenarios, they can monitor trends to identify emerging issues before crisis points are reached. Marsh and Yencken ascribe some of the challenges to long term planning to executive overload which has resulted in those with the necessary power to get issues on the agenda having insufficient time to think beyond the immediate challenges before them. Despite increased acknowledgement of participatory democracy by governments, there remain limited ways in which interest groups can engage with the executive on an on-going basis. Rudd's 2020 forum has opened the door for 1000 Australians but even one of the participants described them as more of the "chattering classes" removed from everyday Australian families. Researchers argue the information available to guide public opinion is limited and often unbalanced. More information about trends and conditions of the nation is required and, while Australia is quite adept at reporting on economic trends and certainly improving on its environmental reporting, a holistic approach to reporting on social trends remains patchy at best.

However, it is also well documented that issues do not get on the government's agenda through a rational process but rather through a complex set of forces that bring them to the attention of governments (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005) mitigating the usefulness of planning. The media is critical in this and others argue that the populist nature of Australian politics, where winning depends on the swinging voter, dampens any political enthusiasm for enunciating a long term vision (Young, 2004).

By the end of 2006, Gallop himself was promoting the concept of Strategic Government as the next phase of public administration after New Public Management (Gallop, 2006; Gallop, 2007). Strategic Government is an approach which involves "developing major themes for government, priority setting around sustainability-type objectives, the setting of targets or strategic outcomes, and the involvement of the people and the monitoring of performance" (Gallop, 2006:13). State strategic plans are, in his view, the mechanisms through which Strategic Government is articulated. Involvement of the people is also a key concern for those who are seeking a new approach to help to re-establish trust in government and public administration (Bourgon, 2007).

## **International examples**

The Western Australian experience in whole of government planning was initially influenced by the Oregon which raised awareness of the potential for a community-based approach commencing in 1987 and overseen by a legislative based Progress Board (Dyer, 1996). Others which were examined as the Western Australian model was developed were Finland and British Columbia. Professor Guy Peters made available an unpublished paper on his analysis of the Finnish approach highlighting the importance and frustrations of developing a process to get political as well as bureaucratic input and links to the budget process. The other critical element of the Finnish process was the employment of a person at the level of secretary of state responsible for developing agreements among participating agencies. Each one of these was hired specifically for that priority and had few resources beyond “the power to beg” and the backing of government and therefore a moral claim. These people are reported to have said that without their own political connections they would never have been able to achieve their goals. Nonetheless, subsequent research has concluded that “management reforms aiming at introducing the strategic role of politicians have not been a success. ... Politicians are not eager to define goals and to set priorities, nor are they motivated to consider issues that are not realized in the immediate future” (Tilli, 2007).

The approach taken by British Columbia with its five “great goals” was also considered. The British Columbia 2007 plan identifies five priority areas which matrix across the goals with specific actions that are considered necessary to achieve the goals. For instance, the relationship with First Nations is the first priority and has two actions to be accomplished in the next two years – concluding treaties and closing the gap between first nations and other citizens in the areas of health, education and economic opportunities (British Columbia, 2007). A total of 15 performance measures have been developed with at least one associated with each goal. Each has baseline information and performance targets to 2015/16. All departments prepare annual plans that link back to the overall strategic plan.

## **Strategic Planning in Australian jurisdictions**

### *Western Australia*

A report delivered in Gallop’s first year envisaged a state strategic planning model that flowed in a hierarchical fashion from a vision for the state, to government policies with high level outcomes, portfolio strategies with key performance indicators, agency outcomes and strategic directions, to agency operational plans and finally to the provision of goods and services to the community (Hicks et al., 2001). The aspirations were high. It would “outline the priorities of government for the Western Australian community (and) be a guide for the public sector against which progress can be judged.” It would “signal the over-arching purpose of ministerial portfolios, in the form of a description of high-level outcomes or of cabinet’s desired policy objectives and priorities in the portfolio” that could be “integrated directly into a state strategic planning framework utilising key economic, social and environmental indicators of progress.” Finally, it would provide “a great opportunity for CEOs’ performance to be measured against the priorities of government as enunciated in agency and state strategic plans and agency budgets.” “The Minister for Public Sector Management, through the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, (would) be central to the integration of the new arrangements with the overall state strategic plan.”

In November 2003 the first plan, *Better Planning: Better Services (BP:BS)* was published (DPC, 2003a). It enunciated a vision for the public sector, five goals and against those goals a total 72 strategic outcomes. The goals were essentially triple bottom line reflecting the Government's commitment to sustainability and to the regions. The fifth focused on governance. For four of the goals there was a cabinet standing committee which it was anticipated would take a key leadership role in monitoring progress towards the achievement of the outcomes. Ownership by the committees was variable (in fact the economic committee did not meet at all after the first two years) and while the plan was referred to in speeches by Gallop where the audience was comprised largely of public sector staff, it was not a theme that was promoted explicitly beyond that audience although the message of sustainability was evident in speeches in many forums.

The process for developing *BP:BS* was led by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet with the Social, Economic, Environment and Regional sub-committees of cabinet signing off the outcomes against respective goals. After initial involvement of all 21 directors general of the major departments, the key strategy for involvement of agencies was through a small sub-committee of that forum and the final plan was promulgated through a Premier's Circular, an administrative tool for disseminating whole of government policy, and was linked into a number of strategic processes (DPC, 2003b). Critically it was included within the budget framework requiring all funded government agencies to address the goals and where possible the strategic outcomes. All public sector programs funded by government needed to link to one or more of the five goals of *BP:BS*. (DTF, 2004) thus providing an incentive for "budget" agencies to become cognisant with *BP:BS*. A common criticism, and one that becomes apparent to the discerning reader, is that the strategic outcomes of *BP:BS* were inconsistent in their level of specificity and many were not measurable. As there was intent to develop measures of progress, the outcomes being sought needed to be measurable in some form. Nonetheless the overall sentiment of the sector was that the concept of a state strategic plan was a positive development and should be pursued but that it was important to retain consistency from year to year as the cycle of agency strategic planning was always out of step with centrally produced plans.

A revised plan *Better Planning: Better Futures* was released in November 2006 (Gallop had resigned in January 2006) with five revised goals supported by 21 strategic outcomes rather than the 72 in the previous plan (DPC, 2006). The goals had been "under development" between the department and the premier's office for some time and were incorporated implicitly in Gallop's in speeches to various audiences (see, for instance, his speech on 14 July 2005) thus reflecting an accommodation rather than a determination of priorities in the strategic plan. These outcomes were more consistent and measurable, however, the plan itself made no mention of the development of measures. Furthermore, while the 2003 plan indicated that cabinet would "review progress and decide on any changes to its strategic outcomes" (DPC, 2003a:11), the 2006 plan made no mention of a role for cabinet. Responsibility for its development and reporting against outcomes remained within the structures of the Departments of the Premier and Cabinet and Treasury and Finance. By the time this plan was in place the correspondence between cabinet standing committees and the goals had disappeared. Only the Social and Regional sub-committees had been retained following the 2005 election.

Despite the clear movement away from a set of targets or measurable outcomes in the state strategic plan, such targets do exist within a variety of documents and statements. For



instance, a retention rate of 90 percent of 15-19 year olds in some form of education and training was a goal of government reforms in that sector in 2003 (Legislative Assembly, 25 February 2003); there is a target to reduce water consumption from 180 to 155 kilolitres per person per year and achieving 20 per cent reuse of treated wastewater by 2012 (W.A., 2003c); and a road safety strategy aimed to reduce the number of fatalities (on roads) per 100,000 population to a level that is equal to the best in Australia (W.A., 2003a:7). Other targets also exist such as retaining the state's triple A credit rating and getting major infrastructure completed on time and on budget. In addition, there is an endless source of documents with benchmark statistics providing ample opportunity for the development of measurable goals and targets.

It should also be noted at that the same time that *BP:BS* was being developed, Western Australia developed a more public document the *State Sustainability Strategy* using a consultative approach which required all agencies to develop Sustainability Action Plans and was to be underpinned by a Sustainability Bill (W.A., 2003b). Despite sporadic attempts by officers within the premier's department to more closely align the two strategies, this did not eventuate leading to some confusion for public sector agencies and potentially detracting from the ownership of each. The website suggests that little activity has occurred since Gallop's resignation in 2005 when responsibility was transferred from the Premier's department to the Department of Environment. The specific legislation has not eventuated but sustainability principles have been embedded in a range of other legislation (see for example the Planning and Development Act 2005).

### *Other states*

In Australia, state strategic plans of various forms have been developed in most jurisdictions in the last decade although it was not until the end of 2006 that New South Wales published a state plan and the Commonwealth does not (yet) have a comparable document. This section outlines some key features of those plans. The features that are published with the plans are summarised in Table 2. Most are on their second published iteration although as Adams has pointed out in his analysis of the Victorian experience, there may be many unpublished iterations (Adams and Wiseman, 2003). Profiles of the plans vary and their web presence has been categorised in Table 2 as high, medium and low according to whether or not they can be accessed in one click on both, one or neither of the home pages of the government and the premier's department. Only Western Australia is rated "low" and the rating of Victoria as "medium" reflects what appears to be a move away from the previous regime. In February 2008, the new premier launched an "Annual Statement of Government Intentions" which makes no mention of the *Growing Victoria Together* strategy that was integral to many of the statements made by his predecessor who, like Gallop, resigned mid-term for personal reasons. The government's web presence portrays this new agenda.

With the exception of Queensland, all jurisdictional plans are broad in scope with between five and ten strategic goals or themes that accommodate most but not necessarily all the work of government. Queensland's Smart State Strategy is more focussed although it certainly incorporates the business of many of its agencies. The timelines for the plans range from 10 to 20 year horizons where they are specified but the ACT and WA do not specify a particular timeframe. Most include targets or measures of progress against the goals and included community consultation in the development of revised plans if not in the first iteration. However, governments are not averse to announcing other targets outside the formal planning process such as the recent announcement by South Australia's premier that the state



government would be carbon neutral by 2020 (Wiseman, 2008). Finally, accountability for delivery of the plans is most commonly embedded within the structures and strategic management processes of government.

Plans in South Australia<sup>3</sup> and New South Wales are overseen by a committee of cabinet and Tasmania has established the Tasmania Together Progress Board with a legislative base to oversee the plan's implementation and evaluation. While Tasmania has clear community ownership of the process, others are more politically driven. The inherent tensions in these approaches and their impact on longer term ownership by government is well argued in a recent analysis by Crowley and Coffey who compared the Tasmanian and Victorian approaches and their contribution to "green planning" (2007).

**Table 2: Features of jurisdictional strategic plans in Australian states**

State	Title	Date published	Scope	Web profile	Timelines	Measures	Process	Accountability
Australian Capital Territory	Canberra Plan	2004?	Broad	Medium	No	No	Not specified	Not specified
New South Wales	A New Direction of NSW: State Plan	2006	Broad	High	2016	Yes	Community input	Committee of Cabinet
Queensland	Smart State Strategy	Updated 2005	Focussed	High	2015	No	Community input	Within government
South Australia	South Australia's Strategic Plan 2007	Updated 2007	Broad	High	2014	Yes	Community input	Committee of Cabinet
Tasmania	Tasmania Together	Updated 2006	Broad	High	2020	Yes	Community input	Tasmania Together Progress Board
Victoria	Growing Victoria Together	Updated 2005	Broad	Medium	2010	Yes	Community input	Within government
Western Australia	Better Planning: Better Futures	Updated 2006	Broad	Low	No	No	Within government	Within government

Source: (ACT, 2004; Victoria, 2005; DPC, 2006; NSW, 2006; Qld, 2006; S.A., 2007; Tas, 2007)

Integration into the strategic management processes of government has been a priority for all “planners” within the various jurisdictions. Adams and Wiseman (2003) in their discussion of *Growing Victoria Together* stressed the importance of support from ministers and from the head of the premier’s department. Without that political backing and the support to integrate the plan into other government planning, resource allocation and reporting processes, it remains little more than a document on a shelf. By 2007, Victoria had moved to a regular annual report and included targets well into the future (eg public transport targets for 2020.)<sup>4</sup> The challenge for South Australia’s first plan in 2004 which, after an initial attempt by the premier’s department, was overseen by a group of senior ministers was to get greater impact across the state’s planning processes (Manning, 2004; Poletti, 2005). Better communication across the public sector and a better understanding of the roles of the key players were seen to be important as were a link to the budget process and a substantial effort in managing expectations.

Accountability for delivery on the NSW plan is clearly outlined with the Premier taking overall responsibility and supported by a lead minister and lead CEO of each of the 34 priorities. Partner ministers and partner CEOs are also identified and all CEO performance agreements will be required to address the priorities. A new cabinet standing committee will drive the review of progress and all cabinet submissions will be required to identify any impact on the State Plan. It links to the budget process with all proposals for additional expenditure being required to show how they contribute to the priorities of the Plan. However, not all agency funding will necessarily align with the priorities: “Agency funding will be based on their contribution to State Plan priorities and other Government priorities where applicable, as reflected in their Results and Services Plans” (NSW, 2006:145).

In Queensland a state strategic plan was initiated under a coalition government in the mid-1990s as a “definitive statement of the Government’s intent for economic and social development” (Scott et al., 2001:191). While the importance of a clear link with the budget process was acknowledged, the plan itself was driven out of the premier’s department. Scott *et al* described the plan as a “bold proposal” which attempted to drive a whole of government agenda. The Premier and the Treasurer released the plan as a budget document. However, as is clear from the introductory statements to the Premier’s Department Strategic Plan by Director General Peter Ellis in early 1998 and then by Glyn Davis later in 1998 after the change of government, the concept of a wide ranging state strategic plan was not the same priority for the latter. By 2006, the plan had been clearly replaced by a Smart State Strategy and a short statement of priorities published on the department’s web site (Qld, 2006).

## Local perspectives

### Perceptions

Perceptions about the usefulness of both the concept of a state strategic plan and of the way in which the concept was implemented in Western Australia, revealed significant variation in expectations and accordingly perceptions of its usefulness. For some it should be a key medium through which the government would articulate its vision. There was no argument

with the view that a general sense of direction and priority was important and needed to be articulated, but there is a difference as they put it, “between having aspirations and a vision and translating that into a document” so that “the document becomes the outcome – it is the dialogue that is important.”

## Politicians

Among ministers and their advisors, there were some who thought “it is essential to have something like this” even though “not many cabinet colleagues really cared about it”, to others whose preference was for the “6 or 7 things we are going to concentrate on, the cross agency things”. Cabinet planning days with time to focus on the longer term were considered important by ministers, but to them that was quite different from the production of a public strategic planning document. (Within the political arena, Gallop engaged in a range of planning activities from pre-cabinet meetings to regular meetings with back-benchers and constituents. There was, however, no formal link between these discussions and a more formal strategic planning process.) A more focused document with “a set of principles to guide decision making when there is policy conflict” would have been more useful. It was “too abstract to get traction with ministers.” Even though one minister took the view that it “should be more focussed on outcomes for which we have milestones and to which we are held accountable”, a formal document was not a matter that most ministers or their advisors saw as important, or even desirable. As another minister put it:

*There is limited use for government of strategic plans as the political landscape changes on a daily basis, so there is a danger in a well articulated strategic plan in that it becomes inflexible.*

This focus on the more immediate priorities was also reflected in the view that plans tailored to specific industry segments or market groups would be more relevant and more useful.

## Others

Views of public servants varied considerably from those pragmatists for whom a plan of some description was a sound thing to do, to the very supportive, to those who doubted the usefulness of the concept of strategic planning in government. For some it was a “breath of fresh air” but others took the view similar to that of the minister quoted above, that “in government issues and crises overtake strategic planning.” This is in direct contrast to the following comment from a person with extensive experience as an agency head in government:

*At the high level, my advice to an incoming premier would be to develop a plan that establishes a vision to deliver on – goals for the State with performance targets - in consultation with individual ministers and CEOs. Make sure that in cabinet it is clear which minister is accountable for which outcome and, where there are multi-agency objectives, establish appropriate cabinet sub committees. ERC (Expenditure Review Committee) should have an overarching role and be disciplined – everything that goes through ERC should align with the objectives of the plan. The plan must be considered before budget is allocated. Government should produce an annual report on its performance against objectives.*

A key concern and point of difference among public servants was the level of specificity. Some found that high level statements of direction gave the necessary flexibility and showed staff how they fitted into “the bigger picture.” Others considered that without targets and measures of progress it was too unfocussed – esoteric as Painter put it - but these were countered by those who were of the view that any measures were far too “brave”. They saw measures of progress “as a recipe for disaster.” A contrasting view called for consequences for non-compliance and for KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) for some whole of government initiatives.

Thus the plan was variably described as a good outcome, laudable, essential but needing to be more specific, a book on a shelf and too abstract to get traction with ministers probably reflecting the range of views on the importance of and approach to strategic planning among senior people in the sector.

## Discussion

It is apparent that, despite having a premier committed to a strategic plan with goals and measurable outcomes, Western Australia produced the “least brave” of all statements in Australia – and certainly less specific than international jurisdictions such as British Columbia and Finland. It has low visibility and no measurable outcomes. Gallop supported a strategic approach when he was premier and remains committed to the importance now that he has returned to academia. Many public servants were and are keen.

I would argue that ministers, indeed all people, will do something if it is in their interests, they believe in it, and it is sufficient priority to justify the time and resources. It is apparent from the interviews and Gallop’s public statements that at least some members of cabinet and the public sector thought the development of a strategic plan was a good idea and there is no reason to suppose resources are any less available in Western Australia than anywhere else to undertake such a task if it is important to government. However, it is also apparent that there was no consensus of the form that such a plan should take. This leaves the questions as to whether or not more effort should have been made to achieving consensus on form and/or whether there is something that makes the Western Australian government and public sector “less brave” or less willing than their counterparts around the nation to make wide ranging public commitments beyond the next election. Or perhaps they are simply more realistic.

Certainly, governments in Western Australia are relatively short term, rarely getting beyond two terms (8 years) (Halligan and Power, 1992). A 2006 publication by a local academic describes the period from the mid 1980s to the end of the 1990s as “the years of scandal” and has depicted the political climate as one where “performance in parliament – image, persuasiveness, conviction – and presentation in the media, helped determine the boundaries of ministerial and government accountability” (Peachment, 2006:280-86). Indeed, Gallop’s government came in after eight years in opposition still bearing the scars of financial scandals in the 1980s and 90s and wondering if they had done “sufficient penance.” They were understandably risk-averse. There is only one state-wide local newspaper which takes a very critical and, some would say one-sided, view of the government’s performance. As a ministerial staffer observed in this research, “the media are a constant presence and premiers

either have to ignore them at their peril or they spend a lot of time responding to trivial issues.” The influence of the media on swinging voters is considered critical in determining election outcomes in Australia (Young, 2004).

In short, the political climate is one where governments are on-notice, and not expected to be in power for long periods. Indeed, Gallop’s second term was attributed, in large part, to the then leader of the opposition committing to build a canal to bring water 3 700 km from the Kimberley to Perth with a proposal that was un-costed and lacked detail (Van Onselen, 2005). On the other hand, the economy is booming and 80 per cent of the population live in one of the most liveable cities in the world. So for most people, individually, not a lot needs to be fixed.

Gallop’s own style may also have contributed to a lack of action. There seemed little doubt in the minds of any of the people interviewed that Gallop had a clear vision of what he hoped to achieve and the more interaction they had with him the clearer that sense was. However, there was also a perception that the public sector had lost senior people with “intelligence, longevity and nous, (who) could ‘capture a script’ and run with it.” It appeared to external observers that Gallop “had expectations that things would happen and did not bang heads together.” As one of his ministers said: “At the end of the day, you have to have someone who is insistent, if not the premier if that is not his style, then someone in his office or department.”

There was also a lack of clarity about priorities so there was a perception in some parts of the public sector of “many visions” and too great a focus on priorities determined by the media. However, as John Kane (2005:10) points out, premiers have to negotiate and seek compromises with people in and out of politics. Any statement that appears in any way detrimental to one group will be seized by the opposition or the media and hailed as an example of a broken promise or a poor service. For the leader, who speaks on behalf of the government, this requires crafting a message which is at once clear and unambiguous to the target audience but which leaves room to accommodate the expectations of other interest groups (Keating and Weller, 2000). Sometimes it will be necessary to pursue policies that are not supported by the majority of voters but which are judged to be in the longer term interests of the community. A media savvy leader would avoid bringing attention to them in a published and accessible document.

## Conclusion

The beginning of this paper asserted that politicians are “strategic by stealth.” This is not meant in any derogatory sense – rather the intention is to draw an image of politicians who want to be strategic, who have the long term interests of the community at heart, but who are concerned that if they are explicit about their longer term goals, their chances of re-election will be diminished for one of three reasons:

- quite simply because they cannot show progress towards the goals within an electoral cycle

- they will be criticized for proposing one set of goals at the expense of other equally worthy goals
- pursuing the selected goals will have a detrimental effect on other policy arenas

Put simply, the more explicit a government is about its intentions, the more opportunity there is for the media and opposition to target them for promises not delivered. This criticism is most likely to impact in those circumstances where populist policies aimed at swinging voters determine the outcomes of elections. In a state where things are going well, the economy is booming and 80 per cent of the population live in the 5<sup>th</sup> most livable city in the world, Chicken Little would not be believed. The sky was not, and is not, considered to be falling in, without a strategic plan. It is unlikely that swinging voters can be persuaded that something will go terribly wrong if governments are not seen to take a strategic approach to planning for the longer term.

If Tilli's (2007) conclusions are transferable to the Western Australian environment, then the commitment of politicians to defining longer term goals with any degree of specificity is unlikely. Recent experience has shown that there is little appetite. It is not in their interests to be specific about agendas beyond the next election. A different mechanism will be required, therefore, to ensure such goals are established and pursued, if strategic management is to become an established and useful part of the process of government. Public servants and others who believe in the importance of strategic planning – for whom planning is a faith as Wildavsky puts it - need to develop innovative approaches if it is to be incorporated as a tool to build a better future. If more politicians can be persuaded that long term planning is a good idea, then they are more likely to engage in debate about the way in which those plans might be articulated, presented and monitored in ways that will not diminish their chances of re-election. Several people interviewed in this research echoed a concern about lack of dialogue and debate. I suggest that a process of strategic conversations (as described by authors such as Van der Heijden, 2005) among senior bureaucrats, ministers and key advisors would be a good place to start.

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<sup>1</sup> The author is a doctoral student at Griffith University in Queensland and employed in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet in Western Australia. The support of her supervisors Prof Pat Weller and Prof John Kane, the former premier, Dr Geoff Gallop, and senior officials in the Western Australian government are acknowledged and appreciated. The views expressed however are her own. She can be contacted on [Lesley.v@bigpond.net.au](mailto:Lesley.v@bigpond.net.au) .

<sup>2</sup> Details of the forum held on 19-20 April 2020 are available at the following web site <http://www.australia2020.gov.au/>. Rudd has given himself till the end of 2008 to respond to ideas set out in a 38 page booklet released the following day. A political commentator suggested that “there will be a political price to pay as he comes to reject those ideas and hopes for which he has raised expectations” (Shanahan in the *Australian* newspaper, 21 April, page 6).

<sup>3</sup> The South Australian cabinet committee includes a community representative

<sup>4</sup> There is evidence however that the change in Premier between elections in Victoria may impact the profile of GVT. In his address to the Institute of Public Administration in September 2007, shortly after assuming office, GVT was not mentioned and in February 2008, he launched an Annual Statement of Government Intentions which was also silent on the strategy.