Abstract

The activities of Australian local governments seeking to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from households within their municipalities form part of a broader governance response to climate change. This response is driven by the threats posed by a rapidly changing climate, including rising sea levels, increasing global average temperatures and an increasing incidence of extreme weather events (Stocker et al. 2013). Households contribute to the production of greenhouse gas emissions through their everyday activities, such as heating and cooling internal space, washing, lighting, cooking and entertaining; together, these activities account for approximately 18 percent of Australian greenhouse gas emissions (Shove and Spurling 2013; Garnault 2011). As a significant actor in shaping urban environments, local governments perform a set of climate governance practices, including regulation, the provision of infrastructure, the delivery of services, advocacy and community engagement to reduce household- based emissions (Moloney and Strengers 2014; Pucher et al. 2011; Hyder Consulting 2011; Cuthill 2002; Aulich 2009). In this thesis, I focus on Australian local government climate change community engagement practices.

To understand the context within which these practices are performed, I frame climate change as a super wicked problem, which allows exploration of the governance complexities associated with climate change as well as an assessment of current and proposed policies and interventions. Climate change as a super wicked problem extends Rittel and Webber's (1973) wicked problem conception with the addition of four factors: there is a limited time to respond, the problem is caused by those seeking solutions, there is weak central governance and the value of future benefits are discounted (Levin et al. 2012). To overcome these, solutions need to be immediately popular and easy to integrate into everyday activities, embed themselves within target audiences and then spread quickly to broader populations.

Developing these solutions requires a theoretical approach that takes account of the complexities within household emissions-producing practices that may make them susceptible or resistant to change as well as governance practices performed by local governments that may help or hinder the achievement of desired changes. In my literature review (Chapter 2), I draw on practice theory as a suitable theoretical response, exploring its use and application (Shove and Spurling 2013; Shove et al. 2012; Schatzki 2015). I note that while it has proven useful in critiquing the behaviour change-based theoretical underpinnings of community engagement programs, it has yet to be widely adopted by governments (Hoolohan et al. 2018; John et al. 2009). I posit that one reason for this is an under-examination within the field of practice theory of governance practices (Keller et al. 2016). This is a gap I seek to address in this research.

In Chapter 4, I apply a practice theory lens to local government community engagement, performed by Australian local governments, designed to reduce household emissions. I draw on empirical data including interviews with 29 local government practitioners and analysis of 37 Australian local government climate strategies. I characterise community engagement as a bundle of practices, comprised of recruitment, engagement and evaluation. These practices are influenced by their relationship with other local government climate governance practices (regulation, service delivery, infrastructure provision and advocacy) as well as internal local government processes (strategic management, work and political cultures). I identify weaknesses in current performances, including limited resources, a reliance on behaviour change methodologies and the use of climate change as a motivation for action. I then draw upon Spurling et al.'s (2013) approach to re-configuring practices (re-crafting, re-integrating, substituting) and apply it to community engagement practices in order to improve their efficacy in line with the super wicked solutions criteria.

In Chapter 5, I explore how local government climate change community engagement practices have been influenced by the emergence of a new practice within households: distributed renewable energy production. As per Chapter 4, the research underpinning this chapter is based on analysis of 37 Australian local government climate strategies and interviews with practitioners from 29 local governments. I find that the widespread adoption of rooftop solar has been driven largely by pro-individual financial motivations which clash with the pro-social sustainability meanings associated with local government community engagement. As a consequence, local governments have shifted their focus away from the mainstream adoption of rooftop solar to supporting its uptake amongst audiences excluded from this market, such as low-income households and renters. I identify additional opportunities for local governments to further support distributed renewable energy production. These include interventions based on pro-individual motivations for emerging aligned technologies such as battery storage and electric vehicles, and for interventions based on pro-social motivations, such as community energy projects.

In Chapter 6, I consider an emerging governance trend amongst Australian local governments: the declaration of a climate emergency to accelerate the pace and broaden the scope of governance responses to climate change. This chapter's research is based upon a review of four guidance documents generated by climate emergency activists and authors, 95 local government motions declaring, acknowledging or recognising a climate emergency, 25 local government climate emergency strategies, relevant academic literature and public statements by key actors. I analyse guidance produced by activists and early-mover local governments on climate emergency governance, identifying four common principles: a call for faster reduction of emissions, new roles for communities as advocates to higher tiers of government and co-managers of the local climate emergency response, the embedding of climate change through all council operations and increased

collaboration with key stakeholders. These principles have been adapted by Australian local governments in their motions and strategies, to varying degrees, but a question is raised as to whether business-as-usual performances of climate governance practice will be sufficient to meet the demands of the climate emergency.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I consider that if business-as-usual practices will not deliver effective climate emergency governance then other alternatives should be explored. In doing so, I propose a framework based upon transition management but incorporating elements of practice theory, notably Watson's (2012) systems of practice. This not only provides a forward-looking process to drive transitions but also examines the relationships between individual practices in relevant systems (in this instance, energy provision) and local government climate governance practices.

I conclude the thesis reflecting on avenues for further research, including deeper analysis of precisely how local government community engagement practices interact with household practices, how other climate governance practices are constructed and performed and how local governments may develop and deliver transition management processes to achieve their climate governance objectives.