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Opportunities for more ecologically centred and equitable relations in local government environmental discourse: insights from Victoria, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The environment is a complex, life-sustaining, biocultural system. In the context of climate change, biodiversity decline, social inequalities, and calls for transformative change, it is crucial to examine how the environment is represented in policy because environmental representations have implications for governance and material effects. Policy documents express values and shape responsibilities and actions, and power is imbued in the representations and discourses that underpin them. Local government has increasing responsibilities and expectations in relation to the environment, and unique opportunities and constraints including its proximity to the people and environments it represents. This research narrows in to analyse local government discourses in legislated four-year plans in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia, for a detailed example of environmental discourses within a time and place. We ask — what are the distinct and overlapping characteristics of environmental discourses within local governments' strategic plans, and what opportunities do they present towards more ecologically centred and equitable representations? Drawing on a taxonomy of environmental discourses developed by John Dryzek, we find alignments that indicate the dominant discourses are "reformist". However, there are divergences that lean into the more "radical" discourses through their focus on relationships of care and stewardship of the environment, and qualitative representations of diverse communities and recognition of their political capabilities. We draw on these findings to consider opportunities and challenges of extending environmental discourses in policy towards a relational approach that centres nature and social equity.

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Environment policy; sustainability; social justice; local government; discourse analysis; environmental representations

Introduction

Environmental issues are represented as complex and contested problems for policy making (Crowley and Head 2017). The environment is a complex, life-sustaining, biocultural system and as a policy "problem" it crosses boundaries of time, scale, and authority; involves a range of entities and relationships, and often competing interests of diverse communities; and is an issue of social and ecological justice (Carter 2018). International efforts focus on a range of issues including climate

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change (IPCC 2022); biodiversity and ecosystems (IPBES 2019); and ending plastic pollution (Andersen 2022). These three issues have been referred to by the United Nations as "the triple planetary crisis" (Andersen 2022). Amidst this complexity and urgency are calls for transformative change (e.g. IPBES 2019).

Policies are crucial texts for analysis because they are "official" documents that express values; direct roles, responsibilities, authority, and the commitment of resources; and have material effects. Many different actors have authority over defined spaces, and in Australia, local government has been established through Acts of Parliament by state governments to deliver services at the local scale (Ryan and Lawrie 2021). Local government has a particular role in relation to environment policy, described as "the level closest to the people" (Lindseth 2004, 328) and that "its environmental actions remain the most immediate" (Crowley 1998, 91). Since the 1980s, local government has experienced increasing responsibilities and expectations regarding environmental management and sustainable development (Thomas 2010). Considerable academic and practical attention has been directed towards the role of local government in environmental governance, including nature conservation and urban greening (Bush 2020; Bush, Coffey, and de Kleyn 2023; Dunn 2010; Thomas 2010) and climate emergency (Chou 2021; Davidson et al. 2020; Greenfield, Moloney, and Granberg 2022) however, limited attention has been directed towards analysing broader environmental discourses in local government policy.

Given the authority of environment policy in articulating and influencing relationships with the environment and between people, analysing environmental discourses is of democratic and human interest. Following Hajer (1995, 67), discourses can be considered as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices". Imbued with power, discourses generate their own "argumentative rationality" through their meanings, assumptions, and accepted ways of knowing; and have effects (Coffey 2016; Hajer and Versteeg 2005, 176). Discourses are used, explicitly and implicitly, in politics to understand issues, to enlist people to perspectives, and to achieve specific ends (Riedy, Kent, and Thompson 2019). Shared understanding can be assumed, though different meanings are often held by different groups, with "sustainability" as a primary example (Brook 2005). While discourses are structurally reinforced and resistant to change, they are also contested and dynamic and analysis is interested in how representations are produced, maintained, change, and differ (Buijs et al. 2012).

This research analyses environmental discourses in local government Council Plans, with an interest in unpacking how local governments represent the environment and their role in its governance. We chose the Merri Creek Catchment in metropolitan Melbourne, which encompasses six local government jurisdictions, as the site for analysis. Selecting a catchment foregrounds an ecological boundary and enables analysis of aligned but distinct socio-economic situations and discursive contexts in a place and a particular time. The Merri Creek is named the Merri Merri by the Wurundjeri People, the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters, and "merri" means rocky in Wurundjeri (Mathews 2003).

Our purpose is to analyse the meanings and assumptions expressed in local government discourses to explore opportunities that contribute to a deeper relational approach that is ecologically centred and socially equitable. The structure of this article is as follows. We review literature on environmental governance, with a focus on environmental discourses and the role of local government in Australia to contextualise the discourses within the strategic plans. Thereafter we explain the research methodology and methods and use of Dryzek's (2013) approach to environmental discourse analysis. We present and discuss the findings for each Council Plan focussing on the dominant discourses within each Plan and their internal tensions. We then discuss alignments across the Plans, which demonstrate that the dominant environmental discourses in the catchment are "reformist" (Dryzek 2013). Further, we discuss divergences that lean towards more "radical" environmental discourses (Dryzek 2013). The resulting analysis identifies what is common and distinct about the discourses, and opportunities to expand and realise more progressive environmental and social representations in local government.

Environmental governance and evolving local government responsibilities

The overarching structure of government in Australia, including local government systems, has developed in the context of settler colonialism (Grant and Drew 2017). Neither "the environment" nor local government are recognised in the Australian Constitution, however, both have been instituted through legislative and policy mechanisms (Thomas 2010). Broadly, the 1992 Inter-Governmental Agreement on the Environment, updated in 1997, distinguishes roles and responsibilities for federal and state government such that "Policy development, programme delivery and decision-making should be the responsibility of the level of government best placed to deliver agreed outcomes" (Department of Climate Change 1997). Local government was enacted through state legislation and is the lowest tier of government, responsible for delivering services at the local scale (Henderson 2018a). While this legislative structure is similar to other federations, Grant and Aroney (2023) explain that, in comparison, local government in Australia has a more limited role, and note that the major cities are on the same administrative level as other smaller municipalities and shires (comprising regional and rural areas), albeit with vastly different remits.

In Victoria, local government responsibilities are included "under more than 120 pieces of Victorian legislation" (State Government of Victoria 2024). Responsibilities include "land use planning and building control, public health services, domestic animal control, and environmental protection legislation" and "maintaining community infrastructure" (State Government of Victoria 2024). Local government expenditure in Victoria in 2021-2022 demonstrates a strong commitment to "recreation, culture and religion" accounting for 19% (rounded percentage) of the budget in the financial year, which was equal to the expenditure on roads (Grant and Aroney 2023, 179–180).

Roles and responsibilities are enacted in unique contexts. Local governments are elected by, and responsible to, their local communities; they have distinct environmental, socio-economic, and demographic characteristics; and experience significant disparities in their area, population, and revenue (see Grant and Aroney 2023). Central to literature on local government in Australia is the tensions between: meeting legislative and policy directions of higher tiers of government; responding to local community needs; allocating limited resources; being reliant on higher levels of government for service provision in their municipality; being dependent on the aspirations and capabilities of the council and the bureaucracy as the representative and administrative arms of local government; structural reform; and being influenced by local conditions (de Vries 2021; Dunn 2010; Grant and Aroney 2023; Grant and Drew 2017; Henderson 2018a, 2018b; Pivo, Henry, and Berger 2020; Thomas 2010).

As a political institution, and one that is a "creature of statute" (Grant and Drew 2017, 182), local government powers are enabled and constrained through relations with a range of actors. Local governments are acknowledged for their role in fostering local democracy, including by the sector (de Vries 2021) and within academia (Grant and Drew 2017). Local governments also have conditional autonomy, relating to concepts of immunity from the influence of other levels of government, and the potential for initiative (Grant and Drew 2017). Local government amalgamations are clear evidence of a lack of immunity (Grant and Drew 2017), as is the ability of the states to override local government strategic planning and development schemes, which include local ecological considerations (Crowley 1998). Constraints on initiative are evidenced by state government responses to local government actions to oppose and reframe Australia's National Day in support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Busbridge and Chao 2022).

Evolving environmental responsibilities and discourses

Local government powers have been extended over time to include environmental matters (Thomas 2010). Environmental discourses are an expression of government authority and power in the ways that they explicitly and implicitly structure goals, principles, associated issues, and roles and responsibilities, as well as knowledge and approaches that are legitimised within the discourse. Discourse

analysis has been applied to a range of environmental policy issues and practice in the Australian context including sustainability (Coffey and Marston 2013), climate change (Bulkeley 2000), wind energy (Jessup 2010), landscape professions (Brook 2005), and environmental governance (Riedy, Kent, and Thompson 2019). The importance of policy discourse analysis in relation to local government is demonstrated by Taylor, Fitzgibbons, and Mitchell's (2021) analysis of representations of the future in city resilience policies. The authors find that resilience is predominantly characterised in retrospective terms, and there is limited scoping of future risks in relation to what is currently unknown, raising their concern that downplaying risk and uncertainty means that cities will be unprepared for future shocks and stresses.

Discourses shift in response to a range of influences across time, scale, and levels of governance, and pressures and trends can be identified in the Australian context. The underlying dominant neocolonial environmental discourse has been one of problem-solving focussed on responding to environmental problems, particularly when environmental issues were gaining attention in the 1960s and 1970s. Government responses focussed on protecting (some) people and property by removing hazards and conserving select places and species. While discourses and their application are dynamic, the problem-solving discourse is pervasive in Australia.

Sustainability is also widely deployed in local government discourse. Local Agenda 21, deriving from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, was utilised by early adopters in local government in Australia and later replaced by general sustainability policies, planning, and associated activities (Thomas 2010), and more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (Barrett, Horne, and Fien 2020). In practice, discourses and their assumptions can be employed by a range of actors to support their interests, for example, McManus and Haughton (2020) analyse the use of sustainable development by opposers and proponents of the WestConnex motorway in Sydney, Australia.

The urgency of climate change and linking social justice issues and the environment have brought renewed attention and frames within discourses of "environmental politics" (Dryzek 2013). Frames of climate justice, and climate emergency, have resulted in innovative action from local government (Davidson et al. 2020; Moloney and Fünfgeld 2015). Environmental justice is a plural approach (Schlosberg et al. 2024) that responds to the unequal distribution of environmental burdens, risks, and benefits in society and foregrounds the perspectives of marginalised communities for change (Bullard 1990). It has received explicit consideration in government in Victoria (Jessup 2017) and has been applied in activism and research, including as a frame to analyse local government responses to sea level rise (Graham and Barnett 2017). Discourses of decolonisation are further challenging settler colonial governance in Australia. Nursey-Bray, Marsh, and Ross (2010) use discourse analysis to examine perspectives of First Nations peoples in the Hope Vale community, and management agency staff, on Indigenous hunting of turtle and dugong in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, Queensland. The authors reveal imbalances in the constructions of power and knowledge in environmental management and argue that equity is required to enable cultural survival and biodiversity protection (Nursey-Bray, Marsh, and Ross 2010). Discourses of environmental justice and decolonisation attend to power disparities, link the environment to social justice, and advocate for transformative change.

Considering environmental governance, local level responsibilities, and environmental discourses in Australia draws attention to issues relevant for analysis. Each shift in environmental discourse brings tensions such as those over (1) who is recognised in the discourse and how they are positioned, (2) the species and systems that are made visible, unacknowledged, or erased, (3) the knowledges that are legitimised and foregrounded, and the (4) prevalence and nature of democratic decision-making (analysis consistent with Cooke 2020). The normative end of such analysis aims to strengthen the relationship between conceptions of the environment, equitable social relations, and governance as theorised within ecological democracy (Dryzek 1995; Eckersley 2020; Schlosberg 2014). Specifically, bringing discourses, and their assumptions and tensions to the foreground,

supports democratic discussion and the development of frames to promote beneficial relationships for the environment, people, social equity, and governance.

Uncovering relationships in urban environments

According to Dryzek (2013), it is useful to appreciate the diversity of environmental discourses because discourses underlie the way the environment is constructed including the ways that problems are framed, discussed, and analysed. Discourse analysis attends to representations of the physical world, different forms of communication and particularly language and practices, and their structural and material manifestations (Hajer 1995). The analysis considers the entities that are acknowledged and those that are absent, how entities are characterised and understood, and the relationships between things. Collectively, representations and discourses normalise their own expressions, thereby perpetuating their meanings, assumptions, and effects. However, discourse analysis recognises and highlights contestation, and how contestation contributes to change (Buijs et al. 2012).

Policy discourse analysis is viewed as having three strengths: it provides "the capacity to reveal the role of language in politics, to reveal the embeddedness of language in practice and to illuminate mechanisms and answer 'how questions'" (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, 176). Dryzek (2013, 20) identifies the elements that underpin environmental discourses including:

- "Basic entities recognized or constructed
- Assumptions about natural relationships
- Agents and their motives
- Key metaphors and other rhetorical devices".

Through these elements, Dryzek (2013) categorises environmental discourses based on their (1) ideas and (2) approaches. Each category includes a spectrum on which distinct environmental discourses sit:

(1) Ideas: whether assertions are reformist or radical relative to their acceptance of industrialisation conceptualised such that perpetual growth in goods and services leads to material wellbeing and social improvement, and
(2) Approaches: whether the required responses to environmental issues are prosaic such that we have the tools we need to solve environmental problems, or imaginative such that new approaches are required that seek to redefine problems and relationships for structural change (Dryzek 2013).

Table 1 shows Dryzek's (2013) classification of environmental discourses, each of which represents a particular vision and approach. Figure 1 provides a brief description of each overarching category

Table 1. Classifying environmental discourses.

Classifying environmental discourses		
	Reformist	Radical
Prosaic	Problem solving • Prometheans • Administrative Rationalism • Democratic Pragmatism • Economic Rationalism	Limits and survival • Survivalism
Imaginative	Sustainability • Sustainable Development • Ecological Modernisation	Green radicalism • Environmental Politics • Green Consciousness

Source: compiled from Dryzek (2013).

Key categories of Dryzek's (2013) environmental discourses

- **Problem solving:** These discourses accept liberal capitalism and frame the environment as separate from humans. They either don't acknowledge environmental problems because humans will use their ingenuity to meet their needs (Prometheans) or acknowledge environmental problems and respond using established tools such as rational administrative management undertaken by leaders and experts for the public good (Administrative Rationalism), democratic processes to engage diverse communities on complex environmental problems (Democratic Pragmatism), or market mechanisms (Economic Rationalism).
- **Limits and survival:** The single discourse in this category argues that the world is finite and there are limits to growth. Environmental problems can be determined through modelling and experts and leaders are needed to make decisions for the public good.
- **Sustainability:** These discourses accept growth as contributing to material wellbeing and bring together a range of actors to develop imaginative responses to change for example, attending to social justice and ecological health in responses for long-term sustainability (Sustainability); and bringing a range of actors together for collaborative decision-making to respond to environmental issues framed as opportunities (Ecological Modernisation).
- **Green radicalism:** These discourses recognise global limits and seek a new consciousness and corresponding change based on an understanding of interconnectedness and a return to balance in natural relationships (Green Consciousness), or a recognition of interlinked social and environmental injustice and the need for structural change of social, political, and economic institutions (Green Politics).

Figure 1. An overview of Dryzek's key categories of environmental discourses.

and discourse. This schema provides useful insights into the various positions and perspectives evident within (primarily western) environmental policy debates. For example, it illustrates that responses based on "managerial" discourses emphasise the economic, administrative, or consultative dimensions, whereas radical responses call for systemic change and centre a new and distinct politics and/or representation of the environment. Dryzek's (2013) analysis also illustrates the presence of rational and romantic approaches. However, a weakness of Dryzek's (2013) taxonomy is its limited engagement with non-western discourses, and environmental discourses of Australia's First Nations peoples (e.g. Rose 1996).

Analysing discourses in context

In Victoria, the *Local Government Act* (2020) requires newly elected local councils to develop a Council Plan that has effect from 1 July the following year and covers a period of at least four financial years (Parliament of Victoria 2020). Council Plans are the highest-level and broadest strategic council document, with which all other council policies, strategies, and plans align. We investigated Council Plans to analyse the broadest representation of the environment, a document that is

directive, and a document with the opportunity for commensurate interpretation across local government areas.

We selected Council Plans within the Merri Creek catchment in Victoria, Australia, to foreground an ecological boundary. Merri Creek extends more than 60 kilometres and flows through six local councils in the north of the metropolitan Melbourne region (Merri Creek Management Committee 2012) (see Figure 2 below). Our primary research question is: what are the distinct and overlapping characteristics of environmental discourses within local councils' strategic plans, and what opportunities do they present for more ecologically informed and equitable governance?

We developed three sub questions:

1. How is the environment represented including associated relationships with actors and institutions?
2. Which environmental discourses direct each plan, and which are dominant across the plans?
3. What are the distinctions, inherent contradictions, and extensions towards more ecologically centred and equitable representations?

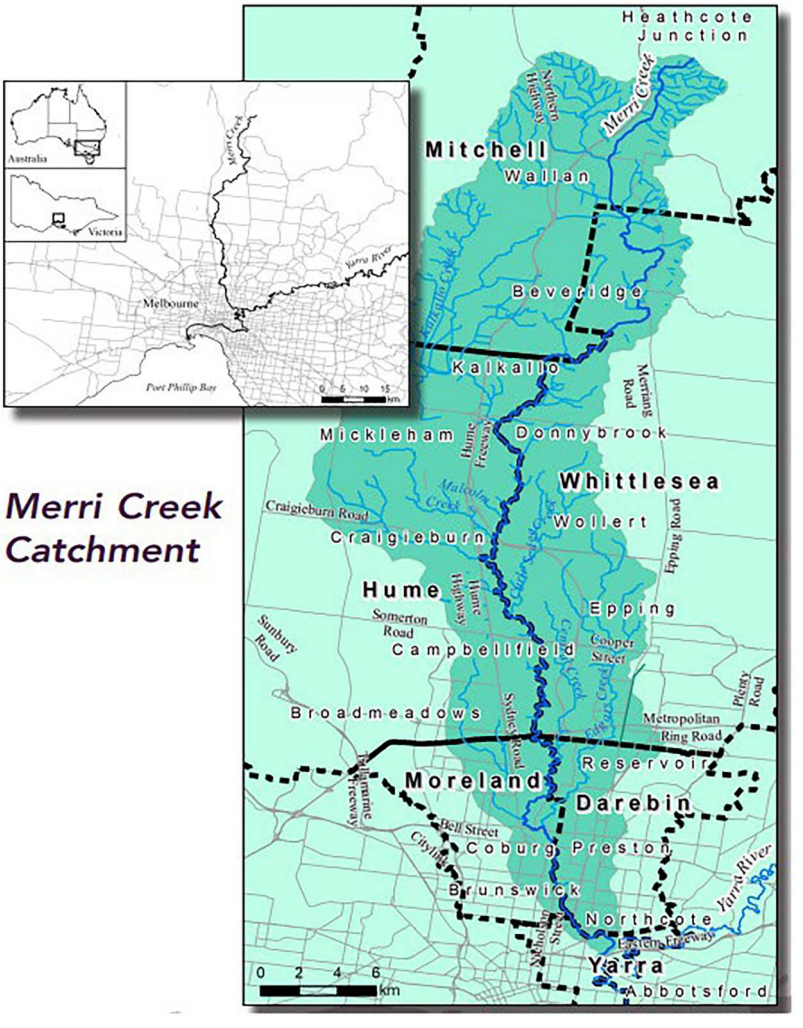

Figure 2. Locations of Merri Creek Catchment and councils (Merri Creek Management Committee 2012, 12).

To analyse the plans, we identified Dryzek's (2013, 20) "key elements for the analysis of discourses" (stated above) within each plan, focussing on the words, statements, strategic directions, imagery, and document structure. We used an iterative and collaborative approach to work through specific sections of the plans; identify the key discourses represented by each individual plan; compare the discourses across the plans; and develop our findings. Our interpretation involved a relational analysis of the elements within the plans (e.g. what was represented, how, in what order, where it was placed in the document and on the page, and emphasis). This allowed for a qualitative interpretation of how the representations of entities, assumptions and actors aligned with the classifications of environmental discourses as described in Figure 1. Reference details for each document are included in the reference list (City of Darebin 2017; City of Whittlesea 2017; City of Yarra 2017; Hume City Council 2017; Mitchell Shire Council 2017; Moreland City Council 2017).

In line with the relational approach, we present the findings below using a narrative style to represent the holistic nature of the ways discourses are infused in documents. The key aspects of the documents that we discuss are (1) naming the dominant and subordinate discourses, (2) providing socio-spatial context about the local government, (3) identifying how the strategic directions are framed, and (4) explaining key aspects of the documents that demonstrate the environmental discourses. Further, in Australia, an "Acknowledgement of Country" is included in formal government documents to recognise First Nations peoples in a settler colonial country (Pelizzon and Kennedy 2019). In line with this practice, the Traditional Custodians are acknowledged in relation to each plan.

Results

The following overviews highlight the primary discourses in each Council Plan based on interpretive analysis of the entities, relationships, and roles represented. A short context for each local government is presented to situate each plan.

Mitchell Shire Council

Two primary discourses: democratic pragmatism and sustainable development

Mitchell Shire Council is around 40 kilometres north of Melbourne, covering 2,862 square kilometres, with approximately 49,000 people (Mitchell Shire Council 2022). Mitchell Shire is one of the fastest-growing outer metropolitan municipalities, including a mix of rural and urban living, and some people experiencing significant socio-economic disadvantage (Mitchell Shire Council 2017). The council acknowledges "the Taungurung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways" (Mitchell Shire Council 2022). The Plan has seven Strategic Objectives: (1) Advocacy, (2) Community participation, (3) Responsible planning, (4) Strong communities, (5) Supporting local jobs and quality investment, (6) Financial and organisational management, and (7) Caring for our environment.

Democratic Pragmatism is foregrounded through the acknowledgement of different agents and their interests (including public-interest and self-interest) within decision-making processes in a liberal capitalist democratic structure. For example, the community is represented as having an important voice in influencing the plan, and the Council's objectives include to "relentlessly advocate for funding" to state government; and to "demand" best practice in development (Mitchell Shire Council 2017, 13). The strategic objectives are prosaic including community participation, supporting local jobs and investment, and financial and organisational management.

The plan also demonstrates imaginative approaches associated with Sustainable Development of building and nurturing strong communities and Green Consciousness through caring for the environment and being responsible custodians. Such language was not used in the other plans thereby extending the representation of the environment across the plans.

City of Whittlesea

Primary discourse: administrative rationalism. Sustainable development is present

The City of Whittlesea is approximately 20 kilometres north of Melbourne, covering 489 square kilometres, with approximately 229,396 people (City of Whittlesea 2022). The Wurundjeri Willum Clan and Taungurung People are acknowledged as the Traditional Owners (City of Whittlesea 2022). The strategic approach is framed through top-down language of "council priorities" and "council goals" (City of Whittlesea 2017, 5). The priorities are: (1) Roads, Access and Public Transport, (2) Health and Wellbeing, (3) Community Safety, (4) Jobs and Investment, (5) Organisational Sustainability, (6) Planning and Infrastructure, and (7) Environmental Sustainability.

The Message from the Mayor demonstrates a managerial logic. While the community is described as culturally diverse, council's role is based on service provision for the public good – representing unitary public interest. Balancing costs and community expectations is represented as trade-offs. A prosaic narrative is apparent in the priorities and goals – "grow our economy", "attracting jobs and investment", working "sharper and smarter", and "value for money" (City of Whittlesea 2017, 5).

The environmental priority is framed as environmental sustainability, and the key strategies present clear prosaic relationships:

- rural land is managed,
- resource use and pollution are to be reduced,
- the community is helped to live sustainably, and
- native flora and fauna are to be protected.

Native flora and fauna are distinct environmental entities and extend the representation of the environment across the plans.

Hume City Council

Primary discourse: sustainable development

Hume City Council is on the northern fringe, covering 504 square kilometres, with almost 258,000 residents (Hume City Council 2022). The plan acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung as the Traditional Custodians of the land for over 40,000 years and states: "Council embraces Aboriginal living culture as a vital part of Australia's identity and recognises, celebrates and pays respect to the existing family members of the Gunung-Willam-Balluk and to Elders past and present" (Hume City Council 2017, p. ii). The strategic approach is aspirational and humanistic, framed through "themes", indicating qualitative understanding. The themes are (1) A well-educated and employed community, (2) A healthy and safe community, (3) A culturally vibrant and connected community, (4) A sustainably built and well-maintained City with an environmentally engaged community, and (5) A well-governed and engaged community.

Social justice and sustainability are guiding principles in the overarching corporate planning framework. The plan's themes are consistent with Sustainable Development whereby growth involves "self-conscious improvement" (Dryzek 2013, 159). The environment is represented as the city, which will be sustainable and well-maintained for community benefit, in essence, a utility for human benefit and subordinate in the narrative.

The qualitative and caring representation of the community is unique across the plans. Extensive detail is provided, including specific quotes from community members, and the council states its intention to work in partnership with community organisations acknowledging community capabilities.

Darebin City Council

Primary discourse: ecological modernisation

Darebin City Council is an inner metropolitan municipality, covering 53.44 square kilometres, with approximately 150,335 people in 2020 (.id consulting Pty Ltd 2022a). The council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Owners and Custodians (City of Darebin 2022). Through a key strategy, the plan acknowledges and respects Traditional Owners and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' history, Culture, aspirations, and leadership towards self-determination (City of Darebin 2017). The strategic objectives are framed as "goals" – linking to the idea of progress. The goals are: (1) We will be leaders in creating a sustainable city through local innovation projects that address climate change, (2) We will improve the wellbeing of people in our community by providing opportunities for them to live their lives well, (3) We will ensure our planning system facilitates high-quality and sustainable development that extracts social, environmental and economic benefits for our community, (4) We will support and attract a diversity of local businesses and industries by fostering an environment in which they can thrive, (5) We will lead on equity and recognise our diverse community as our greatest asset for solving future challenges, (6) We will be a leading, modern, and open council to meet our challenges, now and in the future.

The goals are expressed through economic and entrepreneurial sentiments including being "leaders", "providing opportunities", extracting benefits, thriving, innovation, and the community as their "greatest asset" (City of Darebin 2017, 3). The environment is represented by two separate goals. The first goal represents sustainability and responding to climate change as opportunities, and in the third goal, the environment is a resource that can be extracted through the planning system. Therefore, economic and environmental value are linked, and the environment is represented as an "adjunct" to the "human economy" (Dryzek 2013, 173).

The plan is the only one (at this time) that declared a climate emergency and stated support for the Victorian government's work to negotiate a treaty with First Nations peoples.

Merri-bek City Council (formerly Moreland City Council)

Primary discourse: sustainable development

Merri-bek City Council is an inner metropolitan municipality, covering 50.9 square kilometres, with approximately 173,541 residents (.id consulting Pty Ltd 2022b). The council acknowledges the "Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional custodians" (Merri-bek City Council 2021). The plan has three strategic objectives: (1) Connected Community, (2) Progressive City, and (3) Responsible Council.

The plan situates the council's local challenges and opportunities within major global trends including increasing population, development, urbanisation, digitisation, and diversity (Moreland City Council 2017, 13). The plan is framed to span time, such that it addresses current services, plans, and considerations for the future. The community is represented as diverse and growing and diversity is said to enrich the municipality.

The plan is expressed as one of positivity and benign growth. The three objectives derive from the vision "Moreland will be known for its proud diversity, and for being a connected, progressive and sustainable city in which to live, work and play" (Moreland City Council 2017, 2). Environmental priorities have been included in the progressive city objective, again, representing the environment as the city, and as a utility. The guiding assumption about natural relationships reflects sustainable development: "the positive-sum one: economic growth, environmental protection, distributive justice, and long-term sustainability are mutually reinforcing" (Dryzek 2013, 155).

Yarra City Council

Primary discourse: sustainable development. Secondary discourse: green politics

The City of Yarra is an inner metropolitan municipality, covering 19.5 square kilometres, with approximately 100,000 people (City of Yarra 2022). The plan acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi

Wurrung People as the "true sovereigns, caretakers and custodians of the land now known as Yarra" (City of Yarra 2017, 28). The plan locates First Nations People's politics in Victoria in the area:

> Fitzroy and Collingwood are areas of special significance to Aboriginal people – as the cradle of Aboriginal affairs in Victoria, the birthplace of important Aboriginal organisations, the centre of political activism and as a meeting place for Aboriginal people to link in with family, community and services (City of Yarra 2017, 28).

The seven objectives are: (1) A Healthy Yarra, (2) An Inclusive Yarra, (3) A Sustainable Yarra, (4) A Liveable Yarra, (5) A Prosperous Yarra, (6) A Connected Yarra, and (7) A Leading Yarra. The objectives present a contemporary and progressive approach bringing together a range of goals and a positive narrative of growth, characteristic of Sustainable Development. The environment is represented in the third objective, and the dominant representation is the environment as a utility.

Green Politics is apparent and distinct across the plans. Structural influences on health and wellbeing are acknowledged and the plan states its "commitment to achieving social justice" (City of Yarra 2017, 28). The City of Yarra's engagement includes the Liveable Yarra "People's Panel", which brings its interest in "multiculturalism, political activism and environmental consciousness" (City of Yarra 2017, 6).

Appreciating environmental discourses

Environmental discourse analysis facilitates the appreciation of representations of the environment, actors, and relationships. The clarity of discourses within each plan was unexpected, however, there were also important, divergent statements internally and across the plans. We draw on these openings to provide insight into the potential for change.

The stable core across the four-year plans

The discourses demonstrate that the dominant ideology is "reformist" (Dryzek 2013). The reformist discourses include Administrative Rationalism (reformist/prosaic – interpreted as the primary discourse in one plan), Democratic Pragmatism (reformist/prosaic – interpreted as the primary discourse in one plan), Sustainable Development (reformist/imaginative – interpreted as either the primary or secondary discourse in five plans), and Ecological Modernisation (reformist/imaginative – interpreted as the primary discourse in one plan). The "reformist" narrative is demonstrated through the central ideas that align with the tenets of industrial development including a commitment to growth as fundamental to people's wellbeing and a representation of the environment as separate, segmented, and subordinate to people. This "discursive hegemony" is structured, such that the narrative and agents have "coherence and credibility" (Bulkeley 2000, 735). Considering the national context of environmental discourses described in the introduction, the discourses can be understood to align with dominant and evolving environmental discourses from a fundamentally problem-solving approach to sustainable development, and moving into market-based approaches, and environmental politics.

Discourses are employed to engage actors and facilitate outcomes (Riedy, Kent, and Thompson 2019), which brings the state and local scales into view. Two of the environmental discourses are prosaic including "Administrative Rationalism" and "Democratic Pragmatism" (Dryzek 2013). As problem-solving discourses, environmental issues are understood to warrant attention but not structural change (Dryzek 2013). These discourses derive from the outer-Melbourne councils. Mitchell Shire Council and City of Whittlesea have a significantly larger area within their jurisdictions including a range of environments such as rural and forested land, and distinct social considerations including rapid population growth and demographic diversity, and significant socio-economic disadvantage. Problem-solving, advocacy, and a focus on economic development and service provision are central to these councils' priorities, which is consistent with cities experiencing acute concerns (see Taylor, Fitzgibbons, and Mitchell 2021). Further, all Council Plans have functions including

supporting advocacy to the state government for financial support and service provision (Henderson 2018a) and the two Council Plans strategically set the foundation for advocacy.

Dryzek (2013) explains that discourses may persist if they are seen to be effective (particularly Administrative Rationalism) and they are not questioned. A shift into the imaginative discourses is apparent in the more affluent inner-Melbourne councils, which have a much smaller area, greater population density, and while there are significant socio-economic inequalities, these municipalities have a more advantaged population and well-established infrastructure. For example, Ecological Modernisation is apparent within the Darebin City Council Plan, a local government area that is experiencing significant gentrification. The local scale shows that administrative boundaries have the effect that

> elected representatives are not institutionally obliged to answer to any community other than their electorates or their nation for the ecological consequences of their decisions, even when it can be clearly foreseen that other communities, now and in the future, will be seriously harmed. (Eckersley 2020, 218)

The result of the influence of scale in this research is disparate discourses within an ecological boundary.

Divergences and extensions from the dominant discourses

There are divergences between the plans that indicate opportunities for renewed representations of the environment and communities towards a more ecologically centred, equitable, and democratic approach including:

- nurturing and qualitative representations of communities and acknowledgement of their capabilities for political engagement,
- acknowledgement of First Nations peoples as Traditional Custodians, and supporting treaty and First Nations peoples' right to self-determine, and
- care and stewardship in relation to the environment.

Recognition of the community as knowledgeable, politically capable, and diverse, creates an opportunity to empower communities in governance and move beyond problem-solving discourses whereby the impetus for engagement derives from encouraging the administration to be more "flexible and responsive" as well as "a felt need to secure legitimacy for decisions by involving a broader public" (Dryzek 2013, 100). A primary example is the City of Yarra's Liveable Yarra "People's Panel". Such approaches in Green Politics create spaces where critique and alternatives can arise and be expressed (Dryzek 2013). In addition, Hume City Council's plan was informed by a prior extended community engagement process, which contributed to a rich, humanistic, and qualitative representation of the community and an aspirational and normative direction. Implicit in the discourses of both councils is positioning people as having the capabilities to contribute to local governance.

The majority of the plans start with an Acknowledgement of Country and recognise the Traditional Custodians of the land, sky, and waters associated with the location of each plan. Recognition situates the plans in First Nations People's sovereignty and cultural connections to Country that span tens of thousands of years and hold responsibility for generations to come. Pelizzon and Kennedy (2019, 14) argue "that both 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgment of Country' practices constitute performative acts of ongoing protest against hegemonic claims over Australian land". Darebin City Council states support for Victoria's treaty process, Pathway to Treaty, which commenced in 2016, which has transformative potential. Subsequent to these plans, analysis has identified the three inner-Melbourne local governments as having taken action against Australia's national day, including City of Yarra, and Darebin City Council, both cancelling celebrations and citizenship ceremonies and Moreland City Council committing to the national "Change the date" campaign (Busbridge and Chao 2022, 79).

Representations of the environment are extended within the plans. City of Darebin had declared a climate emergency generating urgency in the plan. A sense of urgency, such that action is necessary, not just desirable, aligns with some of the radical discourses including Limits to Growth and Green Consciousness (Dryzek 2013). However, Darebin's approach aligns with Ecological Modernisation in advocating for a consensual approach to policy making with a range of actors whereby – "environmental values can support economic values" (Dryzek 2013, 171). Employing tools that reinforce structures that arguably interrupt closer relations to people and the environment is problematic. McManus and Haughton (2020) describe such tools and processes as "postpolitical".

City of Whittlesea and City of Yarra added distinct environmental entities of native flora and fauna and biodiversity inviting recognition of a range of species. Such recognition opens opportunities for representing the interests of non-humans, a tenet of "ecological democracy" (Dryzek 1995; Eckersley 2020; Pickering, Bäckstrand, and Schlosberg 2020). Mitchell Shire Council included a primary role of caring for the environment by being responsible custodians. This representation diverges from the environment as a problem or opportunity, and rather, expresses a relational approach of connectedness and care. Such an approach aligns with Green Consciousness and specifically green romanticism, which seeks change "through cultivation of more empathetic and less manipulative orientations towards nature and other people" (Dryzek 2013, 196). Empathetic relationships, and particularly those that recognise mutual dependence and beneficence such as "deep equity" (Takacs 2020), have the potential to create new environmental sensibilities that can change cultures and social structures.

Leading change

In researching local government action towards sustainability in New South Wales, Australia, Dunn (2010, 352) asks: "are council approaches to implementing sustainability like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic? That is, are councils spending time and effort focusing on trivial and superficial things when the crucial interventions for averting the 'impending disaster' are being neglected?" While these questions relate to action, they can also be applied to environmental representations, as an acknowledgement of the transformative potential of discourse (Pickering, Bäckstrand, and Schlosberg 2020). The radical elements in the Council Plans are relationships of care and custodianship, recognition of environmental limits, recognition of community capabilities, and opening critique and alternatives arising in green politics. Dryzek (2013, 234) argues that change requires analysis of the liberal capitalist political economy and effective interventions in its current state and trajectory, and the need for "collective learning in an ecological context".

Structural change is required if councils embrace their more progressive statements including aligning laws, policies, strategies, programmes, tools, services, funding, and review mechanisms. Drawing on Lindseth (2004) and Brook (2005), this is needed for reality to be constructed, and to live up to rhetoric. This endeavour involves considerable constraints. Creating structural change, within a political economy that has upheld, entrenched, and perpetuated dominant reformist and prosaic discourses, including conceptions of separateness between people and the environment, administrative boundaries, a narrow conceptualisation of "expertise", and approaches such as competitive funding, presents as an exceptional challenge given that some structures need to be removed, replaced, and others may not exist. However, there are opportunities to be explored and innovative action has been demonstrated (de Vries 2021; Greenfield, Moloney, and Granberg 2022).

In creating change, institutions can not only resist change, but they can also "protect existing progress towards effective environmental governance" (Riedy, Kent, and Thompson 2019, 151). The Council Plans lead to consideration of new opportunities such as how the siloed approach to the environment might be dismantled and instead, the environment centred across all issues and sectors, while ensuring environmental priorities are protected (Lindseth 2004). Eckersley (2020, 218) writes that administrative boundaries "bear little relationship to nested

ecological boundaries". Aligning responsibilities with ecological boundaries would enable shared decision-making, responsibilities, and resource allocation within the catchment, and this relationship could be founded on care and stewardship. Statements that strengthen First Nations peoples' right to self-determine challenge settler colonial governance for transformation. Realising these opportunities has the potential to deepen the relationship between the environment and democratic values (Pickering, Bäckstrand, and Schlosberg 2020).

Conclusion

Environmental discourses in policy and governance shape how the environment is represented, including problems and opportunities, and associated responses. This research analysed environmental discourses in the four-year plans of six local governments in metropolitan Melbourne, Victoria. We find that the discourses in the plans are predominantly reformist, such that they accept the tenets of industrialisation and economic growth as facilitating wellbeing and represent the environment as subordinate to human interests. However, the approaches to environmental issues range from prosaic to imaginative in line with evolving environmental discourses in Australia that emphasise problem-solving, sustainable development, and market-based and collaborative approaches through ecological modernisation. Further, the discourses analysed are situated and reflective of the socio-economic situations of each local government area.

There are framings of the environment and communities that open opportunities for a deeper relational approach. Specifically, representations of First Nations peoples' sovereignty, qualitative representations of diverse communities and their capabilities including for political engagement, and relationships of care and custodianship with the environment. Change is complex including the significant tensions experienced by local government in delivering services and the constraints of dominant discourses and their systemic expression. However, discourses, and their contestation provide an opportunity for positive change, and as Princen (2010, 60) argues "cultural change occurs not when people argue well, but when they speak differently". We argue that analysing urban environmental discourses, including those that are dominant, maligned and perhaps missing, can provide insights into the prospects for the transformation of policy and governance in ways that are more ecologically sustainable and socially just.

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