



Mobile policies and policy streams: The case of smart metering policy in Australia



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 August 2016
Received in revised form 17 February 2017
Accepted 21 February 2017
Available online 3 March 2017

Keywords:

Policy mobility
Smart meters
Multiple Streams Approach (MSA)
Policy change
Policy window
Australia

ABSTRACT

Geographers have become increasingly engaged with the notion of policy mobility. It is argued that in a globalised world policies have become more internationally mobile: we now live in an era of 'fast policy'. Drawing on core concepts of mobility, neoliberalisation, and globalisation – and with a background primarily in geography and urban studies – policy mobility scholars have developed new ideas about how policies circulate internationally. In the process, however, theories of policy change developed within political science have been rather overlooked. In this paper it is shown how a political science theory with a shared interest in flows – the Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) – is complementary to policy mobilities scholarship. Two issues in particular are illuminated by the MSA: first, what constitutes policy, and, second, the role of the nation state in structuring the possibilities for, and timing of, policy change. In turn, policy mobilities scholarship highlights the different geographies of the multitude of objects, ideas, problems, processes, organisations, and regulations that constitute policy. It also raises questions about the validity of analytically separating politics from policy proposals, as advocated by the MSA. These issues are considered using the empirical case of smart electricity metering policy in Australia, in the period 2000–2015.

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1. Introduction

In 2015 the Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC) hosted a number of Public Forums to deliberate on a change to the Australian electricity regulations about who implements, owns and manages new digital ('smart') electricity meters. Lasting several hours, one might imagine each Forum would comprise rather dry, technical discussions. The reality was anything but. In a packed room with around 150 attendees tempers flared, opposing groups muttered in between presentations, and tension hung thickly in the air. What was taking place was not simply a discussion of competing policy proposals, but rather a complex layering of debates encompassing broader issues such as what the problem was that smart meters were solving, and longstanding conflict between electricity distributors and retailers about their respective roles in Australia's National Electricity Market (NEM). Thus, towards the end of the day when a speaker from New Zealand rose to present on how smart metering was being done there, this policy proposal was greeted with mixed approval, despite its apparent success in New Zealand. "Things are totally different in New Zealand" muttered the utility manager sitting next to me "it wouldn't

work the same way here". Policies like the New Zealand smart metering program might indeed be increasingly mobile, being touted at international venues and widely dispersed through websites and reports, but this does not necessarily help us understand policy change. For policy change does not take place simply in response to the circulation of a new policy idea or proposal from elsewhere, other factors are equally important. Policy mobility scholarship concurs with this view – stressing the importance of local context – but lacks a clear framework for evaluating how and when context matters. For 'context' can mean many different things, and the rich and complex melting pot of politics, problems and already existing policies at the AEMC Public Forums provides an indication of the need to unpack and distinguish between the different aspects of policy; to be clearer about what we mean by 'policy'. In this paper political science scholarship about policy change – specifically the Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) – is used to illuminate and help amend two related weaknesses in policy mobilities scholarship: first, a lack of attention to what policy is (its constituent elements) and, second, issues to do with the timing of policy change, in particular with respect to the processes and procedures of the nation state.

These two inter-related issues – the definition of 'policy' within policy mobility scholarship and the timing of policy change – are the core focus of the paper, explored using the empirical case of

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smart metering policy in Australia in the period from 2000 to 2015. Australia has had in place since 2007 a policy to support the implementation of smart meters (COAG, 2007). It was originally a policy that stipulated mandatory installation of smart meters to all businesses and homes, but over time this has shifted to a less stringent and more open-ended policy of voluntary ‘market-led’ installation. In this paper it is argued that understanding Australia’s initial adoption of the policy and the subsequent changes requires attention to the available (globally mobile) policy proposals, but also to key moments of decision making structured by the state, the ebb and flow of policy problems, and unexpected events.

In policy mobility scholarship policies are typically defined as either about the marketing of policy successes, through narratives, glossy brochures, conference presentations, and models (Pow, 2014; Prince, 2014), or relatedly to do with the politics of the supply and demand for these policy successes (Peck and Theodore, 2010, 2015). For example, Peck and Theodore (2010: 170) define policies as comprising “...selective discourses, inchoate ideas, and synthesized models...”, and McCann (2011: 109) expands, identifying the objects of study of (urban) policy mobilities as “... the global circulation of urban policies (formally drafted and adopted guidelines and procedures setting out the long-term purposes of and addressing specific problems of governance), policy models (more general statements of ideal policies, combining elements of more than one policy, or statements of ideal combinations of policies), and policy knowledge (expertise or experienced-based know-how about policies, policy-making, implementation, and best practices)...”. These definitions purposefully set a broad spatial agenda for the study of policy change, with a focus on localities (especially urban centres) and global policy processes, as well as non-state actors. However, in the process important national and state-based elements of the policy process have been somewhat neglected. A political science perspective is hence instructive in giving much closer attention to the formal decision making procedures and processes of the state (committees, elections, regulatory changes etc.). To date, policy mobility scholars have engaged most keenly with a subset of political science theory on policy transfer and diffusion (see Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000), but there is a much broader expanse of ideas and concepts from political science that is also potentially of value to the study of policy mobility. Political science is of course a vast discipline, covering a number of issues that potentially intersect with policy mobility, such as multi-level governance (Affolderbach and Carr, 2016; Bache and Flinders, 2004; Bulkeley and Betsill, 2003), policy learning (Bennett and Howlett, 1992), the role of policy networks in policy change (e.g. discourse coalitions, advocacy coalitions) (Hajer, 1995; Sabatier, 1999), and collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Out of this body of political science scholarship the MSA has been selected for further analysis because it provides important guidance on - and links together - the two issues under study in this paper, namely the constitution of policies, and the timing of policy change. Further, the MSA has a close affinity with policy mobilities scholarship through use of a metaphor of flows, or ‘streams’ of policy, which is integral to both the policy mobility and MSA conceptualisations of how policy change takes place, and provides a common starting point for thinking about how the two theories can be used in conjunction. The MSA identifies and describes in detail the three streams that make up policy - policy proposals, political support, and policy problems - and in this way provides welcome clarity to policy mobilities scholarship, which, as noted, is rather limited in its definition of what constitutes policy. Moreover, by drawing on the three stream metaphor the MSA provides a framework for identifying and better understanding key moments of policy change - termed ‘policy windows’ - when the three streams converge.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, policy mobilities and MSA scholarship are reviewed and their complementarities explored. Second, in the main empirical section there is first an examination of what Australian smart metering policy is comprised of, and, second, assessment of the timing and nature of policy change - including the opening of a ‘policy window’ for smart metering in Australia in 2007, and the significant policy flux that has occurred since then. This analysis is based on empirical research conducted during 2015 and 2016 with state and non-state organisations active in smart metering policy in Australia, and includes: twenty-five expert interviews across government (state and federal), utility and metering companies, industry bodies, NGOs and standards organisations; attendance at several specialist meetings and workshops; and an extensive policy literature review of over fifty documents and websites. Third, in conclusion and discussion insights of the case for scholarship on policy mobility are considered, as well as the value of policy mobilities scholarship in updating the MSA.

2. Policy mobility and the MSA: conceptualising the constitution of policy and the timing of policy change using complementary theories

The concept of policy mobility builds on longstanding ideas about policy diffusion and transfer from political science, but it introduces new elements and quite a different perspective, drawing on geographical understandings of mobility, globalisation, innovation, and neoliberalism, and with a particular focus on urban areas (Adey et al., 2014; McCann and Ward, 2012; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010; Urry, 2007). Consequently, contrasting ideas and explanations for international policy movement are introduced, as well as different metaphors, including ‘fast policy circuits’, the international ‘connective tissue’ of policy, and policy ‘mutation’ (McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010). Indeed, authors working in the policy mobilities field are keen to position their ideas as distinct from what is seen as rather outdated conceptualisations of international policy transfer within political science, criticised for conceptualising the process as static, rational, and orderly, as well as overly focused on the role of the nation state, as McCann (2011: 112) explains “...the mobilities approach questions the tendency toward reification and national state-centeredness in much of the traditional policy transfer literature.” Thus the types of actors positioned as central to globally mobile policy are not in most cases civil servants or directly employed by the state, but are technical experts such as architects and engineers (Larner and Laurie, 2010; McCann, 2011), non-governmental and intergovernmental organisations such as the OECD (Stone, 2004), and private sector consultancies (Prince, 2014). The role of government has not been completely overlooked, but studies have tended to focus principally on subnational governments at the municipal level, rather than the national scale (Cook et al., 2015; González, 2011; Pow, 2014; Temenos and McCann, 2012; Webber, 2015).

It is suggested here, however, based on findings from the empirical case of smart metering in Australia, that the role of the nation state remains important in understanding policy change in an era of ‘fast policy’. In its efforts to distinguish itself from political science scholarship focusing on the nation state, policy mobility research has arguably gone too far in positioning urban centres and the global arena as the two core spatial scales worthy of methodological and conceptual attention. Cochran and Ward (2012: 7), for example, exemplify this relative neglect of the nation state in their discussion of methodological issues in policy mobilities research:

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