



Panorama of Totnes, Devon, England

UK Environmental Governance through Community

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“I’m no longer skeptical. Now I do not have any doubt at all. I think climate change is the major challenge facing the world. I have waited until the proof was conclusive that it was humanity changing the climate.”

~ *David Attenborough (2006)*

“I don’t want to hear warm words about the environment. I want to see real action. I want this to be the greenest government ever.”

~ *David Cameron (2010)*

Climate change and neoliberalism

Climate change is the major issue facing humanity. How humanity responds to it will say much about our capacity to adapt, to reflect, and to work together. For governments it represents a major challenge. Failure to deal with it could store up greater problems in the future: rising sea levels, climate refugees, wholly unpredictable changes to the natural climate and weather patterns being just a few.

Indeed, changing environmental patterns challenge the very notion of the nation-state, forces which hold no allegiance to seemingly arbitrary national borders. Here, any given environmental problem is distant in both space and time with respect to its generation and effect. Climate change requires international co-operation, and collective action on a scale never seen before.

Given this geographic plexus, *what can the role of the State be in governing the environmental behaviours and practices of its citizens?*

The uphill nature of this challenge for the State becomes near vertical, when a State’s ‘traditional’ capacity to act is undermined by forces of neoliberalism. This involves the roll back of the State.

Neoliberalism, in theory, strongly favours individual rights, especially the right to private property, and has a high degree of faith in the efficacy of both the law and the markets, alongside free trade (Jessop, 2002). Harvey (2005, pp. 64-86) describes how in practice the neoliberal state “*depart[s] significantly from the template that theory provides*” (2005, pg.64). Despite this, there is a general ‘roll back of the State’ that we can associate with neoliberalism. The State then has an ideological reason not to intervene with individual environmental behaviours and practices, or in imposing regulation. Given we are now in what Cameron now calls an “Age

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/apr/26/david-cameron-conservative-economic-policy1> Accessed 28 Jan 2012.

of Austerity”¹, in both fiscal and ideological terms, the State lacks a capacity to respond to the challenge posed by climate change.

It is against this backdrop that the notion of governing by community of environmental actions must be understood. The idea of “*government by community*” (Raco & Imrie, 2000), or “*government through community*” (Rose, 1996) is not entirely new. However it does emerge against the backdrop of increasing neoliberalisation of the State as explored above. What government through community here means is based heavily on Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’.

At the heart of governmentality is the notion that liberty and security, or consensus and coercion, are not binary opposites but can rather reinforce and balance each other. For community to be adopted as a form of governmentality then, means that the State’s governing is not through an encroaching of individual liberties, which neoliberalism abhors, but through a manufactured consent. ‘Community’ here is used in order to help internalise that consent. In this way ‘community’ is a technology of government.

The type of community envisioned here is firmly location bound. As Amin (2005) points out, when community is used it is often elided with a silently implied prefix of local. This is government through (local-) community. Governing by community also implies the notion of governing at a distance; rather than directly regulating, the State governs at ‘arms length’.

In States characterised by dispersed networks, rather than nodes of power, and also the prominence of ‘freedom of choice’ for its citizens, such a form of governmentality is required to negotiate the environmental challenge faced. It is here that this primarily place-based ‘community’ enters.

Community and environmental governance

The first reason to explain the rise in ‘community’ responses to climate change is that such language helps generate buy-in from local residents to, for example, any proposed renewable energy project. The ‘community’ label varies in use: from projects owned and managed by local residents, to those being branded by ‘outside’ developers as a way to assuage local opposition, and a full spectrum in between (Walker & Devine-Wright, 2008). The attraction of using ‘community’ rhetoric is that it can be a useful tool in attempting to see off potential objections from local residents to any new project. Community has long been used as a “*warmly persuasive word*” that is “*never used unfavourably*” (Williams, 1983, pg. 76), and can be adopted by energy companies as a positive label to be associated with and

help in attempts to pre-empt potential objections, NIMBY or otherwise, to developers’ plans (Toke et al., 2008; Warren & McFadyen, 2010).

The community ‘branding’ can make such schemes much more appealing. Devine-Wright (2005) and Toke (2005) both argue that a shift to local ownership of wind farms results in higher levels of acceptance, local support and equity. Warren & Birnie (2009) outline how potential conflict over renewable energy schemes are not so much arguments over facts, but “*whether they and their community had a personal stake in their development*”; this was down to no more than a “*subjective ‘sense of ownership’*”, of which the ‘community’ branding or labeling has associations (2009, pg. 117). This subjective sense is crucial here, as the ‘community’ label still retains the positive perception whether or not the project is owned and invests their profits locally.

In this way community is used not to refer to any explicit meaning (although it does retain connotations of local – territorially bounded, small scale – the traditional community of place), rather it is as a way to gain legitimacy for energy projects.

Walker et al. (2007, pg. 17) again repeats the “*diversity of ways in which the ‘community’ label has been utilised*” in environmental policy. Despite this, one continual motif throughout this literature is the way in which ‘community’ is used as a synonym for the local (Amin, 2005). It is often in the reception of the label ‘community’ that its subjective aspects become politically useful.

Governing by ‘community’, and the rise of ‘localism’ narratives then are two forms of responses to the challenges laid out above. Against the backdrop of neoliberal ideology, and in times of financial crisis, it is also a crucially cheaper means to govern environmental actions.

Case study: Governance by community from above

There are many examples of the rise of ‘community’ in environmental governance ‘at-a-distance’. Here the focus is on the Climate Challenge Fund (CCF), the chosen means by the Scottish Government to reduce their ambitious carbon reduction targets.

In 2008, the Scottish National Party, supported by the Green Party established the CCF, in order to combat deleterious climate change generating emissions, reduction being explicitly through the medium of ‘community’. There were only three criteria for those who could apply to this scheme for funding: the “*community should be at the heart of the decision making process*”; the project “*should lead to significant CO₂ reductions*”; and “*it should result in a positive legacy for your community*”². Despite the central importance

2 CCF website: <http://ccf.keepsScotlandBeautiful.org/> Accessed 28 Jan 2012.

of 'community', it was not tightly defined. This is typical of the use of 'community', gesturing towards some positive well-meant sense of locality, rather than anything firmly described, other than in a via negativa sense of not standing for NGOs and local authorities. Yet it was in and through 'community' that the carbon reduction targets were to be achieved.

A government commissioned study reviewing the first three years of the CCF concluded; *"that community projects are well-placed to deliver pro-environmental behaviour change"* (Scottish Government, 2011, pg. 8). This was due to three reasons: their *"ability to tailor and personalise their messages and interventions to appeal to individual participants' motivations"*; *"Their position in the community as trusted entities that are seen to have the community's interest at heart"*; and *"their ability to engage those who are 'moderately interested' in the environment and open to the idea of change, and spark them into action"*.

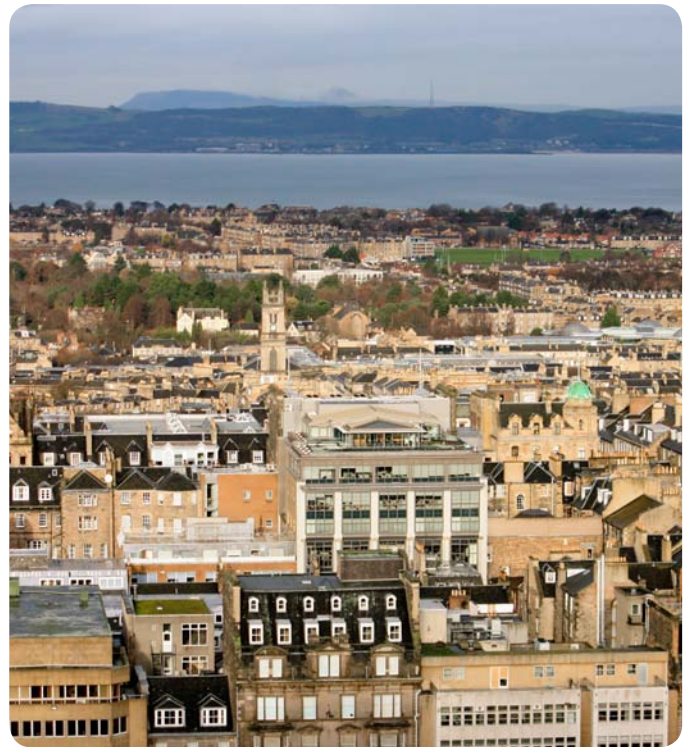
There are several interesting aspects to this conclusion. As is typical, the word 'community' is used three times, to what seems like three apparently different ends (project, location, group). A key word in their reasons for their success is that these projects were 'seen' to act nobly. Again, like Warren & Birnie's (2009) conclusion to the use of 'community' when applied to renewable energy schemes, the appearance is important here, rather than any actual specific denoted meaning.

Seen through the lens of Foucault's concept of governmentality above however, it is noticeable that the Scottish Government, through CCF, seeks to govern the environmental behaviours of its citizens. By appealing to their 'individual motivations', gaining widespread consent across major sectors of the population, not just a minority interest group of 'usual suspects' who would take environmental action.

Case study: Governance by community from below

When this policy was announced, there was understandable upset from the NGOs, and local authorities, who couldn't apply for these funds. The CCF wanted locally rooted, sub-national, 'community' groups. They had to genuinely emerge to represent the 'wider community', not be a front for an existing organisation. Where were such groups to be found?

Fortunately, or rather symbiotically, there emerged concurrently a model of 'community' action to fill this void: that of the *Transition Towns* movement.³



Edinburgh, Scotland

Transition Towns emerged from Totnes in Devon in 2005. They emphasise the role of 'community' in facing the current environmental crisis. Dismayed by lack of State-led action, and daunted by the inefficacy of individual action, their oft-quoted rallying cry is: *"If we wait for governments, it'll be too little, too late. If we act as individuals, it'll be too little. But if we act as communities, it might be just enough, just in time."*

As Transition Towns spread virally from South West England, different expressions emerged in different locations to take local action on their key concerns of climate change and peak oil. The *Transition Town* branding reached Scotland then as the CCF came into existence. Each *Transition* 'cell' was nominally separate, autonomous - thus fulfilling the criteria of the CCF.

Both emerged to serve the others needs. For the CCF, this captivating Transition narrative of 'taking control of our future' resulted in a consented, and crucially cheaper way to govern environmental behaviours at-a-distance. For Transition Towns, they had much more funding than they otherwise could have dreamed. (Cheap by national budget standards, overwhelming by local).

³ Transition Network website: <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/support/what-transition-initiative> Accessed 28 Jan 2012.

It looks eerily like Foucault's notion of governmentality. Here, the government doesn't proscribe and legislate over individuals, but through a discourse of 'community' subjects can actively participate in their own subjugation.

Governing environmental behaviours through 'community' is proving more influential in Edinburgh, but what of the potential for up-scaling such ventures? At the very core of what these ventures are is a desire to govern at the micro level, the community-level. It would seem unlikely then, that these experiments, such as Transition Towns would have any impact beyond their immediate context and environment. However this 'level' is only one aspect of scale – the other is size.

It is possible for these examples to be 'up-scaled' on the level of size. This would require the seeding off, and sparking of other similar initiatives. Such a vision would look more akin to 'a thousand flowers blooming' in the parlance, rather than an individual community project that outgrows its original starting point. This, given the appropriate funding conditions, would indicate no reason for these examples to stop where they currently find themselves, and become an increasingly prominent method of environmental governance in Western cities.

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