

Political modernisation and the weakening of sustainable development in Britain

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POLITICAL MODERNISATION AND THE WEAKENING OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN BRITAIN

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Abstract

Article 28 of Agenda 21 placed elected local authorities at the heart of achieving sustainable development. This required a new balance of environmental, social and economic policies co-ordinated by revitalised democratic local government.

However, the context within which this would have to be delivered in the UK was the extensive and ongoing restructuring of sub-national government (i.e. both local and regional government) – a restructuring which has continued apace since then, not least with devolution in Scotland and Wales; the extension of unelected regional government in England; and centrally imposed changes to the local government committee system. In addition a further raft of so-called ‘modernisation’ policies have been implemented with broader social concerns such as ‘well-being’ and ‘community strategies’ within which the core environmental concerns of sustainable development are sidelined - viewed as generally desirable, but, ultimately, as ancillary and not essential.

This chapter assesses the cumulative impact of these changes in the nature of sub-national government in Britain on the form and effectiveness of policies for sustainable development.

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the significance of the structural framework within which policies and practices for sustainable development are being advanced at the local and regional level in the UK. Hams (1994) argued that local authorities have a real and growing interest in sustainable development, and both Hams and Levett (1994) emphasise the need for policy integration and a strong corporate approach by local authorities in addressing these issues. However it is also important to consider how far British local authorities can progress towards sustainable development given their current functions and powers.

Community involvement and participation is seen as crucial to the environmental policy process, with the need to involve all sectors of the community; as the 'Bruntland Report' argued: "... sustainable development requires a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making" (WCED, 1987:65). There also appears to be general agreement that, to fulfil the requirements of sustainable development, there is a need for democratic and holistic local and regional authorities, and for the integration of sustainability into mainstream policies and practices (Agyeman & Evans, 1994; Tuxworth, 1994; Carter, 2001). It is clear, therefore, that to initiate successful policies for sustainable development, sub-national government institutions need to reassess their role and engage directly with their constituent communities. Moreover, the impact of such involvement depends upon such authorities having the power, competence and resources to act upon the results of consultations with community groups. Sustainable development requires both subsidiarity and democratisation, to permit participation and empowerment at the sub-national level. This chapter therefore raises questions about the ability of British local and regional authorities to initiate and enact sustainable development policies.

Pattie and Hall (1994) argue that there are significant barriers to implementing environmental strategies at the local level, including: the complexity and inter-relatedness of environmental issues; the lack of adequate resources; and the fact that most local government activity is defined by narrow statutory responsibilities which restrict capacity for discretionary action. Our research shows that, at the structural level too, the long-term processes of reorganising sub-national

governance have negative implications for local authorities seeking to develop positive and inclusive environmental strategies, and the latest form of restructuring – founded in the principles of ‘political modernisation’ – has yet further reduced their capacity to achieve meaningful local solutions to the problems of sustainable development. ‘Political modernisation’ is, however, only the latest in a long-running series of changes in the structure, functions and powers of local authorities that have removed former local government functions to a range of non-elected agencies and central departments (Patterson & Pinch, 1995).

Since the election of the New Labour government in 1997 sub-national government within the UK has undergone another round of fundamental reforms. The creation of a Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, and Greater London Authority alongside a programme of local government modernisation and strengthening of the regions has resulted in constitutional changes. It would be overly simplistic to portray the New Labour programme as wholly negative: the Welsh Assembly was established with a duty to promote sustainable development in all of its policies and spending programmes, and the new English regional institutions have been charged with a variety of policy responsibilities relating to sustainable development. However, it is the premise of this chapter that understanding the changing powers, functions and structural arrangements of sub-national government is crucial to understanding why the policy framework for sustainable development is weakening.

Raco (2005:327) describes a theoretical tension between those who believe the state is engaged in rolling out neo-liberalism and those who believe it is pursuing sustainable development (SD):

"For at the same time as the principles of SD have come to 'dominate' policy agendas, others argue that it is neoliberalism, with its principles of market efficiencies, entrepreneurial communities, and resource exploitation which have, paradoxically, taken centre stage."

In this chapter we aim to show how this tension is being played out in the sub-national government structures in the UK. There is certainly a strong rhetoric of sustainable development - and this dominates policy agendas and debates, but the structures of governance and policy determination continue to ensure that, in

practice, there remains a strong focus on the implementation of (neoliberal) policies for continued economic development and the weak and 'muddled' implementation of policies for sustainable development.

This complexity is addressed by drawing on empirical case studies of local and regional government in the South East of England. The evidence presented here has been gathered using three main methods;

1. semi-structured interviews, with key officers and elected members from the local and regional government bodies;
2. participant observation, in local, regional and national level conferences, workshops, and community participation events; and as an employee of a local authority;
3. secondary data analysis, including national, regional, and local policy and strategy documentation.

However, before examining the implications of the current (post-1997) round of restructuring, it will be useful to recap on the changes that have already taken place.

Restructuring local government

One hundred years ago local government in Britain was in its heyday, as Burgess and Travers put it: at the end of the nineteenth century: "... local government was responsible for most of the activities of government apart from Defence" (1980:21). However as the decades passed more and more powers and functions were removed from the local level and transferred to central departments, unelected *ad hoc* bodies, or to the private sector. One of the earliest indicators of the trend was the Government's insistence in 1905 that London's water supply should not be controlled by the London County Council, an elected body with a 'radical' reputation, but should instead be controlled by the Metropolitan Water Board, a body specially created for the purpose run by a board of nominees. However for others the year 1934, when responsibility for poor relief was transferred from local authorities to the national Unemployment Assistance Board, marked the beginning of the decline of local government autonomy (Dearlove & Saunders, 2000:306).

Later the responsibility for property valuation (a task that had been conducted at the local level for 350 years) was transferred to the Inland Revenue, heralding the introduction of new form of equalisation grant for local authorities which ushered in the current era of close central control of local government expenditure. The courts and the auditors have also acted to restrict the authority and autonomy of local authorities through the use of the concepts of '*ultra vires*' and 'fiduciary duty', for example to outlaw a policy of low public transport fares in London in 1986. As Hams argued local authorities have been "... quangoed to death. Everything's about accountancy rather than accountability" (1994:205). Although local authorities gained some responsibilities during this period – particularly in relation to planning and social services – compared to the situation at the beginning of the twentieth century, local authorities are now much larger and more bureaucratic and impersonal; they perform fewer functions and have less autonomy over those that they have retained; and their scope for imaginative policy implementation is tightly constrained both financially and legally.

This 'hollowing out' of local government (Patterson & Pinch, 1995) continued with the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) for the provision of many local services (Pinch & Patterson, 2000). CCT is an important case because it lead to the fragmentation of local authority responsibilities as individual departments lost direct provision of services to the private sector. Rather than encouraging holistic local authority decision-making, CCT required the separation of budgets and responsibilities. As Levett (1994) and Hoyles (1994) note, local authorities are major players in the local economy and the local environment, and therefore they have a powerful impact on the environment through the implementation of their policies. However, the requirement, under the CCT legislation, to accept the lowest tender reduced the power of the local state to act in support of the local economy by purchasing goods and services from local firms through local purchasing arrangements which could provide a contribution to sustainable development. Furthermore CCT specifically excluded the consideration of the activities of a contractor in terms of the stance it adopted on economic, social, and environmental issues (see Patterson & Theobald, 1995; 1996; 1999).

Political modernisation

Since the election of the New Labour government in 1997 local government has undergone a further series of fundamental alterations through a programme of change known as political modernisation. This has been characterised by a shift from the clear distinction between the state and external bodies, to the rise of quasi-governmental bodies and more collaboration with external organisations (Rydin, 1999). In opposition New Labour had pledged to abolish CCT however, instead, it introduced Best Value – requiring local authorities subject more areas of provision to competition from the private sector, and to undertake service reviews and publish service and performance plans, all of which were externally inspected (Ball, Broadbent & Moore, 2002; Downe & Martin, 2006). With the Best Value legislation maintaining a strong emphasis on market-driven decision-making, the privatisation or quasi-privatisation of public services, and extending the influence of the market into many new areas (Andrews, 2003; Geddes & Martin, 2000) the process of ‘hollowing out’ local government has not been reversed.

Modernisation seeks to alter local government’s role, with a new emphasis on partnerships between local authorities, business and the community/voluntary sector. This is what Giddens (1998) has termed the ‘third way’: which he sees as a rejection of both the (left-wing) interventionist role for the state *and* the (right-wing) opposition to state involvement, instead putting forward an agenda for governance through partnership. According to Giddens, this “... third way politics looks for a new relationship between the individual and the community, a redefinition of rights and obligations” (1998:65). Tony Blair (1998) has highlighted how central this ‘third way’ programme of modernisation is in New Labour’s plans for local government, stating that a renewal of local democracy is required specifically in order to tackle social exclusion and to implement LA21.

Whilst the modernisation programme is upheld as a new way forward for local government, Hill (2000) argues that New Labour’s programme follows that of the ‘enabling’ state approach of the former Conservative administration. Hill notes that the Government has argued that its partnership approach to governance will bring greater skills and expertise to local government from the private sector as opposed

to the Conservative's approach of forcing a business culture onto local authorities in an attempt to undermine its power. However, the partnership approach can come into conflict with democratic accountability; thus Hill states "... the question to be addressed is whether we are entering a new era of a 'third way' between state collectivist solutions and *laissez faire* capitalism, as Labour claims, or just seeing the stabilisation of a public-private provision of services that have emerged from the previous Conservative revolution" (2000:7).

Four examples of political modernisation in practice:

1. Reform of the local government committee system

One of the most far reaching of the modernisation changes has been the change to the decision making structure of local government. Required to move from the well-established committee system, local authorities had to choose from one of three options:

- a directly elected mayor with cabinet – the elected mayor to appoint the cabinet members from amongst the councillors;
- a cabinet with a leader – the leader to be elected by councillors, and the cabinet either elected by councillors or appointed by the leader from amongst the councillors;
- a directly elected mayor and council manager – the mayor to provide political leadership to the council manager but not to take day-to-day decisions.

The justification for this change was the claim that the old system was inefficient and lacked transparency. However it has led to the concentration of power, and the creation of a two-tier system of councillors resulting in what the Government review team (Stoker et al., 2004) observed as the great dissatisfaction of non-executive councillors with the new arrangements, and it does not appear to have led to a discernable pattern of improved political leadership (Leach et al., 2005).

2. Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Strategies

Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) should bring together representatives from public, private and community sectors with the remit of joining-up disparate programmes and initiatives (DETR, 2001a). LSPs are non-statutory (but the

Government recommends that all local authorities establish one), and their core task is to create the statutory Community Strategies that are to act as the new overarching framework for public, private and community sector activities within the local area. Community Strategies are supposed to incorporate the aims of sustainable development, and therefore the Government has stated that pre-existing LA21 strategies should be subsumed within them (DETR, 2001b). More recently the government has promoted a shift to Sustainable Community Strategies, which are intended to: "... evolve from Community Strategies to give a greater emphasis to sustainable development objectives" (DEFRA, 2005:127). However the primary focus here relates to the creation of sustainable *communities* "... which are necessary for creating an area where people genuinely want to live long-term" (2005:127), and is far removed from the original strong environmental focus of LA21 which has now been superseded.

The guidance for the LSP and Sustainable Community Strategies espoused the involvement of all parties, but there has been disquiet amongst elected members, with many councillors we interviewed feeling that their role was being undermined and the democratic functions of local government were being eroded.

3. 'Well-being'

The new power to promote 'well-being' permits local authorities to undertake activities that promote or improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of the area. This is a discretionary power of general competence that can be used to do anything which other legislation does not expressly forbid, but it does not enable local government to raise money for these undertakings. When utilising the well-being power local authorities must take account of their Community Strategies. In theory at least, the power of well-being offers a proactive role to local government in promoting the interests, and enhancing the welfare, of its community. However with understanding of the power described as 'patchy' and its use generally confined to discretionary rather than mainstream services, the power is deemed by local authorities to be weak and to only partly address the doctrine of *ultra vires* (Sullivan et al., 2006).

In practice the use of the well-being power is tightly constrained by limits on expenditure, and concern over potential litigation which may arise from its use. In

the past, the use of powers derived from the Local Government Act 1972 (which allowed local authorities to undertake actions deemed to be in the best interest of the community) often resulted in legal challenges, and the courts often adopted a narrow interpretation of the legislation. Therefore, although the well-being power appears to offer an opportunity to local government to promote sustainable development, legal and financial barriers remain.

4. Comprehensive Performance Assessment

Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), is an inspection regime used to assess local authority performance against a set of centrally determined criteria. Inspections are conducted annually by the Audit Commission and currently result in a rating of 1 to 4 stars, and a 'direction of travel' which indicates whether a local authority's performance is improving or worsening (Audit Commission, 2005). This rating is used by the Government to allocate extra funding and greater autonomy, what Downe and Martin (2006) describe as 'earned autonomy'. Therefore CPA has become a priority for local authorities. CPA focuses on traditional local authority service areas and neglects cross-cutting issues such as sustainable development, but also, because there is no explicit reference to sustainable development in the inspection criteria, CPA further marginalises this policy area (Miller, 2002; Bennett, 2003).

The Government has stated that it intends to change the standing of sustainable development within CPA inspections, stating that it: "... will seek to recognise and reward good performance on SD" (DEFRA, 2005:161). However it is questionable how far CPA, which is fundamentally designed to assess efficiency of service delivery can be developed to address the issue of sustainable development, particularly when this policy area is being marginalised in so many other ways.

The following section presents a brief case study of a local authority within the South East of England that had strongly embraced the environmental elements of sustainable development but which shifted its focus in response to the modernisation policies outlined above.

Reading Borough Council – a case study

With a long history of community development work, Reading Borough Council (RBC) was one of the first local authorities to respond positively to LA21 by developing the widely reported 'go local on a better environment' (GLOBE) ward-based community environment groups (e.g. see Buckingham-Hatfield & Percy, 1999; Parker & Selman, 1999). GLOBE groups were designed to enable direct community participation in the council's environmental decision-making process, and a multi-disciplinary team of officers was set up with two roles:

- internally – to get the local authority's own house in order, through the development of such processes as environmental management systems; and
- externally – to work with the community on themed projects.

These initiatives were specifically carried out under the LA21 banner, with a clear and explicit environmental mandate. Between 1993 and 1996 RBC developed its position on environmental issues, moving from an 'Environmental Statement of Intent' to a more proactive policy approach through LA21, and created an 'LA21 Team' which included Community Development Workers, and worked in new areas – such as establishing a farmers market. Community involvement featured strongly in the development of RBC's LA21 strategy with a focus on participation in local environmental problem solving and policy making, empowered by the policy of Agenda 21, through initiatives such as 'neighbourhood action plans' (RBC, 2000).

During the 1990s "... a shift in emphasis from 'local government and the environment' to one of 'local governance and sustainability'" (Parker & Selman 1999:18) occurred. In part this was due to the recognition of the inability to address 'environmental' issues without recognising the inextricable link to social and economic concerns. In Reading this shift towards integrating LA21 into other initiatives ('mainstreaming') began with the Sustainable Communities Dialogue which sought to engage with local groups to identify specific actions that could be taken to make Reading more sustainable. Themes derived from the Dialogue formed the basis of RBC's Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) which then became the primary mechanism for community representation. This change in approach directly reflected the shift in central government guidance which specified the need

to embed LA21 into the Best Value regime, the LSPs, and the statutory Community Strategies. But, although mainstreaming LA21 issues could perhaps have resulted in a more integrated approach (e.g. RBC's three corporate strategic aims all now embed aspects of sustainability), it also had the effect of shifting the focus from environmental concerns to a more anthropocentric 'Quality of Life' agenda (Batchelor & Patterson, 2004).

RBC's LSP has been developed through a representative process, and it has sustainable development as one of its key objectives, but the national guidance does not demand this. The inclusiveness of Reading's LSP has been achieved through the commitment of the local authority's officers, *despite* the weakness of the national legislation. Therefore developing equitable community involvement in the new 'modernisation' initiatives nationally is a vulnerable and uneven process .

This vulnerability is particularly prevalent in relation to resources. The mainstreaming of sustainable development within Reading was a major factor in the recent disbanding of the 'LA21 team' and its replacement by a smaller sustainable development team with a corporate focus based in the chief executive's office. In a recent spending review the new team's budget was cut severely, as it was not seen to provide either a core or statutory service.

Environmental modernisation

Jacobs (1999) argues that the UK Government's unwillingness to put environmental concerns at the heart of policy is based on the belief that environmental concerns are inextricably linked to a green ideology which is viewed as fundamentally anti-capitalist, and therefore, as New Labour does not share this view, the concept of sustainable development has not been embraced. Jacobs believes that environmental concerns can be separated from green ideology in a way which mirrors New Labour's transition to the 'third way', and which, therefore, could permit environmental issues to become part of mainstream New Labour politics. Giddens (using the term 'ecological' modernisation) agrees, seeing a potentially more cohesive path for New Labour politics and the environment because "... there is no doubt that ecological modernisation links social

democratic and ecological concerns more closely than once seemed possible” (1998:57).

Dryzek believes a third way alliance can be formed “... in which governments, businesses, moderate environmentalists and scientists co-operate in the restricting of the capitalist political economy along more environmentally defensible lines” (1997:145). However as Blowers (1999) highlights, the concept of ecological or environmental modernisation has become prominent precisely because it proposes that the objectives of economic growth and the environment are *not* in conflict, which firmly locates it within New Labour’s contemporary political discourse of political modernisation and partnership. Therefore environmental modernisation can be seen as portraying a ‘business as usual’ scenario (Hajer, 1995).

Beck’s (1992) theory of the Risk Society presents a challenge to this cosy congruence, as it places the concept of ‘ecological risk’ at the centre of policy concerns. As Blowers comments “... ecological modernisation provides the case for the continuation of an environmentally sensitive form of modernisation; risk society confronts the necessity for change” (1999:14). Whilst Giddens assumes groups such as NGOs can be assimilated within the third way agenda, Beck (1992) argues that politically uniting forces such as class have disintegrated, leading to what he describes as ‘sub-politics’ which represents a *challenge* to conventional democratic political decision-making forums through the pursuit of single issue politics by pressure groups.

This brief discussion has attempted to highlight some of the significant differences between the environmental movement and the discourse of New Labour in relation to environmental concerns. Whilst sustainable development may have been developed by the ‘pragmatic wing’ of the green movement (Jacobs, 1999) in order to put environmental concerns into mainstream politics, this has certainly not received the support of the Government. LA21 has not been supported strategically by central government, and most of the innovative work that has taken place has been undertaken by relatively small groups of committed local authority officers and community activists and, as illustrated in Reading, many of these successes have been relatively short-lived.

The Government's political modernisation programme may be able to be used to facilitate some of the aims of sustainable development, but, as Evans & Percy (1999) noted in the case of LA21, they may also just produce another round of consultations, and fail to achieve community empowerment. Moreover, the initiatives that have been introduced, such as 'Best Value', have a strong neo-liberal orientation and have hindered rather than helped promote sustainable development.

Regional Government in the South East of England – a case study

Often referred to as the 'growth engine' of the UK's economy, the South East (SE) of England provides a useful regional scale case study to examine the tensions in balancing the pursuit of economic growth against the desire for sustainability. With a population of over eight million and an economy generating over £140 billion/year (which makes a £20 billion net annual contribution to the Exchequer) the SE is the largest of the UK's regions (SEERA, 2004a). The region's economic pre-eminence is associated with its geographical location, particularly its proximity to London and mainland Europe; and good transport connections, particularly the Channel Tunnel and Heathrow airport.

Although the existence of regions for administrative purposes has a long history in the UK, the current structure was determined in 1992 when England was divided into nine regions for the purpose of creating the Government Offices (GOs). The GOs brought together the regional interests of several central government departments, and were established to enhance regional level collaboration with the European Union, and to facilitate the implementation of central government policy at the regional scale (Allen, 2001). As the GO for the South East (GOSE) states: "We represent central government in the region and our role is to promote better and more effective integration of Government policies and programmes at a regional and local level" (GOSE, 2006). Since 1998, Regional Development Agencies (RDA) and Regional Assemblies (RA) have joined the GOs as institutions of governance at the regional level. Within the SE these are: the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA). The RDA's remit is to promote

economic development, enhance business, employment and the skills base, and contribute to sustainable development. SEEDA states that it is: "... responsible for the sustainable economic development and regeneration of the South East of England" (SEEDA, 2006). One way it seeks to do this is through its 10-year Regional Economic Strategy (RES) (SEEDA, 2002), which was developed in conjunction with GOSE and SEERA.

SEERA (2004b) describes itself as the 'voluntary regional chamber' for the SE ('voluntary' because, although Assemblies have been created in all of the regions, the Government did not make their creation obligatory), with three core functions:

- *accountability* – specifically scrutinising the work of SEEDA;
- *advocacy* – acting as the 'voice of the region' to influence national and EU agendas; and
- *planning* – in 2001 SEERA became the Regional Planning Body, and this activity now accounts for 70% of its work and resources.

SEERA has 112 members, none of whom are directly elected, including 74 nominees from the constituent local authorities, and others representing business interests and the voluntary/community sector. Initially the regional assemblies were funded entirely by the local authorities and other regional interests, but, since 2001, they have also received some funding from central Government (ODPM, 2006). SEERA has taken the lead on two overarching regional strategies; the Integrated Regional Framework (IRF) and the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), and must be consulted by SEEDA during the production of its RES (ODPM, 2006).

Through the IRF SEERA (2004) aims to establish: "... a shared vision and objectives for integrated working and ultimately, sustainable development of the region". The RSS covers a 20-year period, and is intended to set the context for local land-use planning and transport strategies: "... core objectives are to balance continuing economic and housing growth with rising standards of environmental management and reduced levels of social exclusion and natural resource consumption. Our vision for 2026 is for a healthier region, a more sustainable pattern of development and a dynamic and robust economy, the benefits of which are more widely shared" (SEERA, 2006:2).

GOSE, SEEDA, and SEERA have developed co-operative working practices and are beginning to foster what Musson and Tickell (2005) describe as a 'regional political culture'. However, in practice, aligning policies is challenging because there are different priorities, and, as explored below, issues of overlapping objectives. Whilst the IRF may seek to provide a coherent shared vision for the region, it does not have statutory status, and so is relatively weak in comparison to the RSS and the RES. Although the IRF is developed by regional institutions and the RSS and RES emerge from central government policy (albeit with some regional input) there is some ambiguity about the spatial scale at which the regional agenda being set: "Government Offices work with regional partners to develop, implement and monitor 'Regional Spatial Strategies', which set out *Government's* planning and transport policy for each region for a 15-20 year period" (GOSE, 2006, emphasis added).

A new tier of government is clearly being developed at the regional scale, but as the previous quotation highlights, it is not an autonomous level and it is difficult to see exactly where the power lies. However, a recent review noted: "... the very prominent role played by SEEDA in regional strategy making" (SEERA, 2004c). The objectives and work programmes of both SEEDA and GOSE have been formed by central government, and although the GOs were created by a Conservative Government, it is now New Labour ideology which shapes these institutions: "... it was clear that RDAs encapsulated the 'new' in New Labour" (Musson and Tickell, 2005:1400). Moreover, as the SE region is the 'engine room' of the UK's economy it is difficult to envisage any specific regional issue being allowed to override national policies. For example, as the Sustainable Communities Plan for the South East states: "we cannot simply try to halt growth in the South East in order to divert it to other regions. The government's regional policy is focused on enabling every region of England to perform to its full economic and employment opportunities" (ODPM, 2003:5). Although a regional policy agenda is developing, the region is clearly not autonomous, however, at the same time, GOSE and SEEDA are honing their policies in line with regionally defined objectives. Therefore the governance of the SE is becoming increasingly complex.

Policies developed at the regional level are made in partnership. SEERA notes that this ensures compliance across the regional bodies, stating that: “we have worked closely with the RDA in a number of key policy areas to ensure complementarity, such as housing, sustainable development, renewable energy, waste markets, transport and urban renaissance (SEERA, 2004b:11). With SEERA and SEEDA each having responsibilities for sustainable development and GOSE also having such interests, policy on this topic is diffuse. This dispersal of responsibility leads to a lack of clear leadership and creates what Hewett (2001) has described as ‘institutional muddle’. To address these issues the following section examines sustainable development policy and practice in the region and assesses New Labour’s approach to the issue.

‘Institutional Muddle’: regional bodies and sustainable development

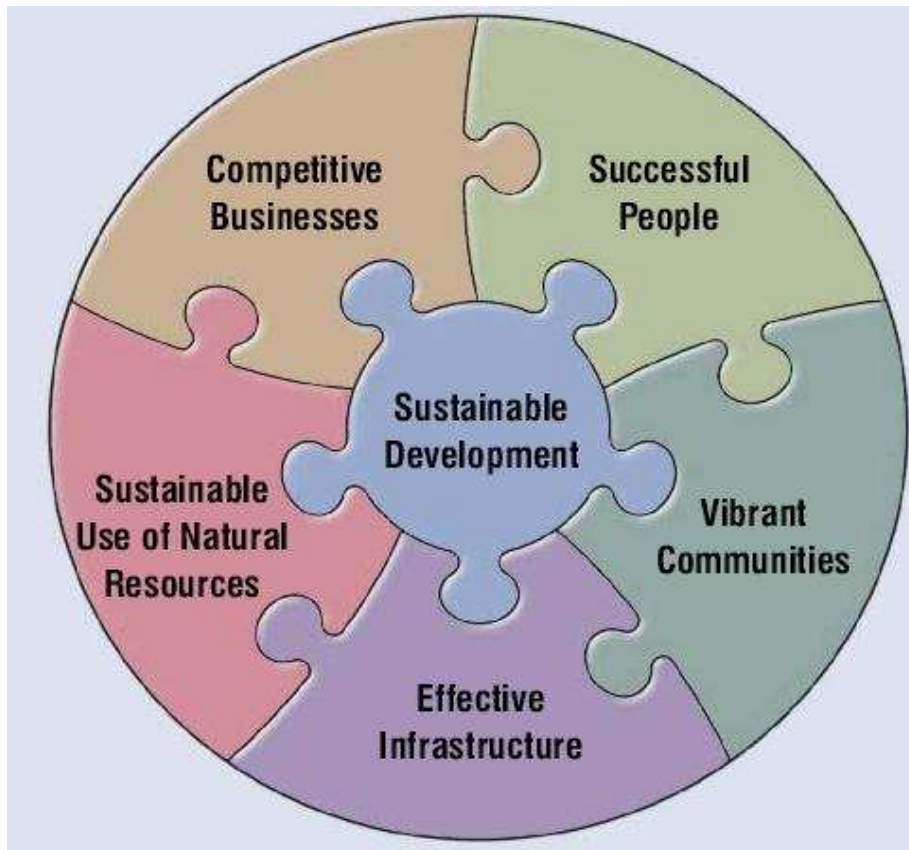
The creation of a uniform regional approach in the SE, under the umbrella of the Integrated Regional Framework (IRF), has proved to be complex. As noted above SEERA, the regional assembly, took the lead in producing the IRF, an overarching regional document that specifies the involvement of other regional bodies and requires conformity of their policies with respect to sustainable development. On this basis SEERA might appear to be the lead body for sustainable development at the regional level. However, SEERA, like all regional assemblies, only has the responsibility to *promote* sustainable development, and most of this work was undertaken *after* the SEEDA had developed the RES (Hewitt, 2001). This weakness of the regional assembly’s role is evident in the SE with SEEDA taking the lead on the move towards ‘Smart Growth’¹, which has become the latest guise for sustainable development in the SE.

One of the five aims on which RDAs were established was a duty to “to contribute to sustainable development” (DETR, 1998). As Figure 2 illustrates

This paper refers to ‘Smart Growth’ in the British policy context which stems from the theory of ‘Factor Four’ developed by von Weizsäcker, Lovins & Lovins (1997). SEEDA (2003) adopted this concept in its Taking Stock report which reviewed resource usage in the SE. This report posits that a 75% reduction in the ecological footprint of the SE can be achieved by doubling resource efficiency whilst halving resource use – the key idea of Factor Four. The term Smart Growth as used within this context relates to the decoupling of resource use from economic growth.

SEEDA asserts that its RES is "... set within the broader context of sustainable development" (SEEDA 2002:8).

Figure 2: The five objectives of the Regional Economic Strategy



Source: SEEDA (2002:8)

With the remit to manage what has often been described as an 'over-heated economy' (e.g. IPPR, 2004) SEEDA has adopted the concept of 'Smart Growth' in an attempt to justify continued economic growth. SEEDA argues that 'Smart Growth' could be achieved through a 75% reduction in the SE's ecological footprint, to be attained by "... doubling resource efficiency and halving resource usage" (2003:2), and sets out key indicators that would be monitored, arguing that increased productivity can be consistent with sustainable development.

The concept of 'Smart Growth' represents a paradigm shift in policy making for sustainable development. The concept came into use in the US in the 1990s in relation to urban regeneration (Krueger, 2005). Noting its successful incorporation into the policies of local and regional agencies, compared with the limited success of the adoption of LA21, Krueger notes: "... in the US 'smart growth' has emerged

as an American variant to the Bruntland paradigm of SD” (2005:78). To understand why ‘Smart Growth’ is being so readily adopted in the SE of England, we only need to revisit the concept of environmental modernisation. ‘Smart Growth’ allows a neo-liberal ‘business as usual’ scenario, because, as Krueger highlights, at its core it is an economic development strategy. It fits well with the aims and objectives of SEEDA and the guiding principle on which all regional assemblies were founded: the promotion of economic growth.

Whilst Government Offices do not have explicit responsibilities for sustainable development, GOSE states that SD is embedded within its priorities (GOSE, 2006b), and within the SE region the main involvement of the GO has been through the development of the Regional Spatial Strategy. Arguing that the GOs are the most influential of the regional institutions, Musson and Tickell (2005) highlight their role in providing expert advice on policy development. They state that this has the effect of projecting central government aims into the regions. If this is considered in relation to the production of the RSS, GOSE’s role could have a significant effect upon SD policy in the region.

With the three institutions each have differing roles and responsibilities towards sustainable development, and an overlap of objectives, it is hard to ascertain where the lead is and on which ideology this is based. However, to achieve an objective as broad as sustainable development requires policy coordination and clear leadership, but the institutional muddle ensures that the regional scale lacks leadership. This was one of the key issues participants in the recent consultation for the UK Sustainable Development Strategy highlighted, with six regions recommending that a statutory obligation for sustainable development be established because there was: “... strong support for putting the delivery of sustainable development at the regional level on a statutory footing” (DEFRA, 2004). Despite this call, the Government states only that it will apply a statutory duty to any new bodies created (although such a duty already exists for the National Assembly for Wales and the Greater London Assembly) and: “... assess whether a specific SD duty should be applied to existing key bodies in priority areas” (DEFRA, 2005:156-157). Instead the strategy outlines proposals for each of the regional bodies: Regional Assemblies role in sustainable development will

be clarified through new guidance, sustainable development will be mainstreamed through the RDA's 'Tasking Frameworks', and GOs will be subject to new performance and monitoring arrangements. Perhaps the most significant development is the enhanced role for the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), as a 'watchdog' on sustainable development.

The Government (DEFRA, 2005:152) specifically notes the importance of "... those providing public services at regional and local level" in achieving sustainable development, but falls short of explicitly giving statutory responsibility to local or regional authorities. To understand why, we need examine the ideology of New Labour. By deferring a decision, the Government is afforded the opportunity to see what works, and what effects SD policies have at the regional scale, before committing to institutional reform – exactly what Stoker (2002) describes as a purposeful muddle. Moreover, as discussed earlier, New Labour's environmental ideology aligns with the principles of environmental modernisation. Worried about the consequences of embracing environmental concerns, it is carefully placing them within the sphere of institutions created by and working within neo-liberal agendas. Therefore the ability to developing counter-hegemonic coalitions is limited by state structures (Gibbs, Jonas & While, 2002:133).

Conclusions

The continuing restructuring of sub-national government institutions has been heavily influenced by the ideologies of political and environmental modernisation. Fundamentally changing the nature of local government and creating an unelected regional tier has resulted in the weakening of sustainable development and the implementation of neo-liberal policies such as 'Smart Growth'.

As the Reading case study illustrates, the government's decision to subsume LA21 strategies into the modernisation initiatives, and to mainstream sustainable development policy into the new 'Quality of Life' agenda, has resulted in a sidelining of the core *environmental* aspects of sustainable development and with it the core participatory aims of LA21. Councils have, understandably, shifted their efforts to focus on the new performance regimes, such as the rigorous Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). As Porritt (2000) has said: "...

local authorities were given powers to promote the 'economic, social and environmental well-being' of local people, but the guidance on community planning and local strategic partnerships that followed was written as if central government had never heard of sustainable development."

Prior to the introduction of LA21, local government in Britain had been denuded of powers and functions, and, under the Conservative Government, CCT and other market-driven policies further reduced local authorities' capacity to respond to the demands of sustainable development. Although New Labour promised much, including the abolition of CCT, the policies it introduced (e.g. Best Value) did not increase local government's ability to achieve sustainable development because the heavy emphasis on neo-liberal solutions and private sector provision were retained. Although many local authorities demonstrated a willingness to respond positively to LA21, the restructuring of their functions and powers', reduced their capacity to respond adequately, and the contemporary programme of 'political modernisation' is not resolving these problems, rather it is further sidelining sustainable development as a policy goal.

Alongside the modernisation programme for local government has come the creation of a new regional tier of governance that is shaping policy for sustainable development. This is resulting in the region becoming a significant administrative tier but without clear leadership producing the institutional muddle described above. The regional level is impacting upon the autonomy and power of local government, which despite having a democratic mandate, must now operate in conformity with the regional agenda; and the new national inspection regimes (e.g. Best Value and CPA) are giving central government more authority over local authorities. Concepts such as Stoker's (2002) 'purposeful muddle' have sought to explain the rationale behind the government's programme of change. Geddes and Martin (2000) note that the programme was purposefully vague, to enable the government to test what would work, and Downe and Martin (2006) see this in a positive light, as an 'evolutionary strategy'.

The 2005 UK Sustainable Development Strategy has set out the government's position on priorities for sustainable development (including an initiative, Community 2020, which looks remarkably like a New Labour variant of LA21).

However the strengthening neo-liberal structures and constrained capacities of sub-national government will continue to inhibit the development of meaningful policies for sustainable development in Britain.

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