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Exploring the regional politics of ‘sustainability’: making up sustainable communities in the South East of England

Exploring the regional politics of ‘sustainability’: making up sustainable communities in the South East of England

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Abstract

This paper sets to explore and clarify the nature of the politics associated with the institutional shift from government to governance, in the context of the rise of sustainability and sustainable communities as governance discourses. After critically considering the extent to which this represents a move to some sort of post-political settlement, it turns to reflect on the notion of assemblage as a means of interpreting emergent forms of politics and governance and exploring the ways in which different priorities may be negotiated in practice. It highlights the processes by which new political realities are assembled around particular concerns without necessarily ever being fully integrated into some overarching unified set of understandings. And it highlights continued tensions and divisions around sustainability and its implications, which undermine attempts to build a governing (or post-political) consensus. These issues are informed by a review of some aspects of the ‘sustainable communities plan’ and its implementation, with a particular focus on the South-East of England.

Introduction: thinking about governance

The old certainties of public administration based around models of top-down rational decision-making with their assumptions of hierarchical systems of government, in which policy is developed at the centre and then handed down for implementation through a series of departments, agencies and levels of government, are now largely discredited. The shift from 'government' to 'governance' has been widely noted, sometimes positively (among those for whom it seems to offer the possibility of a new pluralism) and sometimes more negatively (among those who remain stubbornly committed to direct democratic accountability through elections) (see, among many others, Cochrane 2004, Newman 2005, Rhodes 1997, Rosenau 2004, Stoker 2004, Swyngedouw 2005).

Even if the broader shift is recognised, however, the practices of governance remain elusive and it is all too tempting to slip back into a language (and research) that privileges state institutions, government departments and formal politics. The ways in which governance works and the ways in which particular ends may be achieved or pursued through it are still uncertain and unclear. It is hard to escape concerns about the extent to which the proliferation of partnerships, organisations and groups all claiming status in particular policy areas may ultimately simply lead to confusion and inaction (summarised, for example, in Martin Jones' evocative notion of the 'impedimenta' state) (Jones 2009). Attention has frequently been drawn to the complex and overlapping governance relationships that characterise contemporary urban and regional politics, often with the implication that it reflects some sort of crisis of the state (see, for example, Jones and Ward 2002). At the same time, there is also a danger that the new orthodoxy of 'governance' may deliver a term with little or no content – a danger that what appears to offer a new way of thinking about public policy instead simply becomes another frame within which familiar case studies are pursued and the same calls for better behaviour reappear (reflected, for example, in the World Bank's development of a 'good governance' index).

In this context, notions of 'multi-level governance' borrowed from debates in the political science literature, and particularly those seeking to understand the workings of the European Union (see, e.g., Bache and Flinders, 2004; Hooghe and Marks,

2003; Warleigh, 2006) are helpful because of the way in which they draw attention to the interdependence of governments and non governmental agencies, as well as the negotiated relationships between ‘governments’ that are positioned at a range of geographical levels or scales. The formal institutions of government are not bypassed, but are, rather, located within more complex forms of networked governance. Even these approaches, however, fail to pursue the full implications of the shift to a governance paradigm, because they retain an implicit assumption around the ways in which the different sets of relations are positioned within nested (governing) hierarchies, in part because of their origins within the political practices of the European Union. As Bob Jessop notes, this makes it difficult for them effectively to explore the ‘tangled and shifting nature of dominant, nodal, and marginal levels of government in different areas’ (Jessop, 2006, p. 151).

However, accepting Jessop’s point raises its own problems since it becomes difficult to see how the political arena of governance is held together. Jessop himself resolves the issue by identifying a role for the state through what he calls metagovernance – in a sense providing the regulatory framework within which governance may be pursued, but in practice this implies the existence of the state as metagovernment, thus apparently reintroducing hierarchy by the back door. A similar approach is adopted by Mark Whitehead who introduces the notion of the ‘shadow’ of hierarchy to suggest that even if central government needs to work through much more uncertain processes of negotiation it nevertheless retains some hierarchical authority, because actors operate as if it did (Whitehead 2003a).

But this may be to miss the point. Perhaps it is easier to understand these governance arrangements in terms of a process of negotiation around a broadly agreed or broadly shared agenda, in which the various players are enmeshed and which they also help to produce (or assemble). In this context, the work of Nikolas Rose and others is suggestive because (drawing on Foucault) it highlights the value of seeing governance as a process through which individuals and groups learn to behave in ways that allow them to be governed (and to govern themselves), making up governable subjects (Rose 1999). It is a process that involves somehow ‘binding individuals into shared moral norms and values; governing through the self steering forces of honour and

shame, of propriety, obligation, trust, fidelity and commitment to others' (Rose, 2000, p. 324. See also Dean 1999).

In some respects, this approach fits uneasily with governance as we have so far discussed it (and the term governmentality is more commonly used by these thinkers). What is important, however, is the way in which it directs attention towards ways of rethinking the 'politics' of governance – along lines in which traditional party conflicts and, indeed, conflicts between different groups and interests, may be overcome in the context of some overriding set of shared norms or values. For some, such as Erik Swyngedouw (2009), this heralds the emergence of a 'postpolitical and postdemocratic condition', as a product of discourses which naturalise globalisation and its consequences as inescapable or which deliver a consensus around the inevitability of environmental disaster unless certain actions are taken.

This paper has rather a different starting point, seeking to clarify the politics associated with the shift to governance, instead of seeing it as implying the end of politics, or the arrival of the post-political. In this context, the notion of assemblage offers a useful way of interpreting and exploring the ways in which various different priorities may be negotiated in practice (see, e.g., Allen and Cochrane, 2007). It highlights the processes by which new political realities are assembled around particular concerns without necessarily ever being fully integrated into some overarching unified set of understandings. In her discussion of development programmes in rural Indonesia, Tania Li identifies the 'will to improve' as a framing device for the building of an assemblage, around which actors are able to cohere and mobilise (Li, 2007). This does not mean that there has to be some pre-existing or logically coherent framework into which everything fits but rather highlights the way in which meanings (and projects) are constructed through negotiated practices between agents of one sort and another. Bruno Latour reminds us that it is possible for 'different groups with divergent interests to conspire with a certain amount of vagueness on a project they take to be a common one' (Latour 1996 p. 48). In other words there need be no expectation that a shared agenda of this sort will remain unproblematic and (as in the case of the particular transportation project Latour describes in this work) may never be realised.

In what follows the focus shifts to a particular case, to explore these issues further, namely the role played by the language of ‘sustainability’ in shaping a (fragile) regional political assemblage over the last decade. Following Li, the notion of sustainability or sustainable development may be interpreted as an expression of the will to improve, operating as a focus around which a political assemblage (in this case a regional assemblage) may be put together. As it has developed political momentum the sustainability ‘project’ has been actively negotiated, constructed, imagined and re-imagined.

This paper makes no attempt to suggest ways in which better – or different - governance arrangements might deliver improved outcomes in terms of sustainability or sustainable communities, although following through the implications of some of the arguments might help clarify what is possible. It should not be read as a critique of the work of those actively involved in building (or aiming to build) sustainable communities, nor as a dismissal of the undoubted importance of environmental sustainability as a political and social goal. Instead here, the principal aim is a more modest one, namely to develop a better understanding of governance processes, to explore the role ‘sustainability’ has played as a discourse or technology of governance in a particular English region.

The politics of ‘sustainability’

In principle, the claims made for ‘sustainability’ are precisely those that might be expected to override traditional notions of ‘politics’, in the sense that they seem to override social division. The politics of sustainability are part of a wider set of understandings that bring together personal and community responsibility with the promise of a world in which economic well-being and environmental protection can not only exist side by side, but may even mutually support each other. Roger Keil has suggested that politically sustainability has been re-imagined ‘as one of the possible routes for a neoliberal renewal of the capitalist accumulation process,’ enabling ‘prosperous development *with* rather than *against* ‘nature’’ (Keil 2007, p. 46). ‘Sustainability’ seems to have moved beyond ordinary political debate – it is, of

course, impossible to argue in any convincing way for a programme committed to being unsustainable (and perhaps it always was).

Mark Whitehead identifies the sustainable city paradigm as ‘part of the wider *regularisation* (or *normalisation*) of the socio-ecological contradictions of capitalist urbanisation’ (Whitehead, 2003b, p. 1184). He notes the way in which the United Nations vision of ‘the sustainable city constitutes a new moral space, where social values are transformed and more durable social, economic and ecological relations are established’ (Whitehead, 2003b, p. 1186) and confirms that ‘sustainable cities are not ‘simply business as usual’ for capitalist urbanisation, but involve the active repackaging or humanisation of neo-liberal projects in urban spaces’ (Whitehead 2003b, pp. 1202-3).

In that sense, as Erik Swyngedouw powerfully argues, the rhetoric of sustainability might even be identified as an aspect of a ‘post political’ condition (he maintains that the fetishisation of nature as a ‘singular’ entity is ‘one that eradicates or evacuates the ‘political’ from debates over what to do about nature’ (Swyngedouw 2007, p. 23. See also Swyngedouw 2009). Surely all that deserves to be debated is how to achieve sustainability more effectively.

However, this understates the extent to which sustainability itself is a contested concept – indeed an important site around which conflict may be generated. The drive to get ‘sustainability’ to mean what you want it to mean simply confirms that it does not have a straightforward or unchallenged meaning. As Susan Owens reminds us, the politics of ‘sustainability’ is not as cut and dried as the taken for granted use of the term might suggest: on the contrary not only is it contested but it opens up a wide range of political possibilities. She suggests the basis of sustainability as a site of political argument and conflict – ‘may yet prove to be a Trojan horse admitting radical environmental values’ (Owens, 1994, p. 451). More modestly, Rob Krueger and Lydia Savage (2007) highlight the possibility of negotiation around complex alliances which bring together issues of social reproduction with concerns for the environment, while Mike Raco has similarly pointed to the ‘hybridity of approaches and rationalities’ that were mobilised in the context of Britain’s sustainable communities plan, noting the investment in social reproduction as well as an

engagement with ‘the demands made by a variety of social groups’ (Raco, 2005, page 343).

This is also reflected in a recent tradition within British local government which has drawn on the sustainability agenda to develop innovative policies in ways that sometimes fit uneasily with national priorities, often drawing inspiration from beyond national borders. Hugh Atkinson and Stuart Wilks-Heeg, for example, chart the way in which Local Agenda 21 was taken up by some councils in the 1990s at a time when local authorities seemed to be losing authority in other areas (Atkinson and Wilks-Heeg 2000, particularly Chapter 9; see also Gouldson and Roberts 2000). Harriet Bulkeley and Michele Betsill highlight ‘the multi- and transcalar nature of environmental conflicts, and the consequent implications for sustainability’ (Bulkeley and Bertsill, 2005, p. 59).and draw attention to the emergence of transnational municipal networks (Cities for Climate Change Protection) making up a politics that moves beyond the boundaries of nation states implicitly challenging their authority (see also Bulkeley 2005). This does not seem to be a post-political world.

Governing through ‘sustainability’

Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the extent to which the notion of ‘sustainability’ has become the common-sense of the contemporary age. And, of course, the promise to positively reconcile the tensions between economic development and environmental constraints is a highly seductive one. With the help of evidence drawn from the UK, this paper sets out to review some of the ways in which sustainability has been mobilised in recent years as a political strategy and technology of governance, apparently opening up new opportunities and offering the possibility of consensual progress, without the need to take on any of the more challenging or radical aspects of ecological modernisation as a policy prescription (see, e.g., Mol et al 2009). In other words, this is an exploration of sustainability as it has found an expression in policy practice, rather than as an ethical, philosophical or political vision.

The difficulties associated with sustainability as public policy solution have long been recognised. More than a decade ago, Susan Owens noted that rather than reconciling

environment and economy as promised, the search for sustainability actually led back to an older language of limits to growth. She suggested that ‘defining sustainability exposes conflict more starkly’ and went on to argue that the ‘depth of challenge to current political economy represented by sustainable land use policies has barely been grasped’ (Owens, 1994, p. 440). More recently, Tim Jackson’s discussions of ‘prosperity without growth’ have focused directly on similar issues, suggesting that the search for sustainable development requires a different way of viewing the economy – one in which it is no longer possible unproblematically to link economic growth and ecological sustainability (Jackson 2009a and b). As he puts it: ‘the dilemma of growth has us caught between the desire to maintain economic stability and the need to remain within ecological limits. This dilemma arises because stability seems to require growth, but environmental impacts ‘scale with’ economic output: the more the economy grows, the greater the environmental impact – all other things being equal’ (Jackson 2009c, p. 43).

Nevertheless, arguments like these have not stopped sustainability joining a pantheon of words (such as community and partnership) in British public policy discourse with overwhelmingly positive political connotations and uncertain meaning (see, e.g., ASC, 2007, COIC, 2007, DCLG, 2007, DEFRA, 2008, Egan, 2004, HM Government, 2005, ODPM, 2003, ODPM, 2005b). What is interesting here is the way in which ‘sustainability’ has escaped from its home as a contested concept in debates around environmental policy to become an apparently central feature across economic and social policy.

The 2005 White Paper on *Securing the Future* (HM Government, 2005) sought to draw together all the various aspects of ‘sustainability’ as they were expressed within government policy, and a series of government strategy indicators has been developed which relate to ‘sustainable consumption and production’, ‘climate change and energy’, ‘protecting our natural resources and enhancing the environment’ but also to ‘creating sustainable communities and a fairer world’ (DEFRA, 2008). Meanwhile the ‘sustainable communities plan’ (ODPM, 2003) was intended to provide a framework for development and growth, delivering economic, social and environmental ‘sustainability’ (with the help of an Academy for Sustainable Communities aimed at helping to create professionals and community leaders with the skills needed to build

such communities). The Homes and Communities Agency, which came into operation at the end of 2008 (and into which the Academy, renamed the Homes and Communities Academy, was absorbed), retained a commitment to building ‘sustainable places’, while the notion of ‘sustainable economic development’ provided the framework within which regional development agencies were expected to develop their regional plans and strategies.

In what follows, some of the meanings and tensions captured within the notion of ‘sustainability’ as a technology of governance are reviewed through a consideration of the ‘sustainable communities plan’ and its implementation, as a piece of contemporary history, with a particular focus on the South-East of England. The plan saw its first iteration in *Sustainable Communities: Building for the Future* (ODPM, 2003), before being translated it into what was called a five year plan in the White Paper *Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity* (ODPM, 2005b). The economic and financial crisis of the last years of the decade had already called the growth assumptions of the plan into question even before the election of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010 effectively removed any prospect of its revival.

The invention of ‘sustainable communities’

In some key documents of British urban policy (for example, in discussions of ‘urban renaissance’) sustainability was used to justify a commitment to the compact city (i.e. denser urban living) (Lees, 2003, pp. 75-6. See also Rogers, 1999, Rogers and Power, 2000). But a rather different understanding seems to have informed the sustainable communities plan initially developed under the aegis of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister¹, as well as the programmes and policy summits that flowed from it.

In this context, sustainability was explicitly understood as providing a means of meeting a set of economic, environmental and social objectives. Emphasis was placed on the delivery of economic sustainability, but always with the expectation that this would also deliver other forms of sustainability – economic growth was expected to

¹ The responsibilities of the ODPM have since been divided up between a range of different ministries – the relevant one in this context remains the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)

solve a whole series of other social and environmental problems. In other words, instead of seeing economy and environment as somehow in tension, from this perspective, the promise was not only that economic growth and environmental sustainability could be made consistent with each other but that they could do so in ways which meant that they somehow reinforced and strengthened each other (see, e.g., TCPA, 2007). And it was sustainable economic growth that was to be the main driver.

Embodying a renewed ambition to build balanced communities from scratch to produce the hybrid term ‘sustainable communities’, the new policy approach also powerfully combined the notion of ‘sustainability’ with that of ‘community’ - another word increasingly used to give moral and political legitimation to a wide range of policies (see, e.g. Mooney and Neal, 2009). These were defined as ‘places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all’ (ODPM, 2005b, p. 56). Emphasis was placed on the potential for successful growth, rather than any attempt to resolve urban ‘problems’ in the inner cities or in cities more generally (ODPM, 2003)². This is an approach in which any clear cut division between rural and urban policy becomes increasingly elusive – as the language of community is inflected with a sense of rural England, rather than a sepia tinged nostalgia for some lost urban utopia (see Neal, 2009). Sustainability becomes the carrier of a whole range of policies with positive connotations – to the extent that there is little here against which even the most died in the wool neo-liberal could argue.

It was in the greater South East that the sustainable communities plan found its most developed expression, in a range of sub-regional and cross-regional projects, and it is on some of the governance implications of this that the next section focuses.

The South East in a national governance context

² In echoes of, if not direct borrowing from, the approaches adopted by the ‘new urbanism’ in the USA, which emphasise the opportunities offered by the creation of new communities, rather than the resurrection of old ones (Katz, 1993, Norquist, 2005, Talen 2005. See also Bohl, 2002)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the 'South East' was not a pre-existing and clearly bounded territory with unambiguous institutional governing structures (see Allen et al 1998). It was, rather, in the first decade of that century, made up as a region capable of being governed in large part through the working out of the sustainability agenda, as a technology of governance, which drew in a range of institutions and agencies and helped frame new sets of political relationships. Since the late 1990s the South East of England has been the focus of a clear national spatial strategy, even if it has not always been explicitly identified in that way (see, e.g., Hetherington 2006 for a discussion of the need to have a more explicit development planning framework for England and John et al., 2002 for a discussion of some of the problems of the South East as a region). The nature of the broad (national) regional policy that underpinned these initiatives may have been unstated (or understated), but it was clear enough. Although the government's Public Service Agreement (PSA) 7 specified that the economic performance of all English regions should be improved and the gap in economic growth rates between regions be reduced, in practice this is trumped by the commitment to national competitiveness (HM Treasury, 2007. See also ODPM, 2005b). It was taken for granted that, as the UK's world region, London and the South East needed to be supported a necessary underpinning for the country's prosperity (in a process which it was assumed would also somehow benefit the other regions) (see Burch et al 2009 for a critique of the position that privileges the South East in this way).

The central policy emphasis on competitiveness and growth found a particularly clear expression in the boosterist language of the South East of England Development Agency in the strap-line 'Working for England's World Class Region', stressing what was seen to be the region's key role in underpinning the UK's economic prosperity (John et al., 2003). The Regional Economic Strategy set itself the task of ensuring 'that the South East will be a world class region achieving sustainable prosperity' (SEEDA, 2006, p. 29). And even in the face of economic recession, it was stressed that 'Whilst times may be harder over the coming months, there is no doubt that the many strengths of the South East economy will help it through this difficult period' (HM Treasury et al., 2008)...and the promise remains that investment will be undertaken that will deliver 'the double dividend of a better environment and quality

of life alongside economic competitiveness' (HM Treasury et al., 2008, p. 6). Without a successful, competitive South East, it was suggested, the UK as a whole will not be competitive or successful (see Cochrane, 2006).

At the centre of the sustainable communities plan was the proposal to develop four new growth areas in and around the South-East of England – in Ashford, the Thames Gateway, Milton Keynes and the South Midlands and the London-Stansed-Cambridge-Peterborough corridor³. It was fundamentally a plan for housing growth to support the perceived need to provide 'affordable housing' in the South East for 'key workers' and to enable wider economic growth⁴. These issues are particularly clearly identified in the Barker Report, commissioned by the Treasury and the ODPM, within which it is strongly argued that substantial additional growth in housing supply will be required (particularly in the South East) if house prices are not to continue to rise dramatically (Barker, 2004). Providing housing for those who were needed to sustain the boom, even where (like teachers and other public sector workers, but also the growing army of service workers in retail, distribution, hotels and catering) they were not highly paid 'knowledge workers' was identified as a priority (see Raco, 2007 for a longer history of the relationship between key worker policy and the search for sustainable communities). For SEEDA, GOSE and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) 'affordable housing' was a coded expression for the need to provide the necessary infrastructure to underpin continued growth.

The core principles underlying the sustainable communities plan looked to find a means of mobilising market based institutions (and particularly housebuilders) to deliver the right sort of development supported by the provision of the necessary social and economic infrastructure (part funded out of the surpluses they could be expected to generate). Even in the wake of financial and economic crisis there was a reluctance to acknowledge new realities – in large part because the regional assemblage around which institutions and actors were focused, was based on

³ This is, of course, a 'South-East' whose boundaries stretch far beyond the official government region. See, e.g., Allen and Cochrane, 2007, Cochrane, 2006, Dorling and Thomas, 2004, Gordon, 2003, Gordon, 2004, Hall et al., 2006.

⁴ It was paralleled in the less favoured urban regions of England with a programme of housing market renewal (so called Pathfinders) whose purpose was to reconstruct local housing markets in places (in the North and Midlands) where it was concluded they had failed to deliver increased property values for residents (see, e.g. ODPM, 2005a).

assumptions of housing and economic growth. The official planning documents d to be based on dreams of growth, even if they were by now likely to be unfulfilled (see, e.g., HM Treasury et al, 2008, SEEDA, 2006). As far as housing is concerned, the targets proposed in the draft plan for the South East prepared by SEERA (2006) were substantially amended in the revisions proposed by the Secretary of State (with a new target for 2026 set at some 15% higher than what was proposed) (GOSE, 2008). Even the focus of the conference organised by the interregional board for the Milton Keynes and South Midlands sub-region (mksm) in 2008 was ‘success in a cold climate’.

Sustainability and regional governance

The sustainable communities plan brought together key aspects of contemporary policy discourse: economic growth and competitiveness combined with the building of responsible and balanced communities capable of sustaining that growth. But this was framed within a rhetoric which was environmentally sensitive, both as a good thing in itself (preserving green space, reducing the carbon footprint etc.) and as part of a strategy to make places attractive to residents and investors, to keep or attract ‘people of the right sort’ (Allen and Cochrane, 2007).

The pursuit of this agenda was accompanied by a (desperate) search for a series of overlapping institutional forms which were somehow intended to draw the agenda together. This could be seen in the rise and spread of regional agencies of one sort or another (including government offices and regional development agencies); the diffusion of local (and regional) partnerships; the emergence of third sector organisations; the creation of a variety of local delivery vehicles (with distinctive characteristics); and local councils and community governance. In the case of Milton Keynes and the South Midlands, for example, there were five local delivery vehicles, each with slightly different organisational shapes: two were voluntary partnerships with responsibilities to act as brokers linking public agencies with private developers; one was simply described as a ‘partnership’ (but reported directly into the Homes and Communities Agency and has some development powers); one was an urban development corporation; and the third was an urban development company. In a sixth area development planning was led by existing local authorities. There was also

an overarching inter regional board, chaired by a minister, but supported by an executive team. These agencies existed in a sea of local authorities, local strategic partnerships, local area agreements, economic partnerships and community plans. Three Regional Development Agencies and three Government Offices had some authority within the sub region, seeking to influence interregional bodies and to support, sponsor and cajole the local delivery vehicles in their regions. And this only begins to scratch the surface of institutional arrangements and partnerships.

In the South East, at least while the growth agenda was still being actively pursued, local actors (including local authorities, sometimes through the various ‘partnership’ bodies) were able to negotiate over infrastructural spending, social as well as economic and structural (Cochrane and Etherington, 2007). The politics of governance was one in which consensus was assumed to exist and negotiation was expected to deliver practical outcomes, within broadly agreed frameworks. These were set out in the apparently neutral language of planning documents often prepared by consultants (such as Roger Tym and Partners 2002, which identified a new planning sub-region of Milton Keynes and the South Midlands which in turn became one of the growth areas in the sustainable communities plan⁵), as well as regional strategies (like those prepared by regional development agencies) and local strategic plans (like the one prepared by the Milton Keynes Local Strategic Partnership in 2004).

In this context, consultants often take on a key role of brokerage and integration at local level, oiling the wheels of governance. Rather than simply seeking to impose some universal template drawn from outside, this is a process in which alliances are constructed and agencies entangled in a more complex dance – one in which the global language of public policy (in this case sustainable communities, but it could equally well be what Nick Buck and others refer to as the new conventional wisdom that links competitiveness, cohesion and governance) (Buck et al 2005) is given meaning in and defined through practice. So, for example, in the case of Milton Keynes, even before the arrival of the Milton Keynes Partnership (which drew on its

⁵ Consultants were also involved in another (politically less successful) attempt to construct a cross-regional identity – the so-called Oxford to Cambridge Arc – which continues to live on in some regional planning documents (SQW 2001).

own set of consultants in developing its strategy) (see, e.g., GVA Grimley et al 2006) consultants were utilised in attempts to reframe the local politics of development. One partnership (Milton Keynes Economy and Learning Partnership) commissioned DTZPieda to re-imagine the city in a new context, moving its perception from 'new town to international city' (DTZPieda 2004). Meanwhile, in developing a 'community strategy' another - the local strategic partnership - drew on a range of consultants at different stages (Halcrow, Demos and First), to put together a statement, delivering the strap-line that Milton Keynes is 'the city that thinks differently, embraces evolution and champions change' (MKLSP 2004). The significance of all this is to be found not so much in what is finally agreed – which can often appear rather vacuous - but rather in the nature of the politics involved, and the extent to which the various partners are enabled to work within a broadly agreed parameters. Hierarchy and democratic accountability are replaced by a more detailed set of discussions and visioning events involving recognised stakeholders and community interests. In that sense, consultants add little new or innovative, but they do provide basis on which the practices of decentred governance can be pursued (some of these issues are discussed further in Allen and Cochrane 2007, pp. 1169-70).

Towards a post-political politics of governance?

However, this is not the end of the story, because tensions cannot simply be wished away. So, at the same time there continued to be significant conflicts over amenity, arising out of tensions associated with proposals for planned development or over planning permission for particular developments. Government frustration around such issues underpinned moves to transform the planning system when dealing with major infrastructural and related projects – most notably associated with airport development (Griggs and Howarth, 2004). Within the South East such conflicts have been particularly sharp, in part because of the way that the 'home counties' have historically been constructed as a site of power and of privilege (see Amin et al., 2003). In part it is precisely the green spaces of the 'home counties' that allow them to be defined in this way as protected – and even elite - spaces (Murdoch and Marsden, 1996). So, for example, South Buckinghamshire (where Beaconsfield remains a protected quasi-rural space) has defined itself through its ability to exclude growth from its borders. It somehow survives on the edge of the M4 corridor,

bringing together an anti-growth coalition in a tight arc around Slough (Charlesworth and Cochrane, 1996).

The language of sustainability adds another twist to the debate, allowing the residents of such areas to claim 'green' credentials. Some time ago Hall et al. (1973) developed a powerful critique of green belt policies and their effect on the 'containment of urban England'. They noted the way in which it protected precisely those elites at the expense of those living in the urban core. In other words the rhetoric of the 'green belt' protecting the green spaces on the edges of the big cities (and London in particular) effectively operated to protect both the amenity and property values of those already living in such areas. The notion of sustainability has been mobilised along similar lines by the region's county councils (see, e.g., The Commission on Sustainable Development in the South East, 2005). Even in Milton Keynes, itself defined through growth, there has been a campaign (largely driven by professionals associated with the old Development Corporation but appealing to a much wider constituency) which criticises the latest development proposals for threatening what is described as an 'Urban Eden' and describes itself as 'the movement to promote a sustainable extension of the original masterplan for Milton Keynes' (Urban Eden, 2009). In this case, however, it is Milton Keynes own peculiar greening around a system of grid roads that is being defended.

There is a danger of caricaturing the nature of the conflicts, debates and tensions - these are real issues, not just defensive responses from the privileged. And there are also genuine and significant material constraints lying in the way of the promise of sustainable growth. The challenge of developing the undevelopable is a real one. In the case of the South East, for example, finding ways of meeting the demand for water that will be generated by the new developments has not yet been resolved and threats of flooding are real enough, too (see, e.g. Foley, 2004). And, of course, the loss of amenity is not something that should simply be dismissed as of little or no interest even to those living in the urban cores (quality of life issues are increasingly important) (see, e.g., Robinson, 2004). The drive to the compact city and away from urban sprawl (even through the building of new balanced communities) offers an alternative vision of sustainability, which might have the potential to deal with some of the issues of concern.

In many respects, the semi-rural, small town, suburban or post suburban settlements of the South East are positioned ambiguously. Those living in them – the elites and the aspirants to elite status – are dependent on growth. They commute to work in the City or Whitehall. It was the attempt to square that circle that helped to define the sustainable communities plan in its heyday. And, even among those seeking to promote growth the recognition that the region has to be kept ‘attractive’, to keep and attract ‘people of the right sort’ was seen as fundamental (Allen and Cochrane, 2007). And since the election of the Cameron government in 2010, it seems to have been the agenda of suburbia that has triumphed as the regional housing targets have been removed, the Regional Development Agency abolished and funding for the local delivery vehicles in the ‘growth regions’ cut back.

If sustainability (particularly in its expression through the sustainable communities plan) helped to generate a politics of its own, even within an apparently more complex and confusing governance regime, the focus of the plan on the South East also generated responses beyond the region. The broad expectation was that the spread of the South East would help to alleviate inequalities by encouraging development, while the building of links into the South East economy was also expected help to improve the competitive performance of England’s other regions. Politically, however, it proved more difficult to win this argument. A range of alternative regional models have emerged to reflect some of these tensions, often taking on their own institutional form to make their claims. The best known of these are probably the Core Cities and the Northern Way (Jones and McLeod., 2007). Whatever else it has done, the identification of city regions (see, e.g., Marvin et al., 2006) has also served to provide an ideological underpinning to those seeking to undermine the taken for granted national dominance of London and the South East in public policy practice. The ‘city regions’ were explicitly seen as proper regions in sharp contrast to the somehow less legitimate London ‘super-region’.

Instead of producing an unchallenged ‘post-political’ space, therefore, in practice the notion of sustainability and sustainable communities in particular, has helped to generate a contested political space in which the political meaning of sustainability

becomes the focus of argument, debate and negotiation. The old question of who benefits and how may be given a different inflection but it remains central.

Conclusion: the regional governance of sustainable communities

The politics of the sustainable communities plan in the South East of England brought together a set of understandings (around sustainability, community building, market led growth, and infrastructural investment) that fitted loosely but uneasily with each other. This was reflected in the governance arrangements built around the plan. Responsibility was decentred (rather than devolved) and handled through a series of local and regional bodies and sets of negotiations between key players across the various economic sectors, government and quasi governmental agencies. Rather than being multilevel or multi scalar, actors nominally from different levels operated together within a skein of partnerships and across a range of scales. They were enabled to work towards the delivery of the broad agenda and shape particular (often local) outcomes, but without being charged with delivering any overarching plan. Insofar as there was any plan of this sort, it existed in sets of (ultimately nationally determined) housing targets, which, despite setting the policy parameters, were effectively unattainable.

Sustainability operated as a framing device around which governance could be reinvented, as capable of sanitising the development process and framing private initiative within some sort of social/environmental vision, as well as promising the delivery of self-discipline and responsibility through the making up of sustainable communities. It offered the prospect of moving beyond the 'state' but did so only on the basis of state sponsored involvement in the property market, generating value through house construction and development and with an explicit emphasis on need for state funded infrastructure to support development. If this was part of a neo-liberal project, then it was a statist version of that project (which helps to explain the continued representation of government agencies, such as the government offices, even at local level in the various partnership bodies).

This highlights the extent to which any particular set of governance practices must be understood as contingent. If the sustainable communities agenda and sustainability more widely helped provide the meeting point around which a particular regional assemblage could be constructed, it is equally necessary to recognise that, despite the apparent solidity of various institutional forms, a changed vision might also shift the balance. So, for example, however much one tries to develop an understanding of politics and governance beyond the state, a change of national government may also shift the conditions of local and regional politics. This does not mean that central government has suddenly rediscovered the ability to dictate to others, but it may imply that the balance has shifted in ways that require a recalibration of governance processes. In the case of the South East of England after May 2010, it seems to mean that some of the existing actors and agencies will lose their salience (and in some cases cease to exist) while others find themselves in stronger positions. Sustainability remains a key political battleground, but now the voices of those for whom growth is seen as a threat as much as an opportunity are being heard rather more.

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