GREENING LONDON: SUSTAINABILITY, POLITICS AND THE THIRD WAY

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Contents

Summary

One of the key problems of the sustainability agenda is the relationship between policy and implementation. Policy perspectives are often informed by normative definitions of sustainability. Implementation, by contrast, has to focus on the complex and pragmatic concerns of governance institutions, citizens and other actors involved in the process. The linkage between both sides of the agenda is important if sustainable development is to be achieved over the long term. This is not simply to make the process more efficient, but to ensure that policy outcomes—whether they are local, national or global—conform to the objectives that were originally set.

This paper takes a sectional view through the sustainability agenda in London. It outlines the political and theoretical approach of the national government (known as the Third Way), the relationship between this and the Greater London Authority (GLA), and the ramifications this has for the implementation efforts of London Boroughs. It argues that while there is clear evidence of a sustainability project at work, there is still considerable fragmentation in the approaches taken, the understanding of what sustainability means and the types of priorities adopted by each local government in the wake of the modernization program initiated by the Blair government in 1998.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development—the quest to manage resources in such a way that they are not depleted for future generations—has become a dominant concern of both environmental and political leaders in the twenty-first century. Despite this higher profile, however, the very imprecision of "sustainability" as a concept, the difficulty in reaching some form of agreement over what should be done and the different agendas of the groups involved have meant that initiatives have taken radically different forms in urban centers

worldwide. This paper takes one location, London, and one political approach, the Third Way, and analyzes how the policy agenda for sustainable development has been both formulated and implemented. Using specific measures from each London borough it argues that while there is evidence of both environmental and sustainability initiatives in the majority of councils across the city, there is still considerable fragmentation in the approaches taken, the understanding of what sustainability means and the priority for implementing a number of objectives since the modernization program was initiated by the Blair administration in July1998.

To pursue this argument the paper initially focuses on the Third Way and its approach to sustainability before moving to a more specific discussion of London, the Greater London Authority and the initiatives that have been put in place by borough councils citywide. It considers the context in which the "Third Way" agenda for environment and sustainability emerged and its relationship to other priorities currently being pursued both at national and local government level. It discusses how sustainability is viewed as an agenda within London and the extent to which this approach reflects or detracts from current thinking on sustainability elsewhere. In addition, it also links the objectives to Agenda 21—a program sponsored by the United Nations—and illustrates how borough councils are attempting to adapt their service delivery at different locations within the city.

While the first part of the paper is concerned with theoretical and political approaches to the question of sustainability, the latter part focuses on some of the pragmatic issues that have been encountered during the implementation stage of the agenda in London. Although sustainability is widely used as a theoretical and conceptual tool, it is still nonetheless evolving as a practice, leading to a wide variation in the design of sustainability projects by location. The final section of the paper therefore illustrates some of the tensions that have arisen in London with the attempt to institute a sustainability agenda at the level of local government. Particular attention is paid to the problem of conceptual fuzziness and the difficulties this creates in implementation outcomes, to the layering of instructions from multiple levels of government and to the type of problems local autonomy can generate for the overall agenda. By focusing not simply on the theoretical but also on the practical aspects of sustainability, it allows a sectional view of both the planning and implementation sides of the sustainability process. It highlights aspects of the project in London that are successful, yet, by focusing on both sides of the sustainability equation, it brings into sharp focus areas in which problems still remain.

2. Sustainability and the Third Way

Since sustainability is a much-debated concept, a few words should first be said about the way it is utilized by the proponents of the Third Way. By far the most common definition of sustainability is the one used by the Bruntland Commission in their 1987 report *Our Common Future* which views it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". While there are other definitions, such as "the ability to preserve ecological and social capital", or "the ability to improve the long-term health of human and ecological

systems", it is nonetheless Bruntland that has won out and consequently lies at the heart of the Third Way sustainability framework in the UK.

While Bruntland provides a symbolic and deceptively simple definition of what sustainability should be, it doesn't exactly lend itself to easy implementation. It has therefore been criticized for vagueness, inoperability and as being the root cause of much of the subsequent effort to redefine how sustainability practice should actually operate. Some have argued that it is more of a guiding principle rather than a blueprint for action; others have stressed that a process-oriented definition is the only real way to side-step many of the difficulties Bruntland brings about. Given this situation, Bruntland is often used as a starting point for analysis, yet considerable work is subsequently undertaken to make it more workable from a pragmatic standpoint. The UK and the Third Way approach to sustainability is no exception in this regard, with considerable effort being expended not only on trying to define the concept of "need," but also a meaningful basis of action for those struggling to include "sustainability" in their policy agendas.

To think about sustainability in a more meaningful way requires a return to some of the key themes that underpin the concept. Wheeler is helpful in this regard. He argues that there are three main ideas that contribute to the use of sustainability as a concept: a long- rather than short-term perspective, concern about resource use and the environment, and finally a growing recognition of the complex interaction of issues, fields, actors and disciplines as they relate to a system of sustainable development. By using a "thematic" or "process oriented" definition rather than a conventional attempt to pin sustainability down to a single phrase, he argues that one is able to sidestep the minefield that usually surrounds sustainability definitions. Further, provided there is a normative agreement about the proposed direction of sustainability processes, this sort of approach is more amenable to measurement through performance indicators or other forms of progress measurement. Since there are at least some basic themes that can be enlisted to measure the progress of sustainability in London, this will therefore form the basis on which this paper measures the success of the project in the city. It will also provide a helpful framework from which to assess the relationship between policy and practice, thus providing a much-needed look at all sides of the sustainability equation.

The first thing that should be established from a theoretical and implementation standpoint is the governmental entities that are responsible for sustainability guidelines and policy outcomes. In London, sustainability policy emanates from three distinct levels of government (see Figure 1 below). At national government level, sustainability is being pursued within the parameters of a new political approach called the Third Way. As the paper will go on to outline below, this approach seeks to tie sustainability into a wider political agenda while taking account of existing initiatives such as Agenda 21 sponsored by the United Nations. Below this, is the Greater London Authority (GLA)—a second layer of government—which acts as a conduit through which theoretical approaches to sustainability can be read and made strategically relevant to London. At the bottom of the sustainability hierarchy, yet no less important, are the London boroughs, which manage the day-to-day affairs of those living in the capital. This group of 32 local governments, plus the Corporation of London, provides the practical instantiation of sustainability policy at the local level. It is at this level that

networks are formed, policies implemented and the practical difficulties of the sustainability agenda resolved.
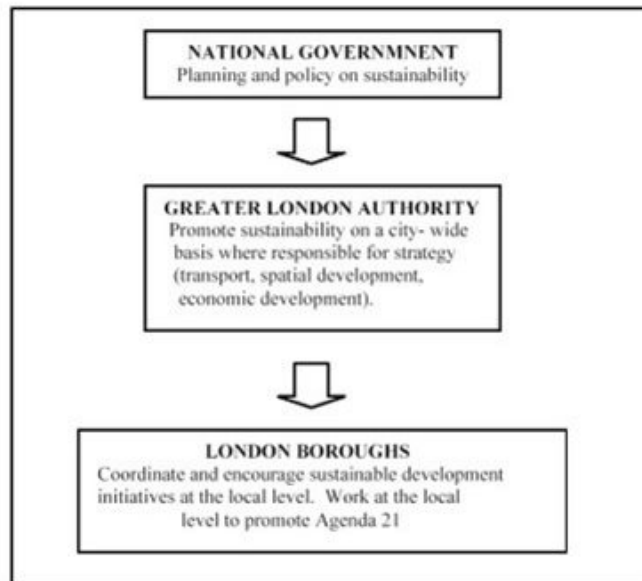
Sources: A Mayor and Assembly for London, Cm3897, 1998; Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People, Cm4014, 1998.

Figure 1. Hierarchy of government bodies responsible for sustainability in London

At national government level, sustainability policy suffers from both the problems of definition outlined above and the need to incorporate it within an existing political agenda. The attempt to cope with the risks wrought by ever-increasing globalization, the tensions of market encroachment into everyday life, the larger ecological modernization project and the trade-offs that politicians have to make in other spheres of political action all set the framework within which the approach to sustainability can be developed. Thus the concern is not simply one of becoming greener or more sustainable in isolation; the quest is to combine these objectives with economic growth, improved quality of life and social inclusion to produce a new interaction between environmental imperatives and other political objectives fit for a forward-thinking government of the twenty-first century.

This is no easy task and for Blair, as for many of the other architects of the Third Way, sustainability encapsulates some of the dilemmas faced in many areas of their work. No longer are the political fault lines clearly drawn with respect to many issues. Instead, contemporary politics now demands a more flexible and in some respects syncretic approach, often bringing together apparently incongruous themes or groups all in the name of political compromise. Sustainability is no different in this regard. It requires an accommodation between the traditionally opposed factions of capitalism and environmentalism in an attempt to achieve a *modus vivendi* in which all sets of actors can pursue their agendas. It requires a "meeting of minds"—a reinvigoration of the sustainability agenda—in which business, environmental requisites and consumer demand can be harnessed in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Picking up Wheeler's reference to sustainability as a "complex web of interconnections between different issues, fields, disciplines and actors", one can clearly see this process at work in the way contemporary politics functions. For the UK government, it is not just a matter of mediating between the demands of groups such as environmentalists or businessmen. The spirit of compromise already referred to requires a complex process where traditionally opposed groups must now *work* together. So, rather than the heavy hand of intervention that characterized post-war years, the government now aims to strike a balance whereby the state is minimized and business is brought "on board" through public-private partnerships. This means that on the environment, for example, there is a concerted effort to appear simultaneously both green and business-friendly. Where sustainability is concerned, the possibilities for long-term economic growth are now stressed as part of the sustainability agenda, rather than opposed to it. All in all, there is a clear theoretical difference between the politics of the Third Way and the type of approach that characterized post-war politics. From a theoretical standpoint, then, the approach to politics and sustainability differs in that it tries to bridge previously entrenched political and economic divides.

However, while there is a theoretical effort underway to rethink some traditional political alliances and categories, it would be wrong to paint a totally rosy picture of sustainability initiatives under the Blair administration. Despite efforts to make business and environment more compatible in the long-term, there has been sustained criticism of the Third Way agenda on a number of fronts. From the standpoint of policy, for example, there is concern about the deliverability of some of the current policy objectives. While the political rhetoric promises a healthy balance between opposing groups in which no one set of needs is sacrificed for another, there is still significant concern that the agenda relates more to lip-service than substance. This concern has been reinforced over recent years by a noticeable lack of serious initiatives where the environment and sustainability are concerned. The net result of the situation is a growing sense of frustration on the part of environmentalists and sustainability experts alike. Recently, in an acerbic response to the power of the corporate lobby *vis a vis* the environment, Spencer FitzGibbon of the Green Party executive said: "It's another case of the emperor's green clothes. On environment policy Tony Blair is virtually starkers. He insists on showing off what he hasn't really got".

Since one of the other key points raised by Wheeler is the importance of the natural environment to sustainability policy, this type of comment highlights a serious problem for the sustainability agenda of the Third Way. How can one strike a balance with what seem to be irreconcilable needs? Since many of the factions seem diametrically opposed, what kinds of policies could even be pursued? As Blair himself has acknowledged, these kinds of difficulties are not easy to resolve and it was this very issue that he set out to address recently in a speech that was given to the Confederation of British Industry/Green Alliance conference. Calling for a coalition between all the groups concerned, he exhorted environmentalists in particular, to "reawaken the challenge" of environmentalism and sustainability. Arguing that the coalition should work with the grain of consumer demand, business and science, he called for a new framework in which the profit potential of green technologies can be recognized. Central to this framework is a belief that the business/environment "zero-sum" relationship can be overturned resulting in positive sustainable growth. By 2050 this -

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The DETR deprivation index is a summary index that brings together multiple measures of deprivation in one score. A low score indicates less deprivation across a range of measures ranging from overcrowded housing to levels of welfare recipients and poverty. Conversely, a high score suggests deprivation across a multiple set of indicators.

Biographical Sketch

Anne Bartlett is a PhD candidate in the department of Sociology at the University of Chicago. She holds a degree in Sociology and Social Policy from the University of the West of England and Masters degree in Sociology from the University of Chicago.

Prior to this, she worked in various capacities in the British government for over fifteen years. Her PhD research centers on the changing nature of political subjectivity in London, particularly as it pertains to the lives of refugees and migrants. Her other areas of interest include sociological theory, globalization, human rights and evolving forms of political culture.