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# **Local Policy for the Global Environment: In search of a New Perspective**

**Liz Sharp<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

British local government is placing a new emphasis on local action for the global environment. In the literature addressing these developments limited attention has been paid to the contested nature of sustainability, or to the local context in which initiatives arise. A cultural politics approach provides a means through which these shortcomings can be overcome (Hajer, 1996). Its discourse basis enables a local authority to be seen as a forum in which technocentric and ecocentric interpretations of sustainability compete with each other, as well as contesting established 'non-sustainable' approaches. The Foucauldian view of power which underlies cultural politics requires that these contests are viewed in the context of an authority's history and traditions. As such, a cultural politics approach could form the basis of a new broader agenda for Local Agenda 21 research.

## **Introduction**

British local government has long been a key player in the care of the local environment. During the 1990s this responsibility has taken on a new aspect, with many local authorities now suggesting that their policies are designed to care not just

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for their local environment, but for the global environment as well. There is a burgeoning literature which describes these developments. In this paper I contend that this literature has distinct limitations. Firstly, it is suggested that the literature takes a uni-directional view of these developments. Authorities are depicted in terms of their progress towards sustainability, but the wide variations in their interpretations of this goal are seldom emphasised. Secondly, it is suggested that most of these descriptions are apolitical, that they lack the contextual information to suggest which factors enable and constrain the development of policy in particular directions. The objective of this paper is to explore a theoretical approach through which these difficulties can be overcome. As such, it suggests a new broader agenda for Local Agenda 21 research.

This paper has four parts. In the first section, the literature on local environmental policy is briefly reviewed; its generally uni-directional and acontextual characteristics are asserted. The second section draws on O’Riordan’s environmental positions and Hajer’s perspectives on ecological modernisation, to suggest that a ‘cultural politics’ approach could provide the basis for a multi-directional analysis of local environmental action. The third section describes how the cultural politics approach might also yield a contextual account of local authority environmental action. Finally, the fourth section provides a partial illustration of how this approach might be applied. A case study uses the discourse framework to explore one incident in a British local authority’s environmental policy making.

### **Literature on local environmental policy**

This paper focuses on how we should study local authority responses to the perception of a global environmental crises. The emphasis on a *global* crises confines the concern to more recent local authority environmental activity; authorities' long standing involvement with the local environment are not of interest unless they have been altered because of the new global imperative<sup>2</sup>. In other respects this focus is inclusive. In particular, it encompasses both the narrower short term and immediate environment- based responses, and those which address the local, regional or global environment through the broader frame of sustainability or Local Agenda 21 strategies. Such inclusiveness acknowledges that the recent concern with sustainability has evolved out of a concern with environmental action. Any investigation which is to consider the development of local environmental actions through time must be similarly wide ranging in its definitions.

Of the considerable literature which already addresses local environmental activity, four types of work can be distinguished. *Assessments* of the broad picture evaluate the extent of 'progress' towards sustainable development. The Environment and Resources Information Centre (ERIC) at the University of Westminster has been particularly active in this field (Tuxworth and Carpenter, 1995; Tuxworth, 1996), but the recent work of the Audit Commission should also be included in this category (Audit Commission, 1997). The second category comprises books and articles which

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<sup>2</sup> The frame for this research is therefore associated with a new, broader, use for the term 'environment' that emerged in local authorities during the late 1980s and which was manifested through the publication of corporate environmental documents (Raemakers, 1993). Stimulated by the wider public concern with the environment, these documents brought together the previously diverse areas of (for example) planning and pollution control.

discuss *tools* for environmental management. Some work in this category compares and contrasts different types of tools (Agyeman and Evans, 1994; Levett, 1997), others describe or evaluate the effectiveness of one particular tool like sustainability indicators (Brugmann, 1997), environmental auditing (HMSO, 1993; Barton and Bruder, 1995; Sharp, 1998) environmental assessment (Therival, 1996). The *overlaps* between environmental policy and other policy priorities are the subjects for the third category, including works which look at the overlap between environment and housing (Bhatti, 1996), planning (Healey and Shaw, 1993; Owens, 1997), economic development (Gibbs, Longhurst and Braithwaite, 1996), and participation (Agyeman and Evans, 1995; Young, 1996a; Selman and Parker, 1997). Finally, a few works reflect on the *development* or *management* of local environmental policy, either in particular case study authorities (Jackson and Roberts, 1997; Kitchen *et al*, 1997), on a more general level (Freeman *et al*, 1996; Hams, 1994 in Jackson and Roberts, 1997; Levett, 1997), or in the form of guides for good practice (LGMB, 1994; DETR *et al*, 1998). This latter category show a change from a more environmentally oriented perspective (Hams, 1994 in Jackson and Roberts, 1996; LGMB, 1994) towards one which is primarily concerned with quality of life (Levett, 1997; DETR *et al*, 1998).

Many of these works comprise extremely useful assessments of the current action and difficulties in the environmental field. However, there are two ways in which this work can be seen to be limited. A first critique concerns the papers' implication that a single and unproblematic goal of sustainability is being pursued. For example, ERIC's annual survey is presented as a measure of British authorities' progress towards sustainability (Tuxworth, 1996), and good practice guides provide steps towards sustainability (LGMB, 1994). Insofar as a range of responses are anticipated

they are presented as different routes to sustainability, rather than paths with divergent destinations (Levett, 1997). It is thus suggested that all authorities either are, or soon will be, travelling towards this single goal. But the literature itself indicates the fragility of this assumption. The wide range of initiatives described will certainly compete with each other for limited 'environmental' resources in local authorities. Moreover, in some cases there appear to be conflicts in the ideology underlying different types of initiatives; for example, would the community responsiveness advocated by Young (1996a) really give rise to the expert led notions of environmental efficiency put forward by Barton and Bruder (1995) or The Audit Commission (1997)? Some of the literature does draw out these conflicts, indicating how in the application of particular tools (Therivel, 1996) or in particular fields (Owens, 1997) the interpretation of 'sustainability' is far from clear. In this paper I argue these tensions are not confined to single tools or fields, but run through all the choices which are made about environmental action at a range of scales. In effect, I suggest that there is more than one version of sustainability.

A second general critique of this literature is that most works lack context which would explain how particular local authority responses develop in particular locations. Most of the literature describes *initiatives* which local authorities have taken in response to the global environmental agenda; it concentrates on the authority as actor, but does not consider how action was selected, initiated or maintained. Thus, there is limited discussion of local authority politics, culture, or even the history of local environmental initiatives in the authorities. In particular, there is little work in which

these three factors are brought together.<sup>3</sup> This gap in the literature is not insignificant. It means, firstly, that we cannot understand what factors facilitate or constrain the development of responses to the global environmental agenda in local authorities; secondly, that we cannot begin to explain the differences between the types of response to this agenda; and finally, that we cannot understand how environmental politics interacts with other important contemporary pressures within local authorities. These points are stressed by Young in his review of the literature, ‘studies that emphasise pioneering initiatives do not explain *why* different countries and cities have embedded in their bureaucratic cultures different ideas about what is technically possible and politically acceptable’... ‘researchers need to move on from policy initiatives to address a range of broader contextual factors’ (Young, 1996b: 356). The third part of this paper considers how this ‘broader range of contextual factors’ might be addressed.

That the current literature on local environmental policy is largely uni-directional and acontextual does not necessarily imply that researchers themselves hold these restricted views. The recent nature of these developments in practice may account for the limited basis of the existing research; more developed analyses are probably in the publication pipeline. Nevertheless, this paper makes a contribution to the literature by suggesting one theoretical framework through which such broader accounts of contested and contextualised sustainability could be developed.

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<sup>3</sup> The work by Davoudi and her colleagues on Lancashire is an exception to this; it concentrates, however, on the statutory planning process, rather than the broader package of local authority environmental initiatives (Davoudi, Healey and Hull; 1997).

## **The search for a multi-directional perspective**

### *Environmental politics as choice*

The first section of this paper suggested that the existing local environmental literature was ‘uni-directional’ in approach. Typically, the literature depicts local authorities as moving from a ‘non-sustainable’ position towards a ‘sustainable’ position. In this section, the environmental literature is used to question the simplicity of this two position approach.

Writing on environmentalism frequently depicts two main streams of thought (O’Riordan, 1989; Pearce, 1993; Pepper, 1996; Barry, 1994). Both streams of thought suggest that nature is a constraint on the type and extent of human development. The first, a ‘technocentric’ position, suggests that we should accommodate this constraint by curtailing the excesses of development, and by using technological progress to overcome the limitations it imposes. The second, an ‘ecocentric’ position, sees damage to nature as an inherent feature of our current patterns of development. This position holds that radical changes are needed in our social and economic organisation in order to maintain the quality of the natural world. These two streams of thought suggest distinctly contrasting interpretations of sustainability: for the first it is accommodation; for a second, it is radical change. A third position approximates to the ‘non-sustainable’ approach implied by the local environmental literature. This position holds that nature is robust. Rather than suggesting that ‘sustainable development’ has anything to do with the environment,



this position would rather emphasise the need for sustained economic growth<sup>4</sup>. Table 1 shows a number of criteria through which these approaches differ.

What do these positions imply about the role of local government with regard to the environment? Clearly, an authority's reaction to recent increases in environmental concern will vary with the position they adopt. There are a number of criteria through which such differences might be manifested. Firstly, there are clearly differences in the meaning authorities give to the term 'environmental policy' (or 'sustainability policy'<sup>5</sup>). Secondly, there are differences in the way they structure their approach to this policy area - some authorities might concentrate on a number of different aspects of the environment, other authorities view the environment as more integrated, concentrating instead on the actions of particular client groups. Differences between authorities may also be revealed from their processes of policy making, and the type of information they collect and use. Finally, there will be differences in the types of actions which these authorities would favour for improving the environment, and in particular, in the relationship they develop with the business community. These criteria are used in Table 2 to show the types of actions which might be favoured by authorities holding each of the three environmental positions.

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<sup>4</sup> Some advocates of this position would also call themselves environmentalists, arguing that they want protection of the environment through the 'natural' operation of the market processes. Consequently, this position has sometimes been depicted as particular type of technocentric approach (O'Riordan, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Clearly some significance can be given to the title which is used to describe policy, as well as to its content. However, the two factors do not always correlate. This paper therefore concentrates on the latter, policy content.

Table 2 also reveals the difficulties in using the environmental positions in the analysis of local authority actions. Few local authority operational procedures accord with any of the three 'ideal' positions described above. Most involve actions which can be seen as a mixture of all three positions. Indeed, it seems that in this way local authorities are similar to other groups, and indeed individuals, whose ideologies and actions are usually 'an eclectic mix of different ideas' (Pepper, 1996: 34). This eclectic mix means that it is difficult to use these positions to classify local authorities, or indeed, individual initiatives. Instead, a more flexible means of analysis is needed which allows the researcher to show the influence of these positions, without asserting that any of them have achieved overall dominance. It is in search of just such a means of analysis that the next section explores the wider literature on sustainable development.

#### *Analysing sustainability: alternative perspectives*

The development of environmental policies in local authorities is clearly associated with the wider pressure in society to move towards sustainable development. In Hajer's depiction, the move towards sustainable development can be seen as a key part of a process of 'ecological modernisation'. Hajer associates this change with a number of developments including new policy making techniques, a view of nature as a 'public good' rather than free good, and new roles for scientists and for the public in policy making (Hajer, 1995). In this section I use Hajer's analysis of different perspectives on ecological modernisation to consider the choices available for the analysis of local environmental activity.

Hajer (1996) describes three 'ideal type' perspectives on ecological modernisation. From the first perspective, ecological modernisation is the process of institutions adjusting to modern concerns about the state of the environment; he calls this perspective 'institutional learning'. For these accounts "environmental degradation is seen as an 'externality' problem, and 'integration' is the conceptual solution" (Hajer, 1996: 251). Ecological modernisation is therefore regarded as a positive development; the process of analysis emphasises and shares good practice among institutions. A quite different perspective is taken by Hajer's second 'ideal type'; writers from this perspective criticise ecological modernisation as the old technocratic project under a new guise. From this 'critique of technocracy' perspective, the model of ecological modernisation is a repressive answer to the radical environmentalists of the 1960s, which leaves the 'structural' causes of the problems unaddressed. The analytical project of this type of analysis is to expose how supposedly 'environmental' developments are ineffective at tackling real social and environmental difficulties. Hajer's third approach to ecological modernisation he entitles 'cultural politics'. This perspective regards debates on environmental problems as debates over the preferred social order. This perspective therefore examines which aspects of reality have been built up as 'environmental problems' and which have not. As Hajer explains, 'the point is that one should be aware that this coherence [of an environmental problem] is necessarily an artificial one and that the creation of discursive realities are in fact moments at which cultural politics is being made'. The analytical objective of this approach is to retell and understand the social construction of environmental problems. It achieves this by highlighting how different languages and knowledges

have competed against one another in the process of defining the problem and in framing the solutions.

To gain a better understanding of what these perspectives are saying about ecological modernisation, it is instructive to consider them in relation to the three environmental positions developed in the last section.

Perhaps the easiest of Hajer's perspectives to understand is the second one - the critique of technocracy. Analysts writing from this perspective would suggest that the environmental positions provide an immediate clear explanation for the phenomena of ecological modernisation. Positioning their own analysis as ecocentric, they would view ecological modernisation as a reformist project in the 'technocentric' tradition. However, as Hajer points out, this simple understanding may be problematic; describing what he called the 'radical' and the 'pragmatic' traditions of environmental thought, he suggests that 'ecological modernisation stands for a political project which breaks with both tendencies' (Hajer, 1996:249). Put differently, ecological modernisation (and thus sustainable development) combines both ecocentric and technocentric views. The reliance on technology and growth appear to be drawn from a technocentric approach, however, the emphasis on the structural nature of environmental difficulties, and the priority which is given to participation, suggest that ecocentrism has also had an influence.

The assertion that ecological modernisation derives from both ecocentrism and technocentrism is also given some support from the way that the term 'sustainability' is used; it is clear that those employing this term often have opposing social viewpoints. For example, the conservation of environmental assets advanced by the

UK government in its report *Sustainability, The UK Strategy* (Her Majesty's Government, 1994) contrasts with the radical social project advanced by a coalition of NGOs for the 1997 election in *The Politics of the Real World* (Jacobs, 1996). This evidence suggests that ecological modernisation includes both ecocentric and technocentric arguments and policies. If this argument is accepted then the dismissal of ecological modernisation as a mere 'technocentric project' by Hajer's second approach must be seen as simplistic.

The view that ecological modernisation incorporates ecocentric and technocentric arguments also has implications for how Hajer's first and third viewpoints are to be understood. It now appears that the promotion of ecological modernisation by the 'institutional learning' perspective could be advancing either ecocentric arguments, or technocentric arguments, or both. Like ecological modernisation itself, the political intent of the 'institutional learning' perspective is hidden. This description of the 'institutional learning' approach shows clear parallels with the description of the local environmental literature at the beginning of this paper.

In contrast, from the cultural politics perspective, lack of clarity in the *policy sphere* is the inevitable outcome of political coalition building. The analysis of cultural politics seeks clarity from these political obfuscations. It therefore draw out the tactics and arguments through which different environmental positions have influenced the problem definition, framing and solutions. Such an approach appears to have the potential to distinguish between ecocentric and technocentric strands of sustainability policy making.

The cultural politics approach can be further distinguished from Hajer's other two approaches. Although they are fundamentally opposed, the institutional learning approach and the critique of technocracy approach share a view of ecological modernisation as a coherent single political project. In contrast, cultural politics suggests that there is more than one project being advanced under the title of 'ecological modernisation'. This difference indicates a shift in theoretical position: whereas the first two perspectives hold single fixed ideas of progress, the latter would argue that progress is in the eye of the beholder; whereas the first two perspectives seek to show and explain the extent to which action has progressed, the latter perspective indicates in which direction it has developed and how this has been achieved. The cultural politics perspective argues that there are always alternative possibilities for the future; moreover, it indicates that there were alternative possibilities for what is now the present. It therefore rejects the idea that any account of the past can explain *why* events progressed as they did - for this would be to suggest that their 'progress' was somehow predetermined. Rather, it seeks to detail *how* changes were effected, to indicate the detailed shifts in practices and concepts through which alterations in reality occurred. This perspective reflects the approach of the post-structuralist theorists, and in particular the 'discourse-analytics' of Michel Foucault which underlie Hajer's work.

It is Foucault's challenging view of power which particularly marks out this approach. Foucault suggests that power is transmitted through discourses. These are conceptual devices which enable thinking to move beyond uni-directional notions of progress. Hajer defines discourse as 'a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices, and

through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer, 1995: 44). It should be stressed that this definition associates discourses with practices, as well as with ideas and categorisations. Hajer's use of the term is thus far broader than that of some academic analysis in which the term discourse is associated exclusively with language and text (for example, Hastings, 1999; Myerson and Rydin, 1996).

Central to Foucault's conception of power is the idea that there is not one discourse, but many. He rejected accounts which, like Hajer's first and second perspectives, depicted history as 'progress' from one viewpoint to another (Foucault in Gordon, 1980: 41). Instead he suggested that there were a wide range of discourses which were in perpetual and fluid competition (Foucault, 1990: 100). From this perspective an account of history would not depict 'progress', but rather would show the many different strands of discourse in operation, and consider their shifting influence through time. This multiple view of discourses means that the definition of one discourse from another is to some extent an arbitrary process.

This account of discourses begins to suggest how cultural politics would understand local authority environmental policies and practices. The three approaches to environmental thought - non-sustainable, technocentric and ecocentric - can be understood not as categorisations for authorities or initiatives, but as three discourses. Their respective problem definitions, policies and practices for local environmental action can be developed. The construction of particular local authority policies and practices can therefore be scrutinised to see which discourses have contributed to their construction and how this has been achieved. The policies and practices themselves are therefore regarded as the outcome of the discourse competition which has been played out in local authorities.

Cultural politics' view of the local authority as a forum for discourse competition places renewed emphasis on the local authority context. How does this context work, and what are the factors which facilitate or constrain the development of particular discourses? These are the questions which will be considered in the third part of this paper below. Initially, the discussion concentrates on how discourses work on individuals and in institutions. Later, the discussion considers how this enables a contextual analysis to be carried out.

### **The 2nd critique: context as dynamic discourse interaction**

#### *The operation of power on individuals and institutions*

To consider how discourse competition works in the local authority context it is necessary to consider in more detail how discourses operate. Foucault provided some useful guidance on this topic. Firstly, he stressed that discourses need to be searched for in the detail of policies and actions. Such small local tactics were, in Foucault's view, inevitably tied to wider sets of aims and objectives; hence, actions were all part of a wider discourse. However, he did not suggest that analysis should search for this discourse in the choices and intentions of particular individuals, indeed, he argued such speculation was pointless. Rather, he suggested that discourses could be identified by considering the effects of an action. He suggested that the effects of power - characterisations, regulation and exclusions, for example - betray the discourse which individual tactics promote. Secondly, Foucault emphasised that the operation of a particular discourse not only involved its own reproduction, but also stimulated a counter-discourse. For example, Foucault noted how the development of the medicalised term 'homosexual' over the nineteenth century, although associated



with a rise in prosecution for sodomy, also had the effect of developing a homosexual identity, an alternative discourse, which itself has been able to exercise considerable power.

These principles add to our existing understanding of how power operates in local authorities. The previous section has already argued that power operates through discourses and that the relative strength of these discourses is in continual flux. It is now apparent that these discourses can be identified through their effects, and that the operation of one discourse can stimulate a counter discourse (Foucault, 1990). This view of power has implications for how individuals operate within the local authority; it also gives some indication of how the local authority will itself develop.

The interaction of discourses with individuals is intimately tied to questions of structure and agency which inevitably weave through social science. With the view that power is everywhere, the cultural politics approach conceptualises individuals as part of a social web through which particular discourses may or may not be transmitted. Individuals in this web may be seen both to be structurally influenced by the discourses to which they are exposed, but also to exercise some of their own agency in the reproduction of discourses. For example, an individual's social class, geographical location, and gender will all exert control on what discourses they hear and see reproduced. However, individuals also enjoy some, albeit limited, choice in this respect. For example, individuals may be able to choose friendship groups to which they want to belong, and some may also exercise choice over their profession, and the location in which they live<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, structures influence the discourses

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<sup>6</sup> Some interpretations of Foucault do not see this as a consequence of agency, but rather an expression of the unique mixture of discourses to which the individual has been exposed. This debate, a post-

individuals reproduce; the norms and values associated with particular settings may require that particular discourses are reproduced. At the same time some individuals will have the option of expressing an alternative discourse, possibly at the cost of their own exclusion from that setting. As the discussion above stresses, the individual 'choices' over which discourse to reproduce are not usually explicitly experienced as part of a wider discursive debate. However, even without this consciousness they nevertheless make an important contribution to discursive reproduction. It is important to note that this conceptualisation of the way discourses interact with individuals allows, or indeed, expects, that individuals will reproduce multiple discourses. It suggests that it is perfectly possible for the same individual to reproduce two contradictory discourses, at different times or in different locations. This is important, for it indicates that individuals are neither 'owned by' nor 'own' discourses, but are nodes in a web which may or may not transmit the discourses to which they have been exposed. In conclusion, it seems that this view of power allows elements of both structure and agency to contribute to the process of social change.

The means through which discourses interact with institutions builds on their interaction with individuals. Just as an individual's words and actions reproduce discourses, so the policy statements and actions of local authorities and other institutions also play an important role in discourse transmission. However, institutions do not behave exactly like individuals. Firstly, it has already been noted that individuals may produce different discourses at different times and in different circumstances. With institutions the opportunity for such 'inconsistency' is greatly

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structuralist version of the more general question of 'nature or nurture', is beyond the scope of this paper. For more detailed discussion of this issue see Burr's Chapter 6 (Burr, 1995).

enhanced because of the volume of discourse reproduction which arises from their policy statements and initiatives. It is to be expected that institutions will produce many different discourses at the same time, and that some of these discourses will be contradictory. Secondly, whereas discourse reproduction by an individual can be seen as a series of one off statements and actions, discourse reproduction by an institution builds an element of longevity. It is possible to distinguish three mechanisms through which discourses are institutionalised: they are built into policy statements, they are expressed through initiatives, and they are immortalised in decision making structures. All three mean that the discourse continues to be reproduced long after the moment at which particular policies, initiatives and structures were decided upon. This process of discourse reproduction is obvious in relation to a policy document which might, for example, continue to be referred to by officers for many subsequent decisions. It also occurs with initiatives - for example, the development of a LETS scheme might continue to propagate the idea of non-money exchange long after the local authority ceases to have any involvement. The final means of institutionalisation, when discourse is expressed in decision making structures, is probably the most important because it is the most closely disguised. A decision, for example, to split the functions of an environment department into component parts - one dealing with water perhaps and another with air - may appear to be a sensible division of existing operations. However, if carried out, this division crystallises one particular view of the environment - which is reduced to water and air - and does not allow the development of new issues and practices until further reorganisation can occur. In all its three forms - policies, structures and actions - this longevity of institutionalised discourses is very important; it means that while one discourse may be currently

dominant in terms of that institutions' new policy making, other discourses will continue to be reproduced in terms of the existing policies, structures and initiatives. As well as subjecting others to the reproduction of discourses, local authorities are also themselves subject to discourses. It is likely that many different discourses are produced and reproduced by the many individuals who participate in the Councils' policy making process. Some influential sources of discourses may be political parties and national policy guidelines. These discourses will compete for influence over the local authority. This competition will be played out in terms of many small struggles (or non struggles) over policy wording, decision making structures, policy monitoring devices, resources allocation, and the detail of policy initiatives. In order to trace the influence of an environmental discourse over a local authority it is necessary to consider who in the organisation is suggesting what policies when and where. However, it is also necessary to consider how different discourses interact in the local authority.

#### *Interaction between different discourses*

The previous discussion indicates that local authority decision making can be seen as involving a number of ongoing 'debates' in which different discourses compete for power and influence over policies, structures and practices. In such circumstances of ongoing and intense competition, a wide range of tactics will advance the viewpoints of different discourses. One possible tactic is the formation of alliances with other discourses. Such 'discourse alliances' can indicate how debates over environmental policy have interacted with other struggles within local authorities. Discussion of

such alliances can therefore make an important contribution to our understanding of the context in which local authority environmental policy is formed.

An alliance arises when different discourses - usually from different debates - work together to their mutual benefit. Thus, for example, the technocentric discourse might favour the development of a centralised environmental unit for the development environmental management in a particular local authority. Another discourse, which seeks to centralise control of the local authority, may have no particular interest in policy with regard to the environment; however, it will give the technocentric discourse active support in the unit's development, because by doing so their own centralising objectives are advanced. As this example demonstrates, an important feature of alliances is that they need not result from conscious coalition building. Rather, they occur whenever a political tactic has complex outcomes affecting more than one debate. This will occur often in politics; indeed, such alliances are the natural corollary of discourse competition. Just as discourse competitions are always in a state of flux, so discourse alliances will wax and wane with tactics and political agendas.

The concept of alliances may be an important tool in the analysis of local environmental policy. It is clear that an authority's treatment of the environment cuts across action in many other policy areas; thus, other policy discourses will be of considerable importance in advancing or constraining the success of environmental discourses. One debate which may be particularly important in this regard is a general one concerning the role, functioning and management of local government. This will affect the environmental debate because it will advance opinions as to which environmental matters are appropriately addressed by local government; moreover,

different positions in this debate will have different opinions as to how these matters are to be advanced. It follows that there will be many different mutually beneficial tactics which could be found between different positions in the two debates. An investigation of such alliances might begin by identifying potential mutually beneficial tactics between discourses in the two debates. Empirical investigation could then verify whether and how these were being advanced. For example, one might hypothesise that the ecocentric discourse would benefit from some authorities' predilection for citizen involvement, particularly in the context of the early 1990s, and the emergence from a decade of local authority cut-backs and restrictions under the Thatcher administration (Selman and Parker, 1997; Leach, Stewart and Walsh, 1994). This example demonstrates how, in the identification of mutually beneficial tactics, local authority discourses themselves need to be viewed in the context of evolving central-local relations.

This section has considered how a cultural politics approach could overcome the second critique of the local environmental literature - that it lacks the political context of the local authority. A detailed discussion about how discourses transmit power in society has allowed a number of concepts to be developed which might enable a cultural politics approach to be operationalised so as to throw light on the political context of local environmental policy. First, it has suggested that discourses are institutionalised through policies, structures and initiatives, and that such institutionalisation assures their longer term reproduction. Second, it has suggested that alliances may occur between different discourses when there are tactics which could work to their mutual benefit.

The discussion above has already given some details about how these concepts would be applied. The illustration in the fourth section below, shows how these concepts might be operationalised.

### **Illustration**

In a primarily theoretical paper space restrictions mean it is impossible to select an illustration which fully demonstrates all of the concepts expounded. The objective, rather, is to give a flavour of the research process, to use a detail to exemplify the approach and the process of interpretation. In the discussion which follows I have selected one incident which was observed in a case study authority during the course of a doctoral research programme (Sharp, forthcoming). I begin by describing the incident. I then discuss the institutional and policy context in which it occurred. Finally, I use the discourse framework developed above to understand how the incident typifies some of the dynamics and tensions within the authority.

#### *The incident*

The ‘incident’ occurred during a meeting of a case study authority’s inter-departmental officer Environment Team<sup>7</sup> during Spring 1996. During the meeting the discussion around one particular agenda item raised my curiosity in a number of ways, and later it helped to stimulate further research. It is only in retrospect that I can give these observations the title of an ‘incident’.

The Environment Team was comprised of one director, and between one and four staff from each of the Council’s five directorates, including two staff from the Councils’ dedicated ‘Environment Office’. The item was raised by a manager from

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<sup>7</sup> Institutional names and job titles have been altered in order to maintain confidentiality.

the finance department, and related to a simple-to-use sustainable purchasing guide which he had developed for Council staff. The guide had already been distributed, but the finance manager was concerned that it was noticed and used. To achieve this, he proposed that 'purchasing indicators' be developed to show the extent to which the policy was being applied. He suggested 'proportion of recycled paper used in photocopiers' might be an appropriate start, and sought further ideas from members of the group. As he explained, 'we talk a lot about initiatives but we have no hard data to indicate where we are going'.

This proposal was greeted with a mixed response by members of the Team. The Director showed enthusiasm for the idea, noting that it fitted in with a general trend towards management indicators. A more reluctant attitude on the part of some other staff was indicated by five minutes of heated tangential discussion about the quality of recycled paper. Allegedly the 'sticky' nature of recycled paper clogged photocopiers; this was categorically denied by the finance manager. One officer offered some explanation for this tension in his comment, 'there are two processes, ..[staff] making decisions in their own directorates, and asking for information corporately'. The finance manager hastily re-explained his position, 'I hesitate to be prescriptive to directorates - they all move at different paces, but not [with respect to] providing information.' After the meeting, a member Environment Office staff, who had been silent during this discussion, confided that the information collection process would 'not work'. She suggested that monitoring would generate resistance and bad feeling. This is a simple and, on the face of it, unremarkable incident from an authority's inter-departmental officer environment committee. Nevertheless, the item raised my curiosity. Firstly, it seemed strange that this substantial item of work should have



been raised, organised and progressed by a Finance manager, with no apparent involvement from the Council's Environment Office. Secondly, I was struck by the antipathy and strength of feeling which underlay the apparently trivial discussion of paper quality, and in the comments of my confidante. In particular, I noted that this remark had not arisen from the Council's operational staff (whose objection to more bureaucracy might have been an understandable defence of their limited time) but rather from the dedicated Environment Office.

To understand the incident, I sought to find out more about the Council's previous attempts at internal environmental monitoring.

### *The Background*

The Council's first commitment to environmental management had occurred in 1990 after a change of leadership. It was part of a tranche of new environmental commitments which followed the spirit of Friends' of the Earth (FoE)'s advice to local government (FoE, 1989; FoE, 1990). To fulfil their new commitments, the Council developed a new Environment Office, the inter-departmental officer Environment Team, and an 'Environmental Sub Committee' of elected Members. The brief for the latter was 'to consider environmental issues of strategic importance which could not be appropriately handled in other committees or sub committees'. A member of staff was appointed to the Environment Office with the specific responsibility of carrying out an 'internal audit'. The individual appointed was a new graduate in an environmental subject, who had no previous experience of the local authority working environment.

The Environment Office generated their first external publication in 1994. This was not an environmental audit, but rather a strategy document. The document did not refer to the previous commitment to develop an environmental audit, but rather discussed a forthcoming 'baseline review' of the Council's internal activities.

Interviews suggest that this baseline review was intended to cover matters of internal environmental management, albeit in a less comprehensive manner than the audit.

In 1995, the Council's environmental activities became subject to review and change. Councillors made a new commitment to 'sustainability'. The inter-departmental Environment Team was reorganised to include one of the Council's directors, and a number of more senior staff, several of whom were involved in the Council's 'service planning' process. Among these was the finance manager who later developed the sustainable purchasing policy. In addition, the Environment Office moved into the central 'Support Services' Directorate. Small Environment Teams were formed to lead 'greening' in each directorate. Effectively, all of these moves raised the profile of environmental activities in the Council.

By the time of the 'incident' in Spring 1996, plans for both the 'internal audit' and 'baseline review' had been quietly shelved. Interviews helped indicate the reasons why. The audit officer stressed the difficulty of the auditing process: 'the challenge was to work on environmental auditing without falling into the trap of being an environmental policeman'. She suggested that the objective changed from that of auditing, to 'raise[ing] the environmental issue on the agenda of managers and staff'.

This shift was achieved through the development of the environmental policy document, and through staff training. Later the more strategic and external work took precedence over the completion of the baseline review: 'the sustainability agenda took

over'. Further perspective is gained from other interviewees. One officer in the Environment Office stressed their initial naiveté, 'we made some mistakes in the way we approached people [inside the Council]'. This is confirmed by officers from other departments; as one Environment Team member commented, 'at first they were trying to change things through control and this caused considerable resentment'.

Two more important issues should help contextualise these points. Firstly, the Council's environmental structure can hardly have aided the auditing process. The restricted brief of the Environment Sub-Committee only granted influence over environmental issues *which could not be appropriately handled in other committees*. But environmental management requires changes to existing practices, inevitably overseen by *existing committees*. Effectively, this brief excluded action on environmental management. Thus, there was no political elbow which could assist the audit officer if faced with uncooperative colleagues in other departments. Secondly, the paucity of environmental management needs to be seen in the context of the considerable activity which the Environment Office was promoting in the *District*, which won the Council local acclaim. This activity fitted into broader contemporary agendas concerned with democracy, participation, and poverty. The Environment Office staff might be forgiven for devoting more time to such high profile and timely initiatives at the expense of environmental management - an activity which would receive little notice from outside the Council and risked generating resentment within. This information begins to explain the incident described above. Previous experience had contributed to the Environment Office developing some antipathy to internal environmental monitoring. The finance manager, as a new senior addition to the Environment Team, was not jaded by the same experience. Moreover, his financial

and service planning background meant that he sought measurable outputs from the Council's environmental activity... But these conclusions are all common sense.

What can the discourse framework add to our understanding?

### *Interpretation*

It is clear that the Environment Office and the finance manager were promoting different interpretations of sustainability. The intention to monitor purchasing effectively suggested a mechanism of central surveillance over the environmental implications of directorate operations. If implemented, these indicators might have enabled the extent of directorates' operational 'greening' to be compared. As Table 2 indicates, this proposal's concentration on monitoring, its concern with operations, and with *physical* aspects of the environment demonstrate a technocentric view of sustainability. In contrast, the Environment Office staff promoted training and encouragement as the way to encourage change within the Council. Their approach put a high emphasis on participation, both of staff within the Council and of citizens outside it. The 'big brother' implications of monitoring threatened to undermine this voluntary strategy. As Table 2 shows, this concentration on persuasion, external activities and voluntary action indicate an ecocentric approach to sustainability. The tension observed in the 'incident' can therefore be interpreted as competition between the technocentric and ecocentric discourse. However, it is important that the context of this competition is noted. These two discourses were not competing for a dominant position in the Council; indeed, far from it. This Council, like virtually all institutions, has a 'non sustainable' discourse deeply embedded in its policies and practices. The competition was rather over a more minor position. The question at

stake was which discourse was going to be in the centre of a challenge to the ‘non-sustainable’ approach.

Secondly, these attitudes to environmental action interact with other agendas about Council organisation and management. The external environmental initiatives which had flourished under the Environment Office in the early 1990s were developed within a system of highly decentralised control. Under the same system of control, their attempt at environmental auditing had floundered, and a more voluntary approach was adopted. Having thus adapted to the decentralised state of the Council, a proposal for a more centralised approach risked a challenge to their autonomy. In contrast, the new senior managers on the Environment Team had an interest in more centralised control, relating to their role in the central planning and management of the Council. This preference was probably more acute because the area of environmental action, while much lauded, was so obviously lacking in measurable achievements. The relation between these different agendas can be seen to indicate ‘alliances’ between discourses. The centralisation of the authority was effectively being promoted with the technocentric discourse, the maintenance of its decentralised structure can be linked with the ecocentric discourse.

This pattern of alliances helps explain a curious irony about interpretations of sustainability. A theoretical understanding of different interpretations would suggest that the ecocentric approach is the more radical than the technocentric position, as indicated by its desire for social change, and from its concentration on changing attitudes as well as behaviour. However, as the incident demonstrates, in this case study a ‘technocentric’ policy of internal monitoring was far harder to effect than the ‘ecocentric’ actions of voluntary training in the authority or facilitating environmental

action in the district. There are two factors which may help account for this irony. Firstly, the development of monitoring required long term changes in practices rather than one off participation. The extent of the change required can therefore be viewed as much more substantial, because it involved the institutionalisation of new practices. Secondly, the centralising process of monitoring contrasted with established practice of decentralised directorate control. At least up to the time of the incident, the alliance between an ecocentric environmental discourse and a strong decentralising management discourse had been sufficient to prevent the development of internal environmental monitoring.

So how are we to understand the Council? The answer to this question depends on the observer's perspective. From a technocentric perspective the Council is inappropriately giving priority to voluntary and external actions. The lack of evidence of internal change reflects a lack of progress on environmental action. From an ecocentric perspective this emphasis has been appropriate. The Council has sensibly concentrated its efforts in areas where change is easier to effect, and where it will have the most long term impact. The effect of these efforts may be profound; however, it may be long term rather than immediate, it may be diffused through the Council and the region, and thus will not be reflected by simple indicators of internal resource use. Indeed, from this perspective the Council's actions may be seen as particularly up-to-date, reflecting the recent literature's aforementioned emphasis on quality-of-life.

So how does the discourse approach add to our understanding of the incident? Firstly, it has emphasised the inherent conflicts in the way environmental policy is run. It has underlined how local tension in the development of environment policy is a manifestation of the contested nature of sustainability. Secondly, it has shown how

these conflicts are closely tied to other issues about Council organisation and management. Thirdly, it has demonstrated that the arguably more radical approach of ecocentrism can be an ‘easier’ interpretation of sustainability to implement, albeit partially, because it offers a less obvious challenge to existing decentralised practices. Whether this means it is ‘better’ or ‘worse’ for the environment depends crucially on the observer’s perspective.

## **Conclusion**

This paper began by criticising the uni-directional and acontextual perspective taken by the existing literature on local environmental policy. To what extent does the empirical illustration suggest that a cultural politics perspective has overcome these shortcomings?

The illustration certainly demonstrated that more than one view of sustainability was present in local authorities. Indeed, it was the contrast between different interpretations of sustainability which enabled the tensions demonstrated in the incident to be understood. A longer account might show this range of views more thoroughly, reflecting further, perhaps, on the role and manifestations of the ‘non-sustainability’ perspective. Nevertheless, even this limited account has gone beyond much of the existing literature in bringing a theoretical perspective to bear upon the local contestation of sustainability policy.

The illustration also draws on the context of local authority policy making to improve our understanding of the authority. In this example, an incident in a meeting is understood in the context of the authority’s previous policy making in the same policy area, and its recent shifts in organisational structure. In a fuller account the ‘incident’

would not stand alone, but would rather form a part of a story about how an initiative was put into practice. Thus, the particular way that the initiative was implemented would be understood in the context of the locations, times and forums in which it was introduced and developed.

This paper has developed a new perspective with which to approach local policy for the global environment, based on Foucault's discourses and Hajer's cultural politics. It has briefly illustrated how this approach provides both a multi-directional and a contextualised account of events in the local authority. The research differs from previous accounts of local environmental policy making because it describes conflict *within* the sphere of environmental policy, as well as *between* environmental policy and other local objectives. I believe that such accounts of the competition over environmental policy are crucial to the future development of Local Agenda 21. If researchers join with policy makers in skating over the real choices and difficulties arising from local sustainable development then they contribute to obfuscation over the goals of Local Agenda 21. In the long run, such obfuscation will disappoint the public, and Local Agenda 21 will become just another forgotten initiative. If, instead, researchers help to foster a real debate about the nature and purpose of Local Agenda 21 then there is a possibility that the initiative will survive, and some of its admirable objectives will be put into practice.

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Table 1

Differences between environmental positions

Source: Some material from O’Riordan, 1989 in Pepper, 1996: 37

<i>Position</i>	<b>Non sustainable</b>	<b>Technocentric</b>	<b>Ecocentric</b> <sup>8</sup>
<i>View of nature</i>	Robust	Somewhat vulnerable	Extremely vulnerable
<i>Sustainability</i>	(If at all) sustained economic growth	Accommodating nature’s limits	Achieving radical change
<i>View of human nature</i>	Faith in individual ingenuity and ability of market to adapt	Faith in adaptability of institutions through monitoring.	Faith in co-operative capabilities of society
<i>Preferred role of state</i>	Facilitate operation of market	Moderate environmental consequences of development.	Stimulate radical changes in production and consumption
<i>Societal change to be stimulated by state</i>	None - belief in status quo and existing distribution of power	Modest reform within existing structure of power - more accountability and responsiveness	Redistribution of power towards decentralised federated economy

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<sup>8</sup> Ecocentrism is often sub-divided, sometimes into two categories of ‘communalism’ and ‘gaianism’ (O’Riordan, 1989), and sometimes into more positions (Dobson, 1995; Eckersley, 1992). The ecocentric position depicted here is close to the more moderate communalist position. However, in relation to key criteria about the role of the state, all these ecocentric positions hold related views, calling for the redistribution of power towards a decentralised, federated economy with participatory justice. It is for this reason that only one ecocentric position is presented.

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Table 2

Environmental positions and local authority environmental practice

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Non sustainable</b>	<b>Technocentric</b>	<b>Ecocentric</b>
<i>Frame for environmental or sustainability policy</i>	Concern with local, short term, and aesthetic aspects of environment only.	Concern with how local action impacts on local, regional and global environment in short and long term.	Concern with how local action impacts on local regional and global well being in short and long term.
<i>View of environment</i>	Tendency to reduce environment to its parts i.e. litter, countryside etc.	Tendency to reduce environment to its parts i.e. water, air etc.	Holistic view - all aspects of the environment are viewed as inter-related.
<i>Policy making process</i>	Internal process, usually one department.	Corporate internal process, external consultation of a range of groups	Council facilitates community generation of objectives; council depts. co-operate in implementation with others
<i>Use of information</i>	Little environmental information collected or used	Considerable collection of technical information	Concentration on community perceptions of the environment.
<i>Mechanism through which Council acts on environment</i>	Council provides local environmental facilities, services and regulation.	As non sustainable, plus council monitors and modifies the impact of its own actions on environment (internal)	As technocentric, but more external emphasis - i.e. council makes internal changes in tandem with enabling local community to modify its environmental impact.
<i>Relation to local business community</i>	No direct contact - good quality local environment assumed to attract business to area	Council provides information and support to help business modify resource use and waste production.	Council promotes alternative patterns of production and consumption (sale of services not products, LETS etc.)

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