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The effects of recent austerity on environmental protection decisions: evidence and perspectives from Scotland.

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to establish the evidence for, the why and how recent austerity policy atmosphere associated with the UK government affected environmental protection decisions within planning in Scotland.

Design/methodology/approach

A qualitative analysis based on perspectives gathered via questionnaire survey targeted at stakeholders involved in planning in Scotland was undertaken. The questionnaire responses were analysed thematically, supplemented by using statistical tests of significance and variance to show how responses differed across participants.

Findings

The evidence showed that austerity policy atmosphere resulted in a pervasive neoliberal imperative of resuscitating the economy; whilst producing subtle and adverse effects on environmental decisions. This was best understood within a Neo-Gramscian perspective of hegemony, borrowed from the field of political economy of states.

Practical implications

Decision-making frameworks should explicitly acknowledge the unique pressures during austerity periods; and contemplate resilient decision-making approaches and practices that can withstand the hegemonic tendencies which prioritise economic goals above environmental ones.

Originality/value

Whilst the area of austerity's impacts on the environment remains poorly evidenced, empirically, this seminal paper uses robust analysis to establish how the austerity policy atmosphere affects environmental decisions. This is insight into what may be happening in other similar situations outside Scotland, raising concern as to whether and how we should approach the challenge of hegemonic ideas.

Keywords: Austerity; Stakeholder views; Environmental decisions; Environmental impacts; Scotland; Neo-Gramscian perspective.

1 Introduction

The financial meltdown of 2007/8 and the subsequent banking crisis plunged the economies of the First World into the longest and deepest recession of the post-war period (Magalhães, 2014; Russel and Benson, 2014). In response, many governments introduced austerity policies or austerity measures, such as spending cuts, tax increases or a mixture of both to instil economic efficiency and fiscal discipline as a means to aid economic recovery (Bracci *et al.*, 2015; Krugman, 2012). Given the scale of the cuts, coupled with rising demands and the magnitude of the challenge, austerity measures and the resulting policy atmosphere have given rise to different perspectives which accentuate different framings of austerity as a tool for responding to the financial crisis. Lowndes and McCaughie (2013, p.533) for example, describe austerity as a “perfect storm” to be weathered, one which can be resourceful in enhancing agency capacities and in reinventing institutional forms of local government, emphasising therefore how it can trigger resilient and reflexive behaviours.

Tobin and Burns (2015, p.2) instead emphasise the unforeseeable and destabilising yet typical nature of the crisis, by portraying it as an “archetypal exogenous shock” resulting in significant ramifications on governance structures and future policy directions. For Jänicke (2012), these ramifications will particularly affect environmental governance in terms of the delivery of environmental protection policies and measures, as in the event of a financial or economic crisis or of a reduction of resources, environmental concerns tend to be put on the back burner (Taylor, 2002; Feindt and Cowell, 2010), or dropped altogether as a policy priority (Cavoski, 2015). Evidence of negative ramifications across health, education, homelessness, disability and the environment in the UK can be found in Cooper and Whyte’s (2017) edited book *The Violence of Austerity*. Loopstra *et al.* (2016) and Lupton *et al.* (2015) also observed that austerity had negatively impacted children and their schooling. Stuckler *et al.* (2009) also noted how across 26 European Union (EU) countries austerity-induced unemployment correlated to significant short-term increases in premature deaths, with deprived groups affected the most (Stuckler *et al.*, 2017).

As long periods of austerity may become the norm (Chu, 2017; Cross, 2015), evidence from European member states’ policy practice suggests that in a post-austerity world, the importance of the environment is being downgraded and advancements in environmental protection are being watered down to allow for a stabilisation of the economy through the prioritisation of growth in jobs and investments (Cavoski, 2015; Krugman, 2012). This raises concerns about [the lack of] environmental agenda during periods of economic hardship such

as austerity, and questions about the extent to which austerity's impacts on environmental decisions are known and understood (Tobin and Burns, 2015). Similar concerns can be raised within the UK context and its devolved nations, where austerity measures have led to economic growth becoming disengaged from environmental parameters; with environmental protection goals considered as unnecessary interferences with the market, and the pursuit of boosts in jobs and investment opportunities (Karamichas, 2015; McKendrick *et al.*, 2016).

This paper aims to therefore focus on the impact of austerity on the environment, particularly on environmental protection decisions in the UK, looking at Scotland as a case-study. As noted by Parkhurst (2017), it is only when the implications of decisions and their associating actions are known and considered, that better quality decisions can be made. This study questions how recent austerity has impacted environmental decisions, and how the manifestation of the impacts can be explained to help better inform environmental decisions in post-austerity periods.

Herein, austerity measures are viewed as both a concept and a tool encompassing policy style, policy strategy and policy design, which taken together contribute to the creation of an austerity policy atmosphere. This represents a complex blackbox of cumulative forces that directly or indirectly influences decisions through incentives, constraints, goals and rhetoric. Environmental decision(s) is treated as synonymous with environmental planning (Selman, 1992), including therefore the environmental features or themes worthy or in need of protection, as well as the policy planning mechanisms, processes and tools for considering, providing and enacting decisions on environmental matters. Following the introduction, the next section provides a review of the literature contextualising further the connection between austerity and environmental protection decisions, arguing that a hegemony, which favours economic goals over the environment, is at play. Then, an understanding of the austerity policy atmosphere in Scotland is provided. Subsequently, the study's methodology is presented, and the findings are analysed and discussed. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are drawn.

2 Austerity and environmental decisions: the nexus.

2.1 Austerity and the environment

Austerity is a set of [economic policies](#) aimed at reducing [public budget deficits](#) and debts, to restore balance in government finances and regain economic dynamism and competitiveness

(Kitson *et al.*, 2011). The literature describes austerity as a neoliberal tool (Schui, 2014; Blyth, 2013), adopted alongside an ideologically-driven motivation based on a *de-facto* dominance of economics over other issues, including the environment (Krugman, 2012). This dominance is particularly reflected in the UK context, where at the height of the austerity policy atmosphere, the 2010-2015 Coalition Government (Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties) argued that “The primary purpose of austerity is to shrink the size of government spending [and make the State] leaner, not just now, but permanently” (then UK Prime Minister David Cameron, UK Cabinet Office, 2013). This ideology has continued to dominate more recent policy activities, as illustrated by the Green Party leader Caroline Lucas (2018), who argued that funding for Natural England, i.e. the government’s watchdog charged with protecting England’s natural landscapes and wildlife habitats, was cut by 55% between 2010 and 2018 (from £1.58 million to just £700,000) with a loss of 23% of its staff since 2016.

Although austerity is not new, only recently are its effects on the environment, being subjected to systematic studies (Tobin and Gravey, 2015; Cavoski, 2015). In their work looking at European environmental policy-making, Jordan *et al.* (2013) identified a range of adverse effects, which include a reduction in the number of indicators used to monitor and measure environmental quality and environmental policy budgets; a reduction in environmental terms in policy density (number of policy instruments) and intensity (content of policy instruments). These findings have also been substantiated by other scholars, with a study by Bauer and Knill (2012) providing evidence that the number/density of environmental policies and policy instruments had indeed decreased during the austerity period. This is also reflected in the difference between the number of environmental policies adopted and abolished (intensity), suggesting a reduction in policy activity and reach in terms of environmental protection.

Consensus is generally emerging that austerity has led to cuts in environmental protection in favour of economic recovery and growth (Feindt and Cowell, 2010; Stoker, 2012). Environmental protection agencies have had to meet increasing expectations with fewer resources (Crouch, 2015), while more resources went to promote job creation and bread and butter issues (Cavoski, 2015). Many also argue that the consequences of the austerity policy atmosphere are likely to be felt across various spatial-temporal scales. As Elliot (2011) pointed out, given the increasing economic integration and interdependence of national, regional and

local economies across the world, widespread negative environmental effects associated to austerity are being reported no matter where the measures were introduced. Moreover, according to Blyth (2013) and Lucas (2018), even if austerity measures were reversed, considerable environmental damage may have already occurred.

Furthermore, consensus is emerging around the view that the environment can be instrumental in aiding economic recovery and a means for economic growth (Russel and Benson, 2014). This is reflected in many countries calling for a shift towards a green economy (Goodman and Salleh, 2013), which would reduce environmental risks, degradation and damage (Bina, 2013). Similar calls are made towards the Blue economy, looking to the marine sector as a new frontier for economic growth (European Commission, 2012). However, a significant initiative was the Green New Deal (Feindt and Cowell, 2010), as an economic stimulus to mitigate the effects of the economic and environmental meltdown triggered by the global financial crisis and accelerating climate change. Although it attempted to make environmental protection and austerity converge by prioritizing the decoupling of the environment from economic growth, its effectiveness has been questioned (Feindt and Cowell, 2010). Furthermore, a study by Evans (2011) concluded that there was no evidence that austerity led to frugality and sustainable consumption, and that austerity policy imperatives need not predominate environmental ones.

2.2 Austerity and hegemony

The role of planning in creating stable contexts for markets, government confidence, and consequent economic and developmental growth following the economic depressions and austerity periods in the 1920s and 1930s, is well-acknowledged (Lloyd, 2011). However, the hegemonic effects of neoliberalism have also been highlighted, particularly the antagonistic relationship between planning objectives and economic growth in times of financial hardship. This is where austerity measures can appear to be challenging planning decisions, raising questions about the overall articulation of purpose of and for planning. Using examples from The Netherlands, Germany and France, Waterhout *et al.* (2012) provided evidence of these hegemonic effects, thus of how decision-making processes had been simplified to account for the dominant position of sets of economic ideas and values, leading to warnings that recent austerity policy atmosphere could be reducing the scope and role of planning (Lloyd, 2011). Studies in the USA (Peck, 2014) and the UK (Grimshaw, 2013) found that austerity policy atmosphere eroded state and local autonomy, reducing their scope to advance other areas of

policy-making, including advancements in environmental protection (see Jordan *et al.*, 2013; Cavoski, 2015).

Whilst tools such as Environmental Assessment¹ (EA) exist to mitigate the dominance of economic considerations and ensure that social and environmental considerations are duly considered in policy-, planning- and decision-making for sustainable development; According to Gazzola (2013), pressures to revitalise the economy during recent austerity may be impacting the purpose of EA and its role as an advocate tool for environmental protection. Like economic policies, environmental protection policies too are impacted by global dynamics, which in turn are likely to influence the domestic policy choices that are driving environmental change in a region (Dauvergne, 2000). This emphasizes, how a hegemonic neoliberal ideology such as austerity, can have poorer environmental protection outcomes. To understand further the nexus between austerity and hegemony, it is helpful to engage with some perspectives of hegemony as those of austerity are already mentioned in section 2.1.

Reference is here made to a foremost social theory of hegemony, Neo-Gramscianism, which is based on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of inter-state relations. Gramsci's view is accepted as a meaningful way for explaining the shaping of specific outcomes of the state and its institutions through hegemonic ideas, institutions and material capabilities (Morton, 2001). Gramsci argued that man is not ruled by force alone and that power, both creative and conservative, resided in ideas. Therefore, the ruling class can manipulate the value systems and views (*Weltanschauung*) of a society, creating a supermarket of powerful ideas through which the state controls people (Bates, 1975).

Neo-Gramscianism is a refined version of Gramsci's theory and perceives state sovereignty as subjugated to global economic systems, marked by transnational financial and corresponding production systems that exercise global [hegemony](#) (Cox, 1981). Neo-Gramscianism locates hegemony within political leadership, as based on the consent of the led, and secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class, without any authoritarianism (Laurie, 2015). The theory posits that the state can establish hegemonic power relations and exercise influence via the machinery of government and its organs (e.g. budgetary control, media and mass culture) (Cox, 1981, 1983; Morton, 2001). It

¹ The EU EIA and SEA Directives take this to encompass the identification and evaluation of likely significant effects and impacts of proposed policies, plans and projects on the environment (Fischer, 2007).

is this strand of the Neo-Gramscian explanation that this paper shall focus upon to help explain the impacts of austerity on environmental decisions. This will explain how austerity rhetoric in one jurisdiction (UK) carried effect in yet another (Scotland) where austerity was opposed.

3. Scotland and austerity

An understanding of the austerity policy atmosphere in Scotland, as a devolved nation, can only be developed if set within a wider UK context. Scotland's executive and legislative powers have been devolved respectively to the Scottish Government and Parliament since 1997, giving the Scottish Parliament legislative authority for all devolved matters relating to Scotland, such as agriculture, forestry and fisheries, environment, health and social services, housing, land use planning etc. Other reserved matters remain a responsibility of the UK Parliament alone, such as benefits and social security, broadcasting, employment, foreign policy, and trade and industry (The Scottish Parliament, 2019).

The austerity policy atmosphere initiated in 2010 by the UK coalition government aimed at addressing the government's budget deficit and reforming the welfare state (Chu, 2017). The coalition government initially set out to save £83 billion over four years and cut 490,000 public sector jobs (BBC, 2011). Further, government departments were to make savings of 25% to 40% of their yearly budgets by 2019/20, contributing to an overall cut in Government spending by £20 billion per annum (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013). Whilst some policy areas had their budgets protected, several of those with an environmental remit suffered from severe budget cuts, e.g. the prevention and prosecution of waste crime and local planning authorities' environmental safeguards (UNISON, n.d.). Although funding cuts were also made to the devolved governments budgets (House of Commons, 2016; DEFRA, 2016), it must be noted that Scotland's political establishment and government are on record as being categorically opposed to austerity (Scottish Government, 2016; Brooks, 2016).

Scottish Government funding at the departmental level (Rural Affairs, Food and Environment) decreased between 2010/11 and 2015/16. Between 2009/10 and 2015/16, funding for Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) fell by almost 30%; between 2010/11 and 2016/17 it fell by 16% for the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA²); and by almost 40% for Marine Scotland (MS). The spatial planning sector also received a decline in

² SEPA is Scotland's principal environmental regulator, whose aims are to ensure that the environment and human health are protected (<https://www.sepa.org.uk/>). SNH's aim is to promote the sustainable use of, care for, and improvement of Scotland's natural heritage (<http://www.snh.gov.uk/about-snh/>).

Scottish government funding, by 55% between 2008/09 and 2016/17³ (Scottish Government, 2016). While Scottish Government spending on environmental protection institutions had increased annually from £35.6 million in 2002/03 to £121.5 million in 2007/08, it decreased dramatically after the crash. Particularly hit, were Scotland's flood defense schemes and in 2015/16 flood scheme works were delayed because of insufficient monies. The Scottish government blamed the delay on the reduction in spending allocated to SEPA's budget, which were a direct result of the cuts passed down from the UK government (Brooks, 2016). Although the Scottish government adopted the Bellwin Scheme, which makes extra financial assistance available upon request to help councils address emergencies such as those relating to flood damage, the scheme is not intended to replace budgets allocated for forward-planning and prevention activities. Figure 1 shows the trajectory of cuts occurring to SEPA and SNH budgets during recent austerity.

Figure 1

When asked by the media about the effects of the budget cuts on their ability to fulfil their mandate for environmental protection, the SEPA Executive Director highlighted how austerity's rationale of financial efficiency meant that the agency had to be innovative. In more pragmatic terms, this meant use less money to deliver the same or more, and that existing roles and responsibilities had to be reappraised so that any work could be entirely dependent on cost efficiencies and savings (Scottish Parliament, 2011; Early, 2016). However, several scholars and environmental organisations such as the National Trust, Greenpeace, the RSPB, The Wildlife Trusts, Friends of the Earth and the WWF have voiced concerns about the long-term effects that these cuts would have on the implementation of wider environmental protection policies and measures (Vaughan, 2015).

3 Methodology

To facilitate an in-depth understanding of austerity and to gather evidence on how and to what extent recent austerity affected environmental protection decisions, Scotland was chosen as a case study. This is to maximize the utility of the information content, applying the least likely case approach (see Stake's (1995). This is because Scotland's government is opposed to austerity (Scottish Government, 2016) although 60% of its budget comes from the UK government, making it vulnerable to the UK's austerity measures. Scotland also has an

³ Although this paper focuses on the period 2010 to 2014, proposed national budgets up to 2020 were affected by the austerity policy.

exemplary reputation for ensuring that environmental aspects are considered in policy- and decision-making (Jackson and Illsley, 2006). On this basis, if austerity's effects are demonstrable in a jurisdiction which was opposed to it and has a good record for pursuing environmental protection, this underpins a strong argument for cause-effect.

3.1 Data collection and analysis

Primary data was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire targeting participants who were engaged with planning decisions, over the pre- and post-financial crisis of 2007/8 up to 2015, and could be relied upon to differentiate environmental decisions attributable to the austerity policy atmosphere. These included planning practitioners (public and private), developers, and those fulfilling an advisory role in support of environmental protection decisions, such as SEPA and SNH, and academics. The questionnaire was structured in three parts:

- background information on the participants e.g. institutional affiliation and role in planning and decision-making processes;
- evidence and views on austerity's impacts on environmental protection decisions, including why and how.

The questionnaire was first piloted and then distributed by email to a total of 253 participants identified through a desk-based internet search and administered via Bristol Online Survey between July 2015 and May 2016. At least 30 participants from each of Scotland's main cities and planning regions (i.e. Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Inverness and Dundee) were targeted to balance coverage of the regions. 90 responses were received, with a response and adjusted response rate of 35.6% and 40.9%, respectively. Most completed questionnaires were from planners employed in local authorities (42.2%), followed by private sector planners (33.3%), and scholars (15.6%). Professionals employed in Scotland's statutory consultees e.g. SEPA and SNH, with an interest in spatial planning, represented 6.7% and 2.2%, respectively. Secondary data on spending cuts was also gathered from published government reports on funding budgets for key environmental protection institutions in Scotland, including SEPA and SNH, to establish how austerity affected their budgets.

The questionnaire responses were analysed using SPSS software, involving statistical tests of significance and variance, to show how responses differed across participants e.g. by

institutional affiliation. Qualitative data collected from the questionnaires were analysed interpretatively, based on the research questions, to highlight trends and patterns in the data and to facilitate deductive and inductive interpretations. A conceptualisation of the research is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2

4. Results and analysis

4.1 Perceptions of austerity's impacts

In terms of adverse effects, 37.8% of the participants indicated that reduced consideration of environmental standards had occurred with planning applications, albeit within the law: “... some regulatory requirements were relaxed; ... some pleas of financial difficulty by the proponent [were] accepted as a mitigating circumstance; decisions which would have not been made in environmental interests [were] being acquiesced to, using e.g. job creation and economic revitalisation as an excuse”. In other examples, wind energy projects were allowed in unsuitable places like peatlands/wetlands, as “part of job creation and fighting climate change” agendas. “New areas e.g. green fields were opened up for development – as part of the push for more renewable energy under Green Economy rationale”. The responses were statistically different based on affiliation, particularly between private and public sectors. Participants' affiliation explained about 31.6% of the responses within a very reliable power of observation (Partial Eta Squared = 0.316; observed power = 1.000). However, 40% of the participants disagreed that any reduced consideration of environmental standards had occurred, whilst 22% were ambivalent (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Of the 37.8% who agreed that austerity negatively impacted on environmental decisions, 53% were from local planning authorities, 30% from academic institutions and only 11.7% were from the private sector. Of the 40% who disagreed, 50% and 33% were from the private and public sectors, respectively. Public sector planners were relatively more critical about austerity's touted benefits, including the view that through budget cuts and efficiency measures it was possible to achieve more without compromising [environmental] protection. In contrast, far fewer planners from the private sector indicated having noticed adverse impacts; and were less optimistic of the current roles of environmental planning, echoing the

sentiment that the planning system holds up development (Brodies, 2015). Although this sentiment has been the case for some time (Lord and Tewdr-Jones, 2014) the participants indicated that it intensified during recent austerity.

Although some effects of austerity in Europe have been described by Bauer and Knill (2012) as policy dismantling, this was not the case in Scotland. 72% of the participants rejected the notion that “less environmental planning and regulation” was required to stimulate the economy. One participant identified positive effects of austerity policy atmosphere in Scotland, as “*rationalisation of costs and resources... two adjoining local authorities us[ed] a joined-up approach to green infrastructure, green networks and place-making, through specific green network priorities that can then be linked to developer contributions*”. Whilst 37.8% indicated that project proponents and planners were “*forced by cost considerations to significantly reduce their environmental protection efforts*”, 40.2% disagreed and 22% were ambivalent (Figure 4). Responses were not statistically different based on affiliation, with affiliation explaining 10.3% of the response differences ($F = 2.427$; $\text{sig} = .054$; Partial Eta Squared = .103; Observed power = .674). 13% of the participants indicated that developers and planners were no longer open to the idea of biodiversity gain through development, because “*the money just was not available*”, “*we have to work within available budgets*”, and “*we have to live in the real world.*” 15% of the open-ended responses cited threats or posturing as a tactic used by developers to delay or reduce previously agreed environmental protection/improvement measures, claiming that the measures were “*no longer financially viable during austerity*”.

38.6% of the participants (52% public vs 26% private sector planners) indicated that the current planning system was inadequate to the task of protecting the environment, whilst 25% disagreed (36.8% public vs 60% private sector planners). The responses were statistically different across affiliation, explaining 15.4% of the response differences within robust statistical power ($F = 3.858$; $\text{sig} = .006$; Partial Eta Squared = .154; Observed power = .882). The participants did not believe in the efficacy of existing decision-making support tools such as EA, to protect the environment during austerity, instead stating that specific EA guidance was needed to protect the environment during prolonged austerity periods. 42.2% of participants indicated that environmental regulations should change to accommodate prevailing economic circumstances, e.g. financial recession, against 37.7% who disagreed. 55.5% of participants (57% public vs. 40% private sector planners) indicated that the recent

austerity period was a missed opportunity to further integrate the environment into planning decisions, whilst less than half that proportion disagreed (25%). The responses were not statistically different across affiliations ($F = 1.448$; $\text{sig} = .225$; Partial Eta Squared = .064; Observed power = .432). Findings requiring changes in environmental regulations to accommodate prevailing economic circumstances, should be interrogated to reveal what those opportunities could be, how they could be pursued, and to what end.

Overall, the results point to subtle and adverse effects of austerity policy atmosphere on environmental protection decisions in Scotland, supporting findings from studies elsewhere: USA (Peck, 2014), East Asia (Elliot, 2011), the UK (Grimshaw, 2013). What emerged was a picture where under the austerity narrative, decisions were made to boost the economy whilst clutching onto ideals of environmental protection, even when elements of the environment were being exposed to degradation. An open-ended comment in the questionnaire pointed to a *“three-way battle between the public sector, who still want to see the environmental priorities upheld and strengthened; the politicians who want to stimulate growth and economic development, but not alienate the public; and developers who argue for a relaxation of regulations or delay in implementing stringent (but necessary?) environmental protection measures on the grounds of cost”*. Although one participant indicated that changes affecting environmental protection were driven by political philosophy rather than austerity measures *per se*, the open-ended responses clearly indicated that current effects were in the order of magnitude greater than in the periods when austerity measures were absent. Based on a score criteria (1= most disagree; 5 = most agree), the below mean scores and standard deviation in parenthesis, indicated the extent to which participants agreed with the statements representing austerity’s impacts.

- Increased pressure on environmental assets: mean = 3.58 (1.049)
- Reduced mitigation costs & measures: mean = 2.87 (1.173)
- Loosening environmental considerations: mean = 2.78 (1.159)
- Satisfied how environmental issues addressed: mean = 2.71 (1.073)
- Less environmental regulation gives vibrant economy: mean = 2.44 (1.113).

4.2 Manifestation of effects

The subtle nature of most effects of austerity was evident in the participants’ responses to open-ended questions. This led to the inference that cause-effect often went unnoticed or

misdiagnosed because of the high proportion of ambivalent answers in the questionnaire (Figure 4). This ambivalence is likely to have arisen from the difficulty in discerning cause-effect in a complex decision-making context, as noted by Tobin and Burns (2015); and from the complex mix of rhetoric of ‘efficiency’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘new ways of doing things’, ‘rationalisation’ and ‘streamlined service delivery’, as noted by the participants. They indicated that the government’s agenda and [political] narrative of austerity driven by the need to resuscitate the economy was far-reaching and affected other institutions beyond local government, including stakeholders and the general public’s mood.

As explained in Karamichas (2015), this in turn is likely to have made environmental protection look like an unaffordable luxury. As put by a research participant: “*even politicians and political parties who once competed to out-green each other now stick to bread and butter subjects such as the economy, crime, the health service and public services, for fear of seeming out of touch with reality*”. Another participant indicated that “*even traditional environmental NGOs were trying not to be seen to interfere with the drive towards economic recovery*”. This echoes Lindblom’s (1979, p. 533) argument that society can have ‘valence issues’ or ‘taken for granted’ issues, for example where the economy rather than the environment was automatically prioritised by politicians.

The findings strongly highlight several ways in which the hegemony of austerity’s imperatives were at play. Firstly, austerity policy atmosphere’s goal of ‘economic revitalisation’ and ‘efficiency’ were singularly pursued; and government-espoused narratives permeated and domineered through the planning system’s environmental decisions. Secondly, regulatory requirements were ‘relaxed’ without introducing any formal changes to the regulations themselves, showing the powerful reach a government-sanctioned agenda. Thirdly, projects which would not have been given development consent pre-austerity, were permitted during austerity policy atmosphere, despite their potential environmental impacts and the application of EA tools. Finally, stakeholders who are known to traditionally act as advocates for the environment, such as environmental NGOs, became somewhat aligned to the government’s agenda and priority of revitalising the economy. Although many participants acknowledged the duty and desire to protect and enhance the quality of the environment, they nevertheless admitted that this duty was often weakened in development approval decision-making processes, to allow ‘much sought after’ economic activities to occur (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Cashmore and Richardson (2013) and Hansen *et al.* (2013) provide detailed and more comprehensive understanding of how power relations and hidden agendas can strongly influence environmental decisions.

5. Discussion

That austerity policy atmosphere led to adverse impacts on environmental decisions confirms concerns from other scholars (Humphreys, 2015; Lloyd, 2011; Cavoski, 2015). These impacts appear to arise, firstly, from the paradoxical dynamics of austerity policy atmosphere. From an empirical study across OECD countries Knox (2017) found austerity as self-defeating, as the savings made by cost-cutting became partly offset by lower revenues. “There’s only so much fat you can cut before you hit the bone” (p. 185), a sentiment that was also expressed by participants in this study, because reduced staff and resources in the Scottish planning authorities had reached a point where it was constraining creativity, performance and delivery of quality environmental decisions. This points to a threshold below which the austerity measures have deleterious outcomes.

A secondary reason is the hegemony of austerity ideology, within a complex interplay of variables across decision levels and actors, which mirror key elements of Neo-Gramscian theory. Principally, the UK government’s portrayal of austerity as a necessity carried coercive power with far-reaching consequences. Cox (1981, 1983) portrayed this as a classical pillar of Neo-Gramscianism: the state’s machinery of coercion and/or organisation of consent, which propels hegemonic agenda. Agents associated with the state (Cox 1983; Laurie, 2015) (e.g. SEPA, politicians, government and local planning officials) and the civil state (e.g. environmental NGOs, some members of the public), were now acquiescent of the austerity narrative. Using similar Neo-Gramscianism argument, McGuirk (2004) explained how urban governance in Sydney since the mid-1990s, benefitted from the state’s sustained activation of a hegemonic institutional and regime representations (planning provisions, branding, financing, rhetoric) to promote and align Sydney with global competitiveness.

Jessop (1997), within urban theory, used Neo-Gramscianism to explain how the political sphere helped to (re-)define and coerce a collective will of a community, in pursuit of projects deemed by the political class. Elsewhere, Andrée used Neo-Gramscianism to explain the

deterministic outcomes in Canadian government's close relationship with the biotechnology industry and NGOs, highlighting how state power and influence explained the industry's position on environmental governance. According to Cox (1981), government-led narratives and measures stabilised the idea of austerity in a way that was irresistible. As this study has shown, even the Scottish government which was opposed to austerity could not avoid its adverse impacts. Furthermore, Scotland's key environmental protection institution, SEPA, became a powerful instrument in promoting the hegemony of the austerity ideals, invoking similar UK government rationale of 'financial efficiency', and using 'less to deliver the same or more'. The study findings that state power and influence, operating through whatever specific structural, political and institutional forms within government and its affiliate institutions, produced hegemonic effects, also echoes similar findings by Harding (1995) on Neo-Gramscianism.

McKendrick *et al.* (2016) also argued that the UK state's agenda of austerity permeated key aspects and levels of decision-making across Scotland, as it was difficult to resist e.g. the budgetary cuts. The budgetary instrument and the legal requirement that Local Planning Authorities balance their books, are a key form of coercion and pillar of perpetrating hegemony, which Laurie (2015) and Morton (2001) described as securing compliance through not only ideas and institutions (e.g. SEPA), but by material capabilities (e.g. the budget). This is further illustrated in Cutler's (2014) Neo-Gramscian ideas in the volume *New Constitutionalism and World Order*, explaining the disciplinary power of legal and constitutional innovations as instruments of coercive power that many must abide with. This Neo-Gramscian element was identified by participants in this study, who elaborated how planning authorities were pressurised to balance their books, making them biased towards favourably deciding on planning applications that brought income, often in disregard of environmental protection concerns.

That the UK Government does not control the planning function in Scotland, yet its austerity imperative was evident in Scotland, is another evidence of Neo-Gramscianism. Cox (1981, 1983) extensively elaborates this definitive element in terms of inter-state relations, explaining how state sovereignty can be subjugated to global economic systems (Eagleton, 2007; Morton, 2001). This complex linkage was alluded to in this study, when the Coalition government found themselves bound to respond to a global crisis, to keep the UK competitive within the broader global economy. This not only illustrated the power of global

forces, but also showed how one jurisdiction/state actor (UK) could use its relative narrative and means, to influence effects in another (Scotland).

In conclusion, Scotland has in 2016 promulgated an ambitious and innovative regulatory strategy as a revamped response to meet its environmental protection challenges (SEPA, 2016). Titled *One Planet Prosperity*, the strategy underpins Scotland's global leadership in tackling the overuse of the planet's natural resources, the threat of climate change and increasing pollution. However, a Neo-Gramscian streak is arguably visible in the strategy: an embedment of the explicit narrative of regulating for environmental protection with the foremost purpose of also sustaining economic success and global markets (SEPA, 2016 pp.3, 5). This is a clear seepage of the neoliberal austerity agenda, making economic imperatives preeminent, and into the sphere of environmental protection.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This aimed to paper explored the effects of recent austerity measures on environmental protection decisions, using a questionnaire survey to gather evidence from stakeholders within the planning sector in Scotland. Supported by statistical analysis, the findings showed that the UK government's austerity-inspired rhetoric and imperative to resuscitate the economy, led to adverse and pervasive effects on environmental decisions in Scotland. The UK state's power and its coordination with other forms of power (political rhetoric and budgetary allocations), projected into the wider society as identified by study participants, thus underpinning the impacts observed in Scotland. The paper successfully met its stated aim, revealing how a powerful ideology (austerity) and force (Neo-Gramscianism) adversely affected environmental protection decisions. Even EA-aided decision-making did not mitigate the adverse impacts. The manifestation of the impacts is explained using Neo-Gramscian elements of hegemony, emanating from the state's ideological approach to economics and politics. This is then promoted based on a governance that develops autonomous inter-organizational relations of power channels through which the ideology's narratives, strategies and projects are pursued and implemented.

Three key implications derive from the findings. Firstly, a robust bespoke decision-making framework to ensure that neoliberal exigencies e.g. austerity do not unduly trump environmental protection, if not altogether be contained within ecological limits, is needed. However, as the environmental benefits of austerity remain doubtful (Cavoski, 2015; Cooper

and Whyte, 2017), debate is required on how the precautionary principle can be applied during prolonged austerity, to counteract the Neo-Gramscian effect. Secondly, in terms of methodology, as the gathered views were constrained within unknown biases that the participants may have had; and because the case study approach was not equipped to generalize the results beyond the study, more research testing cause-effect between the austerity and selected environmental parameters is needed from various contexts. Thirdly, debate on the value and role of neoliberal paradigms where economic exigencies trump environmental ones, need to be re-ignited. However, as both neoliberalism and Neo-Gramscianism are premised on the state's ability to exercise hegemony, the ideas suggested in this paper may still not provide solutions. This seems a wicked problem that requires broader changes in attitudes and paradigms, e.g. from a neoliberalist to more ecological ones.

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