



Unravelling the United Kingdom's climate policy consensus: The power of ideas, discourse and institutions



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ABSTRACT

As climate change policies and governance initiatives struggle to produce the transformational social changes required, the search for stand out case studies continues. Many have pointed to the period between 2005 and 2008 in the United Kingdom as a promising example of national level innovation. With strong cross-party consensus and a first-of-its-kind legislation the UK established itself as a climate policy leader. However, early warning signs suggest that this institutionalised position is far from secure. Through a novel application of discursive institutionalism this article presents a detailed analysis of the role of ideas in unravelling this ambition under the Conservative-Liberal coalition administration (2010–2015). Discursive interactions among policymakers and other political actors were dominated by ideas about governmental responsibility and economic austerity, establishing an atmosphere of climate policy scepticism and restraint. By situating this conspicuous and influential process of bricolage within its institutional context the importance of how policymakers think and communicate about climate change is made apparent. The power of ideas to influence policy is further demonstrated *through* their cognitive and normative persuasiveness, by imposing *over* and excluding alternatives and *in* their institutional positioning. It can be concluded that despite innovative legislation, institution building and strategic coordination of different types of governance actors the ideational foundations of ambitious climate change politics in the UK have been undermined.

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1. Introduction

Global environmental issues such as anthropogenic climate change continue to be a significant political agenda at multiple levels, not least for nation states. As inter-, multi- and trans-national environmental governance initiatives proliferate, the domestic politics of climate change leaders (and laggards) has become of wide interest (Andresen and Agrawala, 2002; Fankhauser et al., 2015; Liefferink et al., 2009; Schreurs and Tiberghien, 2007). In 2008, the United Kingdom (UK) government passed the Climate Change Act (CCA), a first-of-its-kind legislation legally binding the UK to an ambitious greenhouse gas emission reduction target of 80% of 1990 levels by 2050. The implications were significant, institutionalising climate change as a political issue within the UK but also diffusing its ambition and policy framework to other contexts (Gummer, 2014; Hill, 2009; cf. Pielke, Jr., 2009).

The political and institutional circumstances surrounding UK climate politics and the CCA have since received a great deal of attention (Bowen and Rydge, 2011; Carter, 2014; Carter and Jacobs,

2014; Lockwood, 2013; Lorenzoni and Benson, 2014). This article presents a critical and detailed analysis of changes in the way climate change is thought about and discussed since that heyday. Between 2010 and 2015 a Conservative-Liberal coalition government was responsible for continuing this ambitious climate policy agenda within the context of a global and national economic recession. Given the tendency of policymakers to backtrack, or stall, on previous commitments during difficult political and economic periods (Bauer et al., 2012; Howlett, 2014) this is a timely moment to ask: what happens to the underlying ideas and does it matter?

The Stern Review's (Stern, 2007) presentation of early climate change action as economically rational was pivotal in the UK case (Carter and Jacobs, 2014). Also, the idea of five-yearly carbon budgets to keep successive governments on track, and accountable, to the 2050 target was important (Bows et al., 2006). Discourses of low-carbon business opportunities, correcting previous policy failures and a moral sense of urgency helped to secure support from private actors, policymakers and civil society respectively (Lorenzoni and Benson, 2014). Some of these ideas and discourses were formally institutionalised in a government Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC) and a semi-

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independent Committee on Climate Change (CCC). As a result, energy and climate goals became entangled through an increasingly complex mix of instruments, discourses and strategies designed to simultaneously achieve low-carbon, secure and affordable energy—known as the ‘trilemma’ (Kern et al., 2014; Rogers-Hayden et al., 2011).

Despite the formal nature of this institutionalisation, doubts about its longevity have been raised (Lockwood, 2013), especially as the ‘competitive consensus’ among political actors supporting it quickly fell away after the 2010 national election (Carter, 2014). In response to these warnings, and also to calls from climate policy innovation scholars for more research into post-adoption complexities (Jordan and Huitema, 2014), this article tracks the nature and impact of subsequent changes in the ideas and discourses of UK climate politics.

In Section 2 the merits of a constructivist approach to studying political ideas and institutions are outlined. Section 3 summarises the methodology and case study materials. Section 4 shows how economic rationality and the normative positioning of government remained important ideas but that their initial emphasis on early action and leadership shifted under the strain of austerity. In light of these findings Section 5 raises concerns about a consensus approach to climate change politics and explores the political institutional context in more detail. Section 6 concludes with reflections on the analytical framework’s contribution to the study of ideas in policy and the UK case study’s relevance for climate change politics and governance in other contexts.

2. Ideas are more than just another variable

Political science, policy analysis and governance studies have all increasingly sought to account for the importance of ideas and discourse in shaping political processes (Fischer, 2003; Gofas and Hay, 2010; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Kütting and Lipschutz, 2012; Yanow, 2000). This critical turn can be seen in prominent theories of the policy process where only a handful of staunchly empiricist approaches continue to ignore or black box issues of subjectivity (Cairney, 2011; Sabatier, 2007). Reactionary attempts have been made to incorporate ideas as one more controllable variable within a positivist philosophy of science (regarding policy see: Pawson, 2006) so as to ‘not have to swallow the contaminated epistemological water of postmodernism in order to enjoy the heady ontological wine of constructivism’ (Keohane, 2000: 129). However, far from treating ideas as free-floating epiphenomena, many constructivists have explicitly linked them to traditional political entities such as institutions, interests and policy change (Béland and Cox, 2011; Hajer, 1996).

The implication of only partially considering ideas is apparent in some of the research on environmental policy innovations and institutions mentioned above. For example, Patashnik (2008) and Pierson (2004) both subsume the role of ideas under an explanation of politics as path-dependent, thereby failing to fully grasp their diversity and potential for driving change. However, these political realist accounts tell us little about the ideational and discursive processes through which these actors interact and through which climate policies are enacted or undermined. To illustrate, Lorenzoni and Benson (2014) compare such an approach with the more constructivist discursive institutionalism (DI) framework, demonstrating the latter’s ability to explain the influence of climate economics ideas and the discursive interactions among civil society, politicians and business leaders that produced near unanimous support for the CCA.

This article extends the application of a constructivist approach, and DI in particular, to present a comprehensive account of how ideas and discourse have continued to shape UK climate politics over time. Accordingly ideas and discourse are treated as particular

forms of power and political processes differentiated from, but interrelated with, other forms such as laws, institutions and structures. Within the language of DI, Carstensen and Schmidt (2015: 4) define ideational power as ‘the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs’. This is done through three observable processes: the persuasion to accept and adopt certain views (*power through ideas*), the imposition of ideas and exclusion of alternatives (*power over ideas*), and the production of subject positions as well as the constraining of what can be legitimately considered (*power in ideas*) (ibid.). Given this analytical depth the intention is not to simply claim that ‘idea A caused policy B’ but to offer a more qualitative account of how ideational elements affect the way actors interpret, influence and enact climate policy.

2.1. Rethinking institutionalised ideas

Adopting a broadly Habermasian understanding of discourse as communicative action (Habermas et al., 1990) DI focuses on the interactions between actors and the ideas they carry, thereby reducing the emphasis on entrenched formal structures found in other schools of institutionalist thought. This sensitivity to interpersonal dynamics makes it a suitable framework for analysing the post-adoption politics of the CCA, where policy-makers and other actors begin to negotiate their preferred pathways towards implementation. It is in these personal and micro-political exchanges that climate policy ideas are re-formed, supporting or disrupting the achievement of long-term targets.

Following Schmidt (2008, 2010) the analytical components of DI can be clearly defined to produce a framework incorporating ideas, discourses and institutions (see Table 1). Ideas fall across three levels ranging from implicit values (*philosophy*) to general assumptions or principles (*program*) and specific solutions (*policy*).¹ For example, hidden social norms as well as more explicit assumptions about the scientific, economic or cultural nature of climate change are all as important as the practical actions of risk assessments and carbon budgeting. Further, two types of overarching ideas are particularly adept at tying together these three levels: *normative* ideas that provide prescriptions by linking values to appropriate courses of action and *cognitive* ideas that guide analysis by appealing to prevalent logics and interests.

Put simply, discourse refers to the ‘exchange of ideas’ among actors (Schmidt, 2011: 56). These interactions take a variety of forms (e.g. myths, stories, and scenarios) but their common goal is to represent ideas. There are two types of discursive interaction: *coordination* among actors responsible for developing policy and *communication* between these actors and other, less centrally placed, political stakeholders. The relative importance and influence of these types of discourse is partially determined by the institutional context. In a *simple*, or unified, polity communicative discourse will be most prominent as policy actors make decisions centrally and then seek to justify them whereas in a *compound*, or dispersed, governance context coordinative discourse is more pronounced as multiple actors are involved throughout the policy process. Lastly, the particulars of the institutional context (e.g. expected logics, patterns and audiences) need to be adequately addressed by ideas and discourses if they are to be influential.

Having been applied in numerous policy areas at national and international levels DI has become established alongside, but also

¹ This typology echoes Hall’s (1993) corresponding three orders of policy change but is deliberately more expansive, incorporating normative and non-scientific ideas in its description of what constitutes the institutionalisation of a policy arrangement.

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