Sustainable Development in Northern Ireland: From Environmental Mal-Governance to Joined up Thinking?

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Introduction

To discuss the relationship between ‘governance’ and ‘sustainable development’ is to bring together two concepts which are particularly interesting to explore in the case of Northern Ireland. On the one hand, Northern Ireland has a long and troubled history concerning the contestation of the very structures of governance in this region, and its political, social, economic and policy spheres have been characterised by a violent struggle which challenged the very legitimacy of those structures. Much has been therefore written on the character of the conflict here in Northern Ireland around the appropriate structures of governance which would accommodate the competing aims and aspirations of the dominant political projects of ‘unionism’ and ‘nationalism’. In particular, the Good Friday/Belfast Multi-Party Agreement of 1998 which created a devolved power-sharing Assembly not only signalled the potential end of the conflict and the transition to a ‘post-conflict’ political settlement, but as part of that settlement created new structures of governance within Northern Ireland itself, between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

On the other hand, sustainable development in the context of Northern Ireland has received relatively little attention either in terms of policy-making, structures of governance or in terms of academic research. In many ways this is perfectly understandable, in the context of a prolonged conflict which at times verged upon civil war amongst a relatively small population (Northern Ireland has approximately the same population as Greater Manchester –1,685,267 according to the 2001 census), sustainable development, environmental protection and other related policy issues have been consistently ranked lower down than policies concerning security, policing, criminal justice etc. and the politics of reaching peaceful social order and conflict resolution. One of the suggestions of this paper is that policies and research on sustainable development therefore can be considered as evidence of the transition to more recognisable ‘normal’ or normalising liberal democratic politics and policy in Northern Ireland. That is, sustainable development and the structures of governance between state, civil society and

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market/economic actors\(^2\) could function as an overarching ‘policy telos’\(^3\), integrating policy initiatives and strategies from government departments, that, in partnership with other actors in civil society and the market, could offer a coherent vision for a ‘post-conflict’ Northern Ireland. That is, an opportunity exists to connect the sustainable development agenda to processes of post-conflict policy development in Northern Ireland, ranging from providing a policy agenda which transcends the ‘traditional’ political divisions within Northern Ireland to more challenging initiatives to connect sustainable development policies to issues around reconciliation and peaceful co-existence within ‘contested territorial space’\(^4\).

Indeed, the following from the UN Johannesburg Plan of Implementation from the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 explicitly integrates good governance, sustainable development and peace building.

Good governance is essential for sustainable development. Sound economic policies, solid democratic institutions responsive to the needs of the people and improved infrastructure are the basis for sustained economic growth, poverty eradication, and employment creation. Freedom, peace and security, domestic stability, respect for human rights, including the right to development, and the rule of law, gender equality, market-oriented policies, and an overall commitment to just and democratic societies are also essential and mutually reinforcing. (UN, 2003)

Northern Ireland is perhaps unique that in it departs from most other regions within the European Union in having to combine sustainable development with peace-building and establishing a legitimate and settled social and democratic order and ‘rule of law’ in a way sustainable development does not have to deal with these issues in other European Union contexts.\(^5\)

However, given the current stalled ‘peace process’, leading this writer to think that there is no realistic prospect of talks leading to the restoration of the power-sharing Assembly until the end of this year, at the earliest, which pushes ‘sustainable development’ way down the list in terms of political priorities for the four main political parties, the British

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\(^2\) By ‘governance’ I mean a system or regime of rule-following, patterns of ordered behaviour, norms and associated structures/institutions and procedures which involve the state – local, national and other states: civil society – citizens, NGOs, other civil society actors and groups: and market/economic actors – businesses, corporations, trades unions, business groups.

\(^3\) For a discussion of the idea of sustainable development as a ‘policy telos’, see Levy and Wissenburg (2004).

\(^4\) While not a common view to take, elements of this connection between progressive understandings of sustainable development (as opposed to more ‘technocratic’ and ‘business as usual’ discourses such as ‘ecological modernisation’) can be seen in the work and policy proposals of environmental NGOs such as Groundwork Northern Ireland in its explicit linking of urban regeneration and conflict resolution to sustainable development (Groundwork Northern Ireland, 2003) or in the politics and policies of the Green Party in Northern Ireland (Green Party in Northern Ireland, 2003).

\(^5\) Of course there are other ‘contested regions’ within the European Union, such as the Basque country in Spain and France, parts of eastern Europe which share this unique feature with Northern Ireland.
and Irish governments and the general public in Northern Ireland. At the same time, as this paper seeks to demonstrate, the crisis in the overarching political and policy framework for Northern Ireland (i.e. the ‘peace process’ and the Agreement) is coupled with an all too obvious lack of capacity and will within the existing structures of government under direct rule (in the absence of a devolved Assembly), specifically the Northern Ireland Civil Service, to engage in the necessary policy development and provide the leadership which sustainable development requires both at the policy development and especially implementation and monitoring stages.

The aim of this paper is essentially ground-clearing and exploratory. Given the relative lack of research on sustainable development in Northern Ireland, this paper focuses on a number of key issues and actors in sustainable development – the environmental movement, the Northern Ireland Civil service, especially the Department of Environment as the lead Department with responsibility for sustainable development, and the Northern Ireland experience of partnerships and stakeholder involvement, seen as a key not just to modern forms of ‘governance’ as distinct from ‘government’, but partnerships and new patterns of state-non-state relations are at the heart of ‘sustainable development’. The following statement from the ‘Institutional framework for sustainable development’ section of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation from the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, captures this nicely:

Enhance partnerships between governmental and non-governmental actors, including all major groups, as well as volunteer groups, on programmes and activities for the achievement of sustainable development at all levels”. (UN, 2003).

Before looking at the role of state-non-state relations in the context of ‘environmental governance’ in Northern Ireland, some further background discussion of the dynamics, history and institutions of governance for sustainable development is necessary.7

**Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland does have a devolved Assembly; this has not functioned since October 2002, and is currently suspended. Currently therefore the governance of Northern Ireland is within the framework of direct rule from Westminster – represented by a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, plus four direct rule ministers – and the 10 government ministers.

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6 There is some evidence to suggest that public concern and awareness about environmental and sustainable development issues are lower than in other parts of Europe in general and the UK in particular. For example, the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in 2000 found that in comparison to the 2000 British Social Attitudes survey, only 29% of Northern Ireland respondents compared with 43% of British respondents would be willing to pay higher prices to protect the environment, while the report also commented that “Few would be prepared to pay higher taxes or prices, and the level of environmentally positive behaviour is low, especially in comparison to Britain” (Devine and Lloyd, 2003).

7 It is for reasons of space that I use ‘environmental governance’ and ‘governance for sustainable development’ interchangeably in this paper. I do however believe that they are not the same, for similar reasons I distinguish between ‘environmental citizenship’ and ‘sustainability citizenship’ in other work (see Barry, 2005).
departments, excluding the Northern Ireland Office and the 26 local councils, which form the Administrative structures of Northern Ireland. Since its creation as a result of the 1998 Agreement, the Assembly has perhaps not functioned long enough for one to assess its potential as a new mode of governance for sustainable development. However, a brief summary of the experience of environmental governance under devolution is perhaps worthwhile nonetheless.

Environmental Governance under Devolution

In comparison to the other devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland, what is noticeable about Northern Ireland is the lack of priority accorded to sustainable development. For example, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places no obligation upon the Northern Ireland Executive to promote sustainable development or consider all policy in relation to its impact on sustainable development. Here, the Northern Ireland Assembly stands in marked contrast with the Welsh Assembly which has a statutory duty to promote sustainable development (Williams and Thomas, 2004) or the Scottish Executive which has made ‘environmental justice’ one of its core commitments to be implemented across various policy areas. In Northern Ireland, given both the ideological concerns and constituencies of the parties who negotiated the Agreement in 1998, and the history, reality and legacy of the conflict, the ‘space’ where sustainable development could perform this overarching, integrative ‘policy telos’ is occupied by statutory Equality impact legislation (Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998).

Some of the positive aspects of environmental governance under devolution included the greater transparency and accountability of the Department of Environment and the environmental regulatory agency, the Environment and Heritage Service via the Assembly’s Environment Committee through which elected Assembly members were able to question and challenge policy-making decisions and non-decisions by the Department. From anecdotal evidence it is unsurprising that senior department officials found this experience as uncomfortable as novel, in that it was the first time officials were questioned by locally elected politicians in this manner.

Other noteworthy items to highlight is the explicit ‘North-South’ dimension enshrined by the Agreement in terms of the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and its ‘cross-border’ environmental responsibilities (along with other cross-border areas of cooperation including transport, agriculture, and waterways management). The cross-

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8 The adoption of an ‘all island’ and greater ‘cross-border’ approach to sustainable development (that is to include both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) has been the recommendation of a number of studies (Ellis et al, 2004, Macrory, 2004), which, as indicated below in the assessment of the First Environment Minister of the Devolved Assembly, is not free of ideological resistance from those of a broadly Unionist perspective who are weary of any ‘all island’ or ‘cross-border’ environmental/sustainable development agenda, for fear of it undermining or otherwise weakening the union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Equally, the two main ‘Irish nationalist’ parties (Sinn Fein and the Social and Democratic Labour Party) frame aspects of their environmental/sustainable development polices (to the extent they have these) in an ‘all Ireland’ context, but motivated less from the ecological and policy effectiveness of this than for reasons of pressing environmental concerns into their prime ideological objective of achieving a united Ireland. While reference to this issue is made in the paper, space does not
border dimension to sustainable development on the island of Ireland is fully acknowledged by the NSMC which has stated that there should be greater cooperation on “strategies and activities which would contribute to a coherent all-island approach to the achievement of sustainable development” (NSMC, 2000). On particular sustainable development policy areas such as waste management, the NSMC has been focused on developing an all-island approach, in relation to recycling in particular. At the meeting of the Environment Sector of the NSMC in 2002, a joint communiqué noted

the NSMC tasked officials to work together to identify options to encourage the expansion of waste recycling on an all-island basis, and approved the establishment of a steering group of officials, North and South, to consider and develop a structured co-operative approach to a Joint Market Development Programme for recyclates. At today's meeting, the Council noted the report of the market development steering group on the establishment of an all-island Market Development Programme and approved the next element of the work to be addressed by the steering group. This will involve the submission of proposals for developing an all-island strategic approach to market development for recyclable material, taking account of developments in Great Britain, and the making of recommendations on appropriate linkages between Market Development Programmes, North and South. (NSMC, 2002).

Such innovative, market-based and all-island approaches to mobilising one of the key economic drivers of sustainable development are to be welcomed both from the point of view of ecological (and economic) considerations taking precedent over political/jurisdictional borders, but also in articulating the evolution of environmental governance away from purely environmental protection matters to sustainable development.9 However, given the way in which the Assembly and associated cross-border institutions are linked, while the Assembly is suspended, progress on an all-island and cross-border sustainable development strategy and policy.

However, the sustainable development agenda also suffered some set-backs under devolution. While space does not permit a full examination of these (indeed it would require a separate paper), some salient issues can be made. Perhaps most indicative of the lack of priority (indeed I would go so far as to say basic understanding) accorded to sustainable development under the devolved Assembly was its absence from the Executive’s Programme for Government.

This is what this overarching programme said about the environment:

permit a full examination of the origins, implications and dynamics of this interplay between ‘ecological’ and ‘political’ frameworks and objectives. It is nevertheless interesting to note that the EU views the island of Ireland as a whole as one ‘eco-region’ for the purposes of the Water Framework Directive. Another recent development in this respect has been the establishment of Friends of the Earth in the republic of Ireland, which now means that it is organised in both jurisdictions, giving it an all-Ireland organisational scope.

9 The Agreement also established a ‘British-Irish Council’ (an ‘East-West’ institutional body to complement the ‘North-South’ one) which has, like the NSMC, identified environmental matters and sustainable development as core areas of interest.
We also appreciate the importance of protecting and, where possible, enhancing the environment. Protecting land, air and water quality and securing the richness and diversity of habitats, species, landscape and built heritage are not only important objectives in themselves. A good quality built and natural environment is also key to our economy, helping for example to attract investors and visitors as well as being integral to the future of agriculture. It is also of major importance to the personal health and sense of wellbeing of everyone, now and in the future. (OFMDFM, 2001).

The lack of detail and distinct generality and ‘policy blandness’ of the Programme’s view of sustainable development was matched only by the all to predictable demotion of environmental/sustainable development concerns to the bottom of policy concerns elsewhere in the document. For example in the section on ‘Securing a Competitive Economy’, last of eight policy objectives we find ‘ensuring the protection and enhancement of the environment’ (OFMDFM, 2001), a clear indication of both the low priority according to environmental protection but also evidence of a lack of understanding the ‘triple bottom line’ and integrative character of sustainable development as a policy agenda which is not simply an ‘environmental’ issue.10

This lack of serious recognition of the sustainable development policy agenda stands in marked contrast to the other devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. In the case of the Welsh Assembly we find that its Programme for Government outlined sustainable development as one of its three themes (the other two being ‘tackling social disadvantage’ and ‘equal opportunities) (Welsh Assembly, 2000a), while in Scotland the Executive committed itself to making ‘environmental justice’ one of its core policy concerns.

It is fair to say that there was no attempt made to integrate sustainable development across government strategies under devolution. While a variety of policy strategies could be said to contribute to aspects of sustainable development – from the ‘New Targeting Social Need’ strategy (OFMDFM, 2004); Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy (EHS, 2002); the Regional Transport Strategy (DRD, 2001b); the Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy (EHS, 2000); and Investing in Health (DHSSPS, 2002) – little effort was made to integrate these and other policy areas, particularly in relation to economic policy, such as the Regional Development Strategy (DRD, 2001a), under a sustainable development framework.11 Of course such lack of policy integration is not

10 The other preceding objectives were: “working to ensure that our communications, energy, and physical infrastructure is of the standard that a modern information age economy requires; creating a more co-ordinated and efficient planning process; promoting entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity; working to attract inward investment; working to increase Northern Ireland's attractiveness to visitors; working to improve efficiency in our economy and ensuring that businesses and consumers have access to regulatory services of an international standard; working together to regenerate the rural economy” (OFMDFM, 2001).

11 At the time of writing a ‘Sustainable Development Strategy’ is being developed by the Environmental Policy Division of the Department of Environment, one of the aims of which is to integrate relevant
unique to Northern Ireland, and indeed given the other pressing policy issues facing
government in Northern Ireland, it is understandable (though nonetheless regrettable) that
the newly established power-sharing Executive should prioritise other policy areas.

At the institutional level one of the main problems has been the ‘departmentalisation’ and
‘ politicisation’ of government under devolution – one of the costs of the ‘ involuntary
coalition’ structure of the devolved Executive. As Wilson has noted, “devolution
signalled in Northern Ireland a four-party, involuntary coalition” (Wilson, 2001: 77).
Indeed, as another author on devolution in Northern Ireland has observed, “The political
structure was heavily departmental, with various political parties choosing and then
‘owning’ portfolios in proportion to their strength. The system of statutory departments
has made corporate and joined-up working difficult, especially under devolution.
Officials served their Minister rather than the Executive as a whole” (Parry, 2003). Thus
the more usual problem faced by the lack of effective joined up government as a
necessary condition for successful sustainable development policy implementation, is
compounded in Northern Ireland in that departments are not just administratively or
bureaucratically separate, but also politically and publicly divided from one another.
Added to this was the fact that under the complex arrangements of the Assembly, there
was no ‘opposition’ to act as a watchdog and hold the Executive to account, and there
was no effective linking either between Executive ministers and the Assembly as a
whole.

Of particular note is the less than impressive performance of the first Assembly Ministers
for the Environment, Sam Foster and Dermot Nesbitt (both from the Ulster Unionist
Party). While Minister Foster was at best an ineffective and uninspiring environment
Minister, his party colleague presided over an environment ministry which made some
anti-environmental decisions. Nesbitt was particularly resistant to the establishing of an
all-island and greater cross-border dimension to sustainable development and
environmental protection were based more on the fact that he was from the Ulster
Unionist Party and therefore greater North-South cooperation would be difficult to square
ideologically with a Unionist position, than on policy, scientific or ecological grounds.
Indicative here was his criticism of the Irish Government’s campaign to have the
Sellafield reprocessing plant in Cumbria closed down. Perhaps most revealing of the
performance of Minister Nesbitt was his decision in 2002 to lift planning restrictions on
new developments in areas of inadequate sewerage infrastructure. According to the
Minister, “I needed to take a pragmatic approach to balance the need for physical
development, on the one hand, with the need to protect the environment, on the
other…Realising this difficult situation, we have managed to provide a balance between
development, jobs and the long term needs of the environment. As a result I have now
unlocked the precautionary hold on planning applications in all fifty-six areas” (EHS,
2002b). This effectively permitted development demands to ‘ trump’ environmental
concerns and water quality standards, while also explicitly rejecting the long-established
precautionary principle as a core element of ‘good environmental governance’.

Northern Ireland policy and strategy where they can or do contribute to sustainable development. This s
strategy is due to be published in Autumn 2005.
Unsurprisingly, Friends of the Earth (Northern Ireland), were highly critical, stating that
the Minister agreed to allow new houses to be connected to inadequate sewage systems that were already breaking European pollution laws. He has also forbidden his Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) officials from objecting to planned development, even where it would result in more illegal discharges of sewage into our rivers and seas. A moratorium was imposed during the summer preventing the building of new homes in areas where poor sewage infrastructure was already putting poorly-treated sewage into Loughs and rivers in the region. But following intense lobbying by developers, the moratorium was lifted last Monday (7 October) one of the final acts before the Assembly’s expected suspension this Monday (14 October). (FoE, 2002)

This decision has led to raw sewerage being pumped into Belfast Lough and other waters and rivers throughout Northern Ireland. Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland lodged a complain with the EU Commission concerning the failure of Northern Ireland to comply with the Urban and Waste Water Treatment Directive and in January 2005, the European Commission informed Friends of the Earth of its intention to take formal legal action against Northern Ireland (FoE, 2005). The case focuses on the Department of the Environment’s failure to control development in areas where the sewage infrastructure falls below European standards. As will be discussed below, the protection of Northern Ireland’s environment and progress on sustainable development for the region, depends as much on (external) EU environmental and other relevant legislation and directives together with effective (internal) non-governmental political pressure as government departments.

The reality is that there was no urgency or priority given to sustainable development either as a ‘lead’ policy agenda for the Department of Environment (it was largely occupied with a backlog of implementing EU directives) or as a ‘lead’ policy agenda for the Executive’s ‘Programme for Government’ which focused on orthodox economic growth policies and social policy initiatives in tackling social exclusion, social need and equality, some of which contributed to and some of which undermined and ran counter to a sustainable development path for Northern Ireland.

The Call for Environmental Governance Reform

That Northern Ireland is in need of reform to its structures and mechanisms of environmental governance is shared by a growing number of groups, researchers and environmental interest groups. According to a recent UKELA (United Kingdom Environmental Law Association) report,

\[\text{The UK Environmental Law Association (UKELA) is (UKELA, 2004) is publishing this paper to raise awareness of the urgent need for reform of environmental regulation in Northern Ireland. UKELA is not alone in raising concerns about the protection of the environment through the law in the province: Northern Ireland has been seen as the dirty corner of the UK. (UKELA, 2004: 1)}\]
This report goes on to suggest that environmental issues have been given little prominence in the Northern Ireland. Consequently, Northern Ireland in reality ignored the attempts in the rest of the UK to tackle environmental problems in the series of major legislative measures of the 1980s and the 1990s. Even more seriously, Northern Ireland largely ignored the Environmental Directives of the EU and in particular their timetables for implementation. (UKELA, 2004: 4).

Such criticisms of the failures of environmental governance in Northern Ireland are not new. As far back as the ‘Rossi report’ undertaken by the House of Commons Environment Committee in 1990/91, which identified the problem of laggardly implementation of EU environmental directives (House of Commons Environment Committee, 1990/91) there was evidence of the failures of the Department of Environment to deal with the backlog of legislation from national (UK), EU and international (Rio, UNCED) sources (Morrow and Turner, 1998).

Of particular interest to note is in relation to the financial costs of EU infraction proceedings. According to the UKELA report, it is common knowledge that there is a substantial caseload of European Commission litigation ranged against Northern Ireland. Accordingly, any of these proceedings could result eventually in the European Court of justice imposing substantial fines on the United Kingdom in respect of the want of transposition to Northern Ireland. However, as a result of the arrangements between the devolved administrations and the Westminster government the Treasury would be entitled to recoup from the Northern Ireland budget such fine (or the proportion of such fine attributable to Northern Ireland). (UKELA, 2004: 7).

The main government department with responsibility for sustainable development and environmental governance is the Department of Environment. Environmental regulation and enforcement is the responsibility of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) which is an executive agency of the Department of Environment. This means that it has no independent legal status from the Department, such independence it does have only pertains to financial and managerial matters. This has been raised as a serious flaw in the environmental governance of Northern Ireland by the recently published report Transparency and Trust: Reshaping Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland commissioned by nine of the leading environmental NGOs in Northern Ireland and written by the environmental lawyer Richard Macrory (Macrory, 2004), discussed further below. Essentially, the lack of independence of the EHS as the body charged with enforcing environmental laws from the Department of Environment undermines both its effectiveness as a protector of the Northern Ireland environment. Much of the critical literature on the regulatory failure in Northern Ireland relates to the uniqueness of Northern Ireland in contrast to the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, in not having an independent Environmental Protection Agency.
Some salient issues to consider as background information in respect to environmental governance and sustainable development in Northern Ireland include the following:

**Transport and Planning**

Taken per head of population, Northern Ireland has 2.2 times more miles of road than elsewhere in the UK (Fawcett, 2000) and Belfast has been noted as being “the most car dependent city in Europe” (Cooper et al, 2001), with 81% of people travelling to work by car compared to 70% as of the UK as a whole.

Indeed, the figures related to road transport are quite startling - 84% spending on transport in Northern Ireland was on roads, and only 16% on public transport, walking and cycling (Fawcett, 2000). Traffic continues to grow in Northern Ireland at twice the rate of the UK (DoENI/DRD 1991- 1998) and there is much less integration of sustainable transport and land use planning as in most other European regions (McEldowney, 2000).

A report from the National Environmental Technology Centre (NETCEN, 2001) for the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) gives the greenhouse gas emission trends for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It stated that Northern Ireland’s overall emissions of greenhouse gases, those responsible for global warming, were 1.9 per cent higher in 2002 than in 1990. This compares to an 18 per cent decrease in England, a 5.6 per cent decrease in Scotland and an 8.6 per cent decrease in Wales in the same period. Similarly, Northern Ireland’s Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) emissions were 3.0 per cent higher in 2002 than in 1990. This compares with an overall UK decrease of 8.7 per cent with reductions of 10.8 per cent in England, 5.9 per cent in Wales and 3.2 per cent in Scotland.

According to the NETCEN report, road transport accounted for 31 per cent of Northern Ireland's CO₂ emissions in 2002, overtaking energy production as the single largest contributor. This contrasts sharply with the rest of the UK, where energy production is the largest single source of CO₂ emissions. Northern Ireland’s over reliance on private transport and its poor public transport infrastructure shoulder a large part of the blame for its continuing disappointing record.

One prominent local researcher in environmental planning has gone so far as to suggest that the lack of integration, coherence and attention to sustainable development issues makes it appropriate to describe planning for Belfast as ‘autistic’ (Ellis, 2004), while the Planning Service (another executive Agency of the Department of Environment) is routinely described as being in ‘melt down’ in the local press, as well as persistent allegations of being inefficient, unaccountable and there are (as yet unsubstantiated) rumours of corruption (similar to those that led to the Republic setting up the Flood Tribunal). According to Friends of the Earth (Northern Ireland), “Northern Ireland's Environment and Heritage Service is not allowed to object to planning applications in
areas with inadequate sewage treatment. This muzzling would not be tolerated anywhere else in the UK” (FoE, no date).

**Nitrates Directive**

A similar negative story can be told with regard to both the delay in implementing the EU nitrates directive and the extreme resistance to it from both the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) and (less prominently) the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in their lobbying efforts vis-à-vis the Department of Environment. It is worth noting that while the Commission adopted this directive in 1991, it was not transposed into Northern Ireland legislation until 1996 and an action plan was not produced until 1999 (Environment and Heritage Service, no date). Northern Ireland is a ‘nitrates disaster zone’ according to leading environmental groups, having no less than seven designated Nitrate Vulnerable Zones.

For example, the Nitrate Directive Action Programme Consultation Paper published on 21 February 2005 by the DoE and DARD represents significant concessions to the agricultural and agri-business sector. Ian Pearson, direct rule minister for Agriculture in a press release noted

> The Departments recognise that Northern Ireland has a significant water quality problem and are jointly taking steps to tackle the problem. We acknowledge that the introduction of the proposed measures will mean that farming practices will have to change and it is our intention to do all in our powers to support farmers to meet their obligations, including providing financial support and advice. The Farm Nutrient Management Scheme, which opened for applications on 26 January, will make available £45m to assist farmers in meeting the storage requirements. We also propose, subject to European Commission approval, to include a phased introduction to a number of the measures. In addition, we are working with the rest of the UK to develop the highest possible case for derogation to submit to the Commission for approval. (DARD, 2005; emphasis added)

In particular, the UFU had pressed DARD strongly for derogation and other significant changes to the implementation of the Directive (such as the exemption of Poultry litter, reducing the length of the closed period for slurry and fertiliser spreading, and reducing the storage capacity requirement). The strong links between the UFU and DARD can be described and explained using policy network framework, such that the main agricultural producer group – the UFU – is the strongest and most powerful agricultural interest group (though there are others such as food processing manufacturing interest groups), established over a long period of time. In this respect the power of the UFU to influence the main Government Department regulating its industry shares similarities with other examples of producer interests being the most influential interest in the agriculture policy network.

**Summary**
So, in summary, Northern Ireland could be described as an increasingly environmentally stressed region, coming out of a long and protracted period of civil unrest and political violence, with ineffective, non-integrated and under resourced structures of environmental governance, with little policy leadership or political will to prioritise sustainable development; its lead environmental Department still coping with the implementation of a backlog of EU directives and marginalised (as almost all state departments dealing with environment and sustainable development are) vis-à-vis the more powerful ‘economic’ and financial Departments and agencies wedded to an orthodox and unsustainable economic development strategy for Northern Ireland. Perhaps, above all, the lack of a sustainable development strategy for Northern Ireland is indicative of the lack of priority, political will and leadership and capacity for the development and implementation of a sustainable development policy agenda in Northern Ireland.

The Environmental Movement in Northern Ireland

This section examines the extent to which the environmental movement within Northern Ireland shares some responsibility for the neglect of sustainable development within Northern Ireland. That is, whether it is true or fair to say that up until recently, the environmental movement in Northern Ireland has privileged its ‘insider status’ to access civil servants and policy-makers at the cost of not upsetting or challenging government policy in relation to sustainable development and environmental protection.

According to Dryzek et al’s study of the UK state’s relation to the environmental movement:

> the environmental history of the United Kingdom both before and after the Thatcher era is one where inclusion in the state produces very few pay-offs. At most it produces marginal gains, at worst it involves blatant co-optation, be in public inquires with pre-ordained conclusions or consultative processes that produce no effect on policy” (Dryzek et al, 2003: 72).

In the case of Northern Ireland, one interpretation of the history of the region’s environmental movement is to point to the considerable levels of co-optation that characterises its history since the origins of the ‘troubles’ in the late 1960s. While there is evidence to suggest a continuity between the civil rights movement in the 1960s with later environmental movements (such as the Green Party which established itself in Northern Ireland in 1983) or specific environmental mobilisations (especially cross-community ones)\(^\text{12}\), the main environmental NGOs, such as the National Trust, the Royal

\(^{12}\) For an analysis of the connection between the environmental movement and the earlier civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, see Cinalli (2002). While space does not permit a full examination, it is interesting to note the potential of sustainable development to contribute to the process of ‘post-conflict’ transformation in terms of the ‘Civic Forum’ established by the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. This innovative institutional forum which was designed to bring together representatives from civil society (economy, agriculture, environment, women, youth etc), while it never got the political support it needed,
Society for the Protection of Birds, the Ulster Wildlife Trust, and Wetland and Wildfowl Trust, have favoured ‘insider’ tactics and approaches to dealing with the Department of Environment and other relevant departments in relation to environmental protection, and more latterly sustainable development.

It is fair to say that the history of the environmental movement in Northern Ireland has been one of quiescence, what some may provocatively term a form of ‘collusion’ with government departments, particularly the Department of Environment. Environmental NGOs in Northern Ireland prioritised non-confrontational, behind the scenes bilateral negotiations over more public and confrontational forms of holding those in power responsible for their actions and inactions in relation to environmental protection and delivering sustainable development. Of course, from another point of view, this ‘non-confrontational’, non-oppositional relationship could be seen as an example of working partnership and ‘good environmental governance’ in terms of state-non-state cooperation and communication. However, what I wish to express here is that the form of ‘cooperation’ which characterised the relationship between leading environmental organisation in Northern Ireland and the structures of government was ‘unhealthy’ in that it was closer to ‘cooption’ than cooperation between two independent actors.

One explanation of this is that in the context of civil unrest, political violence and instability, confrontational tactics by environmental groups in relation to the state was perhaps unlikely to be productive. Equally, from another angle, the likelihood of environmental issues attaching themselves to the main sources of the conflict in Northern Ireland and the confrontational ‘community’ and ‘street’ politics that typified Northern Ireland citizen-state relations, was also unlikely, particularly as environmental NGOs tended to adopt the strategy of ‘keeping their heads down’ and attempting to promote their organisational objectives through non-confrontational mechanisms. However, a legacy of this experience is that the majority of environmental organisations in Northern Ireland – with the notable exception of Friends of the Earth and to a lesser extent, World Wildlife Fund, and latterly the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – are resistant to being associated with any public and explicitly ‘political’ character. In large part, the main environmental organisations in Northern Ireland are remarkable ‘apolitical’ in the sense of being unwilling or unable to attach their concerns to the main political issues that characterise Northern Ireland, or to see the possible contribution sustainable development for example can make to the ‘post-conflict’ policy and political agenda.

Another explanation for the ‘apolitical’ and ‘compliant’ character of the Northern Ireland environmental movement is the degree to which not only would such organisations jeopardise their access to civil servants and officials by adopting a more public and less acquiescent role, but also some of them would also lose financial resources, given that many of them receive funds from the Department of Environment or other state agencies. It is perhaps significant to note that the one environmental organisation which has and lacked leadership itself, did manage in its brief lifetime to produce a report into sustainable development, perhaps indicative of the ‘cross-community’ and ‘post-conflict’ contribution sustainable development can make to Northern Ireland society and policy-making. For a brief account of the civic forum see Woods (2001).
consistently challenged the Department of Environment is one that does not depend in any way on state funding- namely Friends of the Earth.

Dryzek et al’s (2003) analysis of the ‘taming’ and ‘capture’ of environmental groups by being included in the state is very apposite in the case of some environmental groups in Northern Ireland. As they put it:

> groups themselves can change in two ways as a result of being included in the state. First, they may have to moderate their positions substantially in order to be more consistent with the political mainstream – especially as conditioned by state imperatives. Second, they may have to develop a much more professional and bureaucratic character, entailing a large full-time staff, internal hierarchy and division of labour, and specialists in fund-raising, organizational maintenance and management. (Dryzek et al, 2003: 81-2)

Evidence to support this view of a compliant environmental NGO sector in Northern Ireland is the UKELA report which noted that because of the dominance of the DoE, any governmental funding for environmental NGOs in Northern Ireland has to come through the DoE. Consequently, there is at least the danger of ‘agency capture’ between DoE and environmental NGOs. This point may be resented by many of the local environmental NGOs who with their limited resources do what they can in unfavourable circumstances. *But an indication of this is the strange lack of legal challenge.*” (UKELA, 2004: 13; emphasis added)

It is indeed remarkable to note that until the recent Friends of the Earth complaint to the EU Commission concerning the lack of compliance with the EU Urban and Wastewater Directive (FoE, 2005), no Northern Ireland environment organisation has initiated legal proceedings against relevant government departments.

There is also evidence that membership of senior positions of the main environmental organisations in Northern Ireland are from ‘elite’ socio-economic strata of Northern Irish and English society, and that one reason for a lack of non- or apolitical modes of

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13 Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) – an overarching umbrella organisation for environmental groups in Northern Ireland and funded by the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of Environment - presents a classic case of the dangers of environmental organisations being dependent on funding from the state. Set up in 1990 to complete the network of four ‘Country Links’ for the UK, namely Scottish Environment Link; Wales Environment Link; and Wildlife and Countryside Link, it has had a precarious relationship with its main funder the EHS which has, in this author’s view, severely constrained its capacity for being more critical of government. While requiring more space, evidence and argument than I can provide here, one assessment of NIEL is that it effectively acted as a controlling mechanism on the development of a more oppositional environmental movement in Northern Ireland. State funding for this overarching network organisation could be said to have prevented the ‘social movement’ aspect of environmental organisations in Northern Ireland from developing which depended (at least in part) upon linking environmental/sustainable development concerns to the main political and ideological conflicts and underlying political that characterised the ‘troubles’ in Northern Ireland and the post-1998, ‘post-conflict’ political situation.
engagement with the structures of environmental governance in Northern Ireland is that this layer of senior management is largely unionist in ideological makeup or at least made up of individuals for whom there is an ‘aristocratic’ disposition in managing the land and only the land and not relating this to the surrounding political crisis and issues that characterise Northern Ireland.

Another issue to consider in terms of assessing the environmental movement and NGO sector in Northern Ireland is its relatively underdeveloped nature. The sector’s underdeveloped character was identified in the recent UKELA report (UKELA, 2004) referred to earlier. According to this report,

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\text{the environmental NGO sector is seriously underdeveloped in Northern Ireland as compared with other NGO sectors here, which concentrate on areas of social policy or human rights…Accordingly, there is a pressing need for capacity build for the environment NGO sector in Northern Ireland leading to the DOE and environmental NGOs engaging in a more healthy and transparent debate. (UKELA, 2004: 13)}
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As discussed below, this underdevelopment and need for capacity building is also shared with the structures of environmental governance both within the Department of Environment and in particular the capacity building needed within government itself to integrate ‘sustainable development’ as a cross-cutting policy agenda. Thus, both the state and non-state civil society environmental actors are in equal need of development and capacity building to effectively function to deliver structures and processes of governance to devise and deliver sustainable development in Northern Ireland.14

The Macrory Report and Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland

The recently published Macrory report (Macrory, 2004) into the establishment of an Environmental protection Agency has led to some of the larger environmental NGOs to demand a review of environmental governance in Northern Ireland. This seems to have brought a sense of unity and purpose within the Northern Ireland environmental movement which was lacking previous to this. The review has also been supported by the Department of Environment – thus indicating some level of commitment to ‘partnership’ between the Department and the environmental NGO sector. How the partnership and dialogue between the environment movement and the Department of Environment develops in the coming months will be discussed as well as discussion of

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14 In many respects the position environmental governance finds itself in within Northern Ireland in terms of the obviously lack of capacity (leaving inclination and leadership to one side for the moment) within relevant government departments and agencies and outside non-government and civil society environmental actors and organisations, is perhaps similar to that found in developing world contexts where ‘environmental governance’ has, like in Northern Ireland, been either deliberately or otherwise neglected as a policy area and a core part of the business of government. Recognition of this need for environmental capacity building is the fact that Sustainable Northern Ireland (established as a non-profit executive programme funded body, and funded by the DoE body) was asked to develop and deliver a training course for policy-makers in sustainable development in 2004.
how this relationship should be constructed to maximise the delivery of a sustainable
development strategy and efficient, democratic and accountable system of environmental
governance for Northern Ireland.

The main issues from the Macrory report addressed three areas relating to the reform of
environmental governance in Northern Ireland. These were

- Delivery arrangements for pollution control, wildlife protection and heritage
  conservation. Included among the options is the creation of an independent
  Environmental Protection Agency.

- Accountability for those engaged in environmental protection. Among the options
  is the creation of a dedicated Environmental Unit within the Northern Ireland
  Audit Office, a public body which scrutinises the work of Government.

- Provision of expert policy advice to Government and includes an option to create
  an all Ireland Environment Commission.

While the report outlined options in these three areas rather than prescribing specific
institutional changes to the structures of environmental governance in Northern Ireland,
an important point to stress is that the commissioning and publication of the report itself
marks something of a watershed for the environmental movement in Northern Ireland.
Two issues are worth highlighting in this regard. The first is the very fact of these nine
environmental organisations joining together to produce such a report on environmental
governance as a whole – as opposed to working together on specific policy areas or
campaigns.\textsuperscript{15} The second is that the report itself is both an in-depth and critical audit of
the failures (particularly regulatory) of the existing system of environmental governance
in general and the Environment and Heritage Service in particular.

Responses to the Environmental Protection Consultation based on the Macrory report
(Fawcett, 2004) are equally noteworthy. As well as the preferences individuals and
groups expressed in terms of their preferred options for reforms in environmental
governance, what is interesting about the consultation exercise was that it was one of the
first instances of environmental NGOs conducting consultation as opposed to themselves
responding to government consultation processes.

In terms of delivery arrangements, the option which gained most support was for the
reform of EHS and the establishing of a new independent Environment Authority as a
non-departmental public body (Fawcett, 2004: 17), while in terms of accountability the
most favoured option was for a new Environment Audit Commissioner (Fawcett, 2004:
18). Perhaps most interestingly, and one that indicates a significant shift in visions of
environmental governance and sustainable development for Northern Ireland, was that in
response to provision of policy advice, the preferred option was the establishing of an all-

\textsuperscript{15} It is worth nothing that there is relatively little cooperation between environmental organisations in
Northern Ireland. Such cooperation as can be discerned is through fora such as Northern Ireland
Environment Link, with all the ‘capture’ problems that potentially brings as indicated above.
Ireland Commission reporting to both governments (UK and Republic of Ireland) (Fawcett, 2004: 19). If any of these were to be acted upon it would significantly alter the composition and dynamics of governance structures for sustainable development within Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on an all-Ireland basis.

However, it remains to be seen if the Macrory report marks the emergence of a more coherent and oppositional environmental movement in Northern Ireland. While Friends of the Earth has been leading the way in robust and public forms of holding the Department of Environment and government in Northern Ireland to account over its many environmental failings other environmental groups seem content to let FoE play ‘bad cop’ to their ‘good cop’. This is not to suggest that anything as co-ordinated as a strategy of different environmental groups in Northern Ireland playing different roles in engaging and challenging government can be adduced from their behaviour. The underdeveloped character of the Northern Ireland environmental movement and the legacy of its past pattern of engaging with Northern Ireland departments and official agencies is something that will continue without an explicit commitment to change.

State-Civil Society relations in Northern Ireland: The Dangers of Environmental Governance becoming Environmental Governmentality

In particular, the environmental movement shares some of the similarities of the larger and more coherent Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) in Northern Ireland, such that criticisms of that sector in relation to its relationship to the state and state bodies are applicable to the environmental movement.

One of the most persistent criticisms of the CVS in Northern Ireland is the influence of government and government policy. While environmental NGOs in the main do not identify with the CVS (though environmental NGOs were included in the ‘community and voluntary’ component of the Civic Forum for example), they do tap into similar funding streams (either from local or central government or EU PEACE funding) and there is a considerable cross over of staff. Both operate in a similar strategic environment and are prone to buying into consultation as a substitute for activism and mobilisation of new constituencies e.g. NIEL, or making links between environmental/sustainable development policy and other policy areas, such as peace, reconciliation, or urban regeneration, targeting social need, environmental injustice.

Consultation is the main (and often only) ‘inclusive’ mode of engagement between government and civil society in Northern Ireland. For example, the Office of First and Deputy First Minister document ‘A Practical Guide to Policy Making in Northern Ireland’ states that,

Consultation is at the heart of the Executive’s commitment to openness and inclusivity. It is firmly embedded in the culture of the public service in Northern Ireland and is particularly important in the context of the statutory duties on
equality and good relations under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
(OFMDFM, no date)

Indeed, the processes by which government departments promote consultation as the main form of engagement with civil society is worrying in light the recognition of the central role participation of non-state actors and citizens in ‘good environmental governance’. Whether one favours the more deliberative democratic model of citizen and civil society-state engagement in policy development (Smith, 2003) or the elite/representative version outlined in Meadowcroft’s (2004) ‘stakeholder model’, it is clear that consultation of the sort routinely carried out in Northern Ireland does little to enhance the democratic legitimacy of governance. Indeed, one could say that such processes of weak engagement are more accurately to be viewed as forms of Foucauldian ‘governmentality’ where under the guise of ‘consulting’, the state or its agencies are embarked on ‘information fishing trips’ to better allow them to gather ideas, discourses, information and other forms of ‘intelligence’ to enable the more effective ‘selling’ or ‘promotion’ a broadly pre-determined set of policies or strategy. That is, whether diligently submitting responses to consultation processes actually produce substantively different policies and strategies that would otherwise have been the case (marginal changes notwithstanding) is a serious and challenging question non-government actors, including environmental ones, need to ask themselves in Northern Ireland. From a critical perspective one could say that the state’s seemingly democratic willingness to engage with and consult with the environmental movement is an extremely effective way to ensure that organisational resources and strategy are used/spent in this formal consultation process than in other, perhaps more challenging and oppositional and disruptive forms of political activity.

Morison in a wide-ranging essay on the emergence of ‘compacts’ between the voluntary sector and government in the four countries of the UK, deploys a governmentality perspective to analysis and understand these developments. His analysis is particularly pertinent to the Northern Ireland case and one of the possible interpretations of new ‘governance’ structures and discourses in general (i.e. not just ‘environmental governance’ or governance for sustainable development). According to him

The compact process can be seen as part of an exercise in governmentality and subject to complex rationalities developing within the context of newly emerging parts of the voluntary sector. Government, perhaps in pursuit of a third way, is seeking to operationalise a particular, more managerially driven programme by influencing, allying with, and co-opting the voluntary sector as a resource that they do not directly control. Parts of the sector, interested in developing opportunities for partnership with government, are responding to the processes that the compacts have started…This is not, of course, a simple one-way process with government controlling all the action. It does not involve tricking the sector of destroying their subjectivity but rather cultivating a specific form of subjectivity aligned to a view of partnership. (Morison, 2000: 131)
The essential point being made here is that it is not simply the case that the state ‘captures’ an ‘unwilling’ voluntary sector – in Focauldian terms the voluntary sector are ‘willing and free’ subjects who enter into this relationship with the state – and of course there is the possibility of the non-state sector and actors influencing and changing the state – in keeping with Foucault’s insight that ‘power’ is productive and possessed by all actors and in all relations and is not to be viewed as a limited resource where one actor has ‘power over’ another. However, it is the case that the subjectivities that are obliged to change are those within the non-state sector, and that while “The sector is an ‘active subject’ which not only collaborates with in this exercise of government but also shapes and influences it” (Morison, 2000: 119), it does so under actively state cultivated modes of thinking, acting and articulation. When asked to submit a response to a particular consultation process it is rarely the case that this process is open-ended. Rather the responses and options are usually limited and constrained and indeed the language one uses is often prescribed. Thus, often only economic arguments or more specifically those made in terms of cost-benefit analysis are the only ones permitted or the only ones that will have any chance of being adopted or influencing policy.

Essentially, in the context of Northern Ireland (though of course not confined to Northern Ireland), consultation and other forms of state-non-state relations (including in particular state-funding of non-state organisations and groups, including environmental organisations) is a way of ‘domesticating’ and disciplining potentially disruptive groups, interests and constituencies in civil society. Though more positively viewed as ‘stakeholder participation’, partnership and so on, the danger of ‘governance’ becoming ‘governmentality’ is an ever present possibility, or in Hodgson’s (2004) telling terminology of such partnerships leading to the creation of a ‘manufactured civil society’ and equally manufactured civil society organisations.

It is perhaps particularly acute however in the context of Northern Ireland where the system of public administration itself was not ‘neutral’ in the conflict, given it was part of a Unionist-dominated Assembly and government (1922-1972) or associated with the British state under direct rule from 1972 until the creation of the devolved Assembly in 1998. The legacy of such a contested association needs to be factored into any understanding of the system of governance, environmental or otherwise, in Northern Ireland today.

In particular the experience of direct rule from 1972 seriously widened the democratic gap between citizens in Northern Ireland and the system of governance. As Knox puts it

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16 This Focauldian insight is similar to one made by Dryzek and his colleagues in their study of environmental movements in the UK, Germany, Norway and the USA and the conditions under an environmental movement makes strategic decisions about whether and how to engage with the state (Dryzek et al, 2003).

17 A fuller examination of the ‘domestication strategies’ of states in relation to potentially disruptive environmental (and other) groups and interests in civil society would include a review of the restrictive legal context for fund-raising which means that to avail of charitable status and charitable forms of fund-raising such as gift-aid, environmental groups cannot engage in ‘political’ activity.
While the abuse of powers in service delivery by former public bodies (particularly local authorities) played a major part in the creation of the present system of administration, this was compounded by government policies in Great Britain, adopted in the region, which eroded local democracy and contributed to the growth of quangos and other non-elected public bodies. The priority accorded to constitutional, political and security matters allowed public policy to rest with unelected civil servants or politicians who had no electoral constituency in Northern Ireland. (Knox, 2001: 157)

Thus an essentially ‘colonial’ style and culture of administration was developed and sustained in Northern Ireland, under Direct Rule which meant that Northern Ireland was governed by local civil servants but directed from Westminster, the Northern Ireland secretary of state and the powerful Northern Ireland Office. Often this evidenced itself in what may be called the ‘tipex culture’ whereby local officials simply tipxed out ‘Westminster’ or ‘England’ and substituted ‘Northern Ireland’ into the relevant policy document or legislation. The author has had direct experience of this in that a discussion document on sustainable development in Northern Ireland was largely the same one developed for England and Wales. While of course there can be good reasons for ‘policy transfer’ of this sort, the point here is that the culture of the civil service in Northern Ireland is largely one based on deference to Westminster, both in terms of primary orientation and as a source of policy. A similar deference to the colonial/metropolitan ‘centre’ has also been identified in the contrasting post-devolution administrative cultures to be found in Wales and Scotland.

Osmond (2001) has noted the determination by the Welsh Assembly to move the Welsh civil service in a more autonomous direction. In Putting People First: A Partnership for the People of Wales, (October 2001) the Assembly commits to a review of existing structures and workings of Assembly officials to ensure that they are in tune with the reality of political devolution. He comments that there is a feeling, certainly among the Liberal Democrat members of the Welsh Assembly who drafted the clause on ensuring that civil servants are “in tune with the reality of political devolution”, that civil servants have been continuing the old Welsh Office practice of constantly deferring to Whitehall and being reluctant to countenance Welsh policy initiatives (Osmond, 2001).

First Minister of the Welsh Assembly, Rhodri Morgan, recalling his own time as a civil servant at the Welsh Office in the late 1960s, highlights the contrasting cultures of the Welsh and Scottish civil service cadres: one, in Wales, where the culture and tradition of the service rewards deference to Whitehall, and the Scottish model, where innovation and “putting one over on Whitehall” has long been the path to recognition and career progress. Morgan’s comments are worth quoting at length:

In the Scottish Office, which had been around for 100 years, they had developed a tradition of independent policy. The Welsh Office had no capability of policy-making at all in the late 1960s. Likewise you promoted staff in the Scottish Office on the basis that they had put one over Whitehall. You promoted staff in the Welsh Office on the basis of whether they had kept their nose clean with
Whitehall. I hope that’s not entirely true today but you are still struggling against a very long tradition where there is not an experience of autonomous policy-making…What we need now that we have the devolution settlement is to create a positive problem-solving political culture. We need to generate a policy-making ability in a Welsh context and get rid of the old habits which still inhibit that process (in Osmond, 2001: 30).

If this is the case for Wales then one can multiply this assessment in characterising the deferential, colonial administrative culture of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

This ‘colonial’ and extremely hierarchical and ‘departmentalised’ character of the civil service – not least due to over 30 years of direct rule from Westminster – has left it bereft of capacity to develop integrated sustainable development policies specific for Northern Ireland and engage with wider UK and European initiatives on sustainable development.

According to Morrow and Turner (writing in 1998 – pre-devolution, the Agreement and the subsequent devolved Assembly):

The vexed problem of accountability lies at the heart of the debate concerning future governmental arrangements for Northern Ireland. Environmental governance provides one of the worst examples of the problems underlying current arrangements, and therefore presents a pressing case for reform. Questions of accountability take many forms, however the enduring core of the democratic deficit remains a lack of accountability of Northern Ireland institutions to both Westminster and the people of the Province. (Morrow and Turner, 1998: 46)

This problem of unaccountable and non-democratic governance persists today in Northern Ireland, and while the brief experience of devolved government did give some indication of the possibility of reform to the governance arrangements, nevertheless it is the contention of this paper, that unless we recognise the deep-seated legacy and problems of the ‘dependent’ and ‘colonial’ administrative mind-set and culture in Northern Ireland, and the effect this has had on local environmental organisations and other civil society actors over 30 years, simply changing the structures of government will not deliver the necessary change in governance required to deliver sustainable development in Northern Ireland.

Equally, the potential for sustainable development to become a ‘policy telos’ which grounds itself both in the legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland and attaches itself to the ‘post-conflict’ political agenda of reconciliation, stable and inclusive power-sharing, tackling social exclusion, economic and urban regeneration, the creation of open, accountable and democratic public (to name but a few policy issues), this potential exists. Sustainable development could become the policy framework for a post-conflict Northern Ireland, since it necessarily requires joined up and integrative policy development, delivery and monitoring, moves in an all-island direction (without necessarily requiring an ideological commitment to a ‘United Ireland’), while firmly placing Northern Ireland
within an explicit European policy context – the source of the main sustainable development legislative initiatives – which itself helps overcome the parochial and colonial administrative and governance set-up of current arrangements. Finally, it is clear that unless sustainable development in Northern Ireland becomes connected to the conflict and the larger political and cultural dimensions of the fitful peace process and devolutionary government, it will remain at best an ‘optional extra’ or regarded solely as an ‘environmental’ issue with no remit or reach beyond that, and thus safely consigned to the bottom of a policy priorities. There is no ‘one size fits all’ understanding (or operationalisation) of sustainable development. Sustainable development must fit with and make sense within the particular political and cultural context it finds itself, while of course being cognisant of and consistent with its non-local dimensions. In Northern Ireland, sustainable development needs to be ‘indigenous’ and locally tailored to meet local needs and issues. To coin a phrase often used in relation to Irish/Northern Irish politics – sustainable development attached as indicated above to the main ‘post-conflict’ issues concerning the future governance and policy agenda of Northern Ireland needs to be framed as a ‘Northern Irish solution to a Northern Irish problem’.
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