CHAPTER 7

Power in Practice: Reflecting on the First year of the Edinburgh Climate Commission

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Highlights Insiders' perspectives on the first year of the Edinburgh Climate Commission. Innovative governance, or the reproduction of existing power structures?

Keywords Local governance · Climate change · Cities · Net-zero · Power · Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Surfing a wave of place-based urban governance, the creation of Climate Commissions through the Place-based Climate Action Network (PCAN) reflects an increasing focus on cities as 'strategic sites' for experimental

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climate governance (Broto, 2019). The creation of these Commissions under the broad umbrella of ‘PCAN’, however, means that these new groups are caught up in a complex, multi-scalar and fast-evolving landscape which connects the messy and lived experiences at ‘the local’ to a much broader network of actors and institutions across the country, and across the world. It is this a tangled landscape that those charged with ‘setting up’ these place-based Commissions must try, not only to interoperate, but to work within.

This chapter reflects on the first year of the *Edinburgh* Climate Commission: from the ‘setting up’ process in Autumn/Winter 2019 to November 2020 when the Commissioners were looking forward to the next phase of their 2020 workplan. This period marks a unique part of the Commission’s history as stakeholders grapple with a dynamic landscape, attempting not only to define the role of the Commission but conceptualise and represent the ‘place’ in which it exists. In grappling with these questions, there exists an opportunity to develop a mode of climate governance which combines the input of ‘organic intellectuals’, whose knowledge is grounded in everyday experiences and working-class life, alongside ‘traditional intellectuals’, whose knowledge is grounded in formal expertise (Gramsci, 1971). This mixing of formal and informal knowledges and experiences sparks more inclusive climate actions through an articulation of knowledge that is place-based and culturally inclusive (Rice et al., 2015).

Written from the perspective of two junior, female members of the team charged with setting up the Commission, this chapter will be a personal, reflexive account of our experiences on the project as passionate environmentalists eager to become involved with local climate action in practice. Through two themes, ‘The Carbon City’ and ‘Project Power Relations’, we reflect on how power dynamics, from the personal to the international scale, have influenced the representation of place through the Edinburgh Climate Commission. Importantly, these themes articulate barriers to building a climate ‘praxis’ (Rice et al., 2015) and demonstrate how decisions made in the setting up phase are vitally important for shaping a Commission’s future.

BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

The Edinburgh Commission was formally established in March 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but we (the authors of this

chapter) had been part of the team working behind the scenes on the project since August 2019. This team was made up of small group of Council and University of Edinburgh staff including three core members who occupied senior roles at their respective organisations. As a recent MSc graduate and a part-time MSc student halfway through her degree, we came to the project as junior members of the team. We are both Edinburgh residents and passionate environmentalists and were excited about working on an innovative project related to the city's recent Climate Emergency declaration and pledge to be Net Zero by 2030. Rosanna was tasked with the more day-to-day 'doing' in the project—administrative tasks and attending meetings—whilst Alice was providing research support to inform the shape and structure of the Commission based on evidence from local climate action initiatives taking place elsewhere.

This chapter's contribution is based on ethnographic diaries kept by both authors since August 2019. Ethnographic research methods can be defined simply as the process of the researcher immersing themselves in the research setting: observing events, participating in conversations, examining speech for underlying assumptions and recording observations in a field diary (de Volo & Schatz, 2004). Although first used in research projects on 'traditional communities', the benefits of using ethnography to 'study up' have since been noted (Wolf, 2018). Project, or participant, ethnography has been used by researchers embedded in projects or institutions to better understand how policy is produced and how projects are implemented. It is emphasised that 'ethnographies must engage with the concept of 'power', paying attention to whose voices, interests and ideas come to dominate within projects at different times and why' (Evans & Lambert, 2008; Lewis et al., 2003). With this in mind, this chapter will reflect on the power dynamics of establishing the Edinburgh Climate Commission and on the dominant voices, ideas and interests that have persisted both before and after the Commission's launch.

THE CARBON CITY

The concept of a Climate Commission is a relatively new one and, until the expansion of the PCAN project in 2019, a practice that was firmly rooted in the geography of Leeds. As PCAN grew to encompass two more cities in late 2019, coordinators looked around for mobile pieces of policy, research and best practice that could be applied to the development of Commissions in different places. In Edinburgh, faced with not only a

blank slate but a self-conscious pressure to get the Commission ‘set up’ and to work with the City Council, stakeholders leaned heavily on a piece of work called the Carbon Roadmap to guide the practical development of the Commission and its approach to climate change in the city. This piece of work would become integral to the development and focus of the Commission.

The Carbon Roadmap presents a carbon accounting methodology which allows researchers to develop emissions profiles for the city, broken down by sector and based on carbon budgets derived from the IPCC’s global budget divided equally across the world’s population. The Edinburgh iteration was aligned explicitly to the Council’s target of becoming Net Zero by 2030. The methodology is based on the national Stern Review (Stern, 2006) and was led by researchers in Leeds.

The first time we saw the Carbon Roadmap, we struggled to understand it. It used a methodology we were unfamiliar with and presented a way of approaching climate action that we had not come across during our social science degrees. It was intimidating to see climate change in Edinburgh (a topic we thought we had a good grasp of) reduced to a set of numbers and sectors. While we could understand the high-level intentions of the Carbon Roadmap—technical interventions for Edinburgh to reach Net Zero—the numbers were completely inaccessible to us. The universal acceptance of this approach and its dominance across the climate change narratives being formed through the Commission left us feeling intimidated and, frankly, insecure. If this was how climate action was ‘done’ in the ‘real world’, what had we been taught at university? Did this mean what we had learnt was useless? From our perspective at the time, embedded within this project, the power that this piece of work had over stakeholders in the city and its unquestioning acceptance by those leading the Commission’s development led us to assume that this was the best way to approach climate action.

As the project evolved, the Carbon Roadmap was further cemented in its importance as it formed the basis for the Council’s Policy and Sustainability Committee’s acceptance of the Commission in November 2019. This demonstrated the power of this carbon accounting methodology within the city, and as a result, it became the foundation on which the Climate Commission, and Edinburgh’s approach to climate action, was built. From the beginning, Net Zero and the Commission have been inseparable as concepts, with one giving purpose to the other. This focus on emissions not only shaped the Commission’s view of climate change

as a quantitative ‘issue’ to be tackled by technical, measurable carbon reduction efforts but, given the ‘area-based’ approach to emissions reduction being touted here, served to frame the city as a bounded geography, raising questions as to what and whom would come to ‘count’ as *Edinburgh*. As Rice et al. (2015) observe, carbon accounting methodologies speak to a certain way of framing the climate challenge, one that privileges scientific and technical knowledge to produce exclusionary politics.

Choosing Commissioners

In November 2020, with the go-ahead from Councillors, our small team was able to start considering the task of recruiting Commission members. The goal of ‘hitting the carbon numbers’ (Hulme, 2019) propagated by the city’s 2030 target and the Carbon Roadmap set the scene for the type of technocratic, expert knowledge that would be chosen to represent the city on the Commission. With carbon seen as a key indicator of success, the breakdown of city stakeholders by sector (private, public, third) was regarded as a ‘manageable’ way of making sense of the city and approaching the ‘challenge’ of climate change. Within these early conversations, the ability to leverage private sector capital, set out as a key mechanism for change in the Carbon Roadmap, became an important focus in drawing up the Commissioner shortlist and guiding the eventual choice of a private sector commission chair.

Instead of an application process for Commissioners, people were handpicked to fill the small number of Commission roles. The language around the selection of Commissioners was constrained by sectors, for example the need to find ‘a finance representative’ or ‘a third sector representative’. It was at this point we began to reflect considerably on the direction this endeavour was taking and why such an approach was deemed valid. During our Masters, we had learnt about the fundamental role of social justice in addressing climate change. However, as the Commission came together, it seemed to represent one version of Edinburgh: affluent, middle class, professional. This approach highlighted how different our vision for the Commission and ideas around representation were from others working on the project. To us, representation meant the inclusion of different and diverse voices in the city, however, this perspective failed to chime with the pursuit of climate ‘expertise’, deemed necessary to tackle Edinburgh’s emissions profile.

CO₂ has become the politically mainstream way of ‘knowing’ climate change. Swyngedouw (2010, pp. 219–220) has called it the ‘thing’ around which our ‘environmental dreams, aspirations, contestations as well as policies crystallise’. Rice et al., (2015, p. 255), meanwhile, have also observed how scientific knowledge has come to dominate political discourse, noting how ‘the corresponding community of technical experts that is called into importance provides a narrow pathway of understanding and action that is not sufficient to produce change because of its exclusionary politics’. In Edinburgh, the Carbon Roadmap functioned as a way of upholding a certain way of *knowing* climate change and climate action, predicated on mitigation activities grounded in leveraging finance. Through the selection of Commissioners, guided by the Carbon Roadmap, the benefits of including alternative and diverse voices were overlooked, thereby limiting the possibility of building an inclusive route to impact. Our experiences in Edinburgh thus illustrate just how powerful the narratives described by Swyngedouw and Rice (above) are in practice. Not only does carbon drive environmental policy-making (Kenis & Lievens, 2017), but it is also capable of dominating efforts to create new *institutions* for climate action.

PROJECT POWER RELATIONS

Creating a Workplan

Due to growing pressure to act and announce the Commission’s arrival in the city (further accelerated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic), the development and enactment of the workplan became a very controlled, closely managed process. Rather than developing the workplan with Commissioners, a draft was prepared by the Chair and secretariat and presented to them for comments. At the time, it felt as though people’s lives were being turned upside down by the pandemic and that by presenting pre-prepared documents to the Commission, it would ease the burden on Commissioners, all of whom are volunteers. Beyond this, however, in these early days, there was also a sense that the secretariat (staff at the ECCI and Council) needed to maintain control of the potentially messy and unpredictable Commission in order to deliver results at pace. Consequently, the production of the workplan became overtly administrative.

As the sole administrator in the secretariat, Rosanna embodied the bureaucratic depoliticisation of what otherwise could have been an exciting political co-production exercise. Over the course of a few weeks, the Commission became a sterile, bureaucratic job that was a far cry from the dynamic, inclusive and innovative forms of climate governance we had learnt about in our Masters degrees. Most communication with the Commissioners was conducted in a flurry of emails and attached documents. It was clear that the Net Zero target and the Carbon Roadmap were seen as sufficient to guide the work of the Commission's first year, thereby preventing a Commission-wide conversation about climate action in Edinburgh where alternative views could come to the fore. Furthermore, the urgency of this target was driving a preoccupation with speed and impact that justified decisions being taken by a few key stakeholders as opposed to the wider group. Thus, the creation of the Commission (articulated through its Terms of Reference and workplan) became an increasingly closed process. Not only had the workplan served to exclude certain voices from the process, but it had also trapped us, as young, politically engaged and passionate climate activists, in administrative roles that reduced climate governance to a series of bureaucratic tasks.

Proposing a Working Group

Led by the goal of Net Zero and the Carbon Roadmap, the workplan for the Commission's first year was focused predominantly on engaging the private sector in Edinburgh, 'scaling up' action and producing a Green Economic Recovery guide for the city. Six months later, it was noticeable that some Commissioners were intimately involved with delivering the workplan, whilst there was a remaining opportunity to engage others with new ideas that more closely spoke to their skillsets. In response, we proposed a working group that could focus on public engagement and adaptation, two issues that up until then had received little attention. It felt good to take ownership and initiative in order to potentially steer the project towards climate action we felt was meaningful. Not only would this proposed working group engage Commissioners whose knowledge lay outside the private sector and engage organisations and individuals not represented on the Commission, but it would help us as employees on the project to feel empowered, useful and give us the chance to learn new skills.

Although we had buy-in from several Commissioners and from colleagues at the university, the challenge came when trying to integrate this idea with the vision of Edinburgh City Council. A key issue since the project's inception was the question of resourcing. For the Commission to deliver a demanding programme of work (outlined in the workplan), it was necessary to have more staff than the PCAN project could fund. As a result, most secretariat duties had been transferred to the Council, which would also ensure continuity once the PCAN project ended. However, resource pressure at the Council—the legacy of years of budget cuts (Ford, 2019; Centre for Cities 2019) and the COVID-19 crisis—meant that any unpredictability or deviation from the established workplan was seen as an unnecessary risk or distraction.

Because the workplan was designed and guided by a select group of individuals at an early stage, as the project evolved power remained concentrated within that same group. We experienced this power first-hand during discussions about our proposed working group, which ultimately ended up being rejected. Not only had we seen this group as an opportunity to enhance the work of the Commission in a way which would benefit the city but also a mechanism through which to empower individual people involved in the project (including ourselves). This process left us feeling disempowered and highlighted the difficulty of challenging established narratives and knowledges on how to 'do' climate action. Importantly, this experience demonstrates how difficult it is for discussions around justice, inclusivity and place-based identities to penetrate conversations on sector-based CO₂ reduction, even at the early stage of idea formulation.

CONCLUSION

Sustainable cities have been touted as global climate solutions, leading the way as national and international leaders fail to agree and implement effective climate policy (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2020). With the pressure on urban centres mounting and after decades of climate inaction, a desire to act is both understandable and commendable. However, in an increasingly busy and fractured governance landscape, new climate-focused organisations must grapple with the tension between urgent action, and the ethical pitfalls of moving too fast. With this in mind, we have had a fascinating opportunity to observe and experience what this innovative leadership looks like 'on the ground' in Edinburgh.

Over the course of a year, we have seen the way in which dominant and normative narratives of climate action as Net Zero became embedded in the Commission's identity before any Commissioners had even been selected. Reflecting the global push for cities to reach Net Zero, the Carbon Roadmap laid the foundation for 'traditional intellectual' knowledge to guide the Climate Commission at the expense of building a new, grassroots and organic institution, attuned to the unique historical and geographical landscape of Edinburgh—one which could embrace the multiplicity of ways in which people can 'know' climate change. This has served to foster an exclusivity that has pervaded the Commission, engaging only those whose expertise is sufficiently useful for the carbon city of Edinburgh.

On a personal level, our work on this project has hammered home how difficult it is to challenge and negotiate established, mainstream visions of the 'sustainable city'. This has been, at times, a very emotive and frustrating project which has tested our resilience and challenged our knowledge about climate governance in practice. However, despite the challenges described in this chapter, this hugely valuable professional and personal learning experience has highlighted the ways in which involvement in local climate action means wading into (and fully appreciating) the complex power relations involved with the governance of place-based futures. As the focus on place-based climate action intensifies, we hope that these reflections might provide some insightful lessons for others who find themselves in similar positions, at the confluence of urban climate governance in theory and in practice.

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