**The neoliberalisation of climate?**

**Progressing climate policy under austerity urbanism**

**Abstract**

While the urban is identified as a productive site for addressing climate change, the ‘post political’ critique dismisses climate policy as a vacuous discourse that obscures power relations and exclusion, defends the established neoliberal order, and silences challenges. This paper argues that rather than consensus, there is a conflict between urban climate policy and the need to reignite economic growth in the context of austerity urbanism, but also that we should not assume that challenges to neoliberal understandings of the ‘sensible’ will always be disregarded. Rather, urban climate policy can be progressed through partnership processes utilising ‘co-production’ techniques which entail significant agonistic, if not antagonistic, contestation. The argument is illustrated with a case study of climate policy making in the context of austerity urbanism in Liverpool, UK. While ‘low carbon’ is conceptualised by elite actors Liverpool in neoliberal terms as a source of new low carbon jobs and businesses, with an emphasis on energy security and fuel poverty, this view is not unchallenged. The paper recounts how an ad hoc group of actors in the city came together to form a partnership advocating for more strategic decarbonisation, which should be progressed through a bid for the city to be European Green Capital. The disputes that emerged around this agenda suggest that in the context of austerity urbanism the need for cities to act to mitigate against dangerous climate change is not as uncontested as conceptions of the post political suggest.

**Introduction**

Given recent concerns about the capacity of humanity to act to avoid dangerous climate change, a number of city leaders have decided to take action at the urban level (Bulkeley 2013). This notwithstanding, the ‘post political’ critique of climate policy (Swyngedouw, 2010) characterises urban sustainability strategies as vacuous statements of the ‘obvious’ benefits of building socially-inclusive, environmentally-sustainable cities through consensual, technocratic means in order to avoid ‘calamity’. Challenges to this consensus are silenced or rendered deviant rather than recognised as legitimate challenges or debates, and issues of power and exclusion are obscured. The result is that any elements of climate policy that challenge neoliberal orthodoxies are rejected. Against this, we argue that the ‘post-political’ thesis ignores the nuances of urban politics which are not determined exclusively by neoliberal rationalities, but by political contestation, by “struggles and bargains between different groups and interests in cities” (Harding 2009:35). We argue for more ethnographic analyses of the urban policy process to understand how urban managers handle competing pressures in making climate policy (Bulkeley and Betsill 2013:150-151: Hodson and Marvin 2013:3), defend agonistic co-production as a method for developing local climate policy, and illustrate our argument with a study of the climate policy-making process in Liverpool, UK.

**Urban climate policy: post political or contested?**

Although action to mitigate dangerous climate change at a global or national scale has been disappointing, the city has been identified as an appropriate scale at which to act to reduce greenhouse gas emissions ([Rutland and Aylett, 2008](#_ENREF_47), [Rice, 2010](#_ENREF_44), Hodson and Marvin 2010, 2013; Bulkeley et al., 2011; Bulkeley 2005, 2013; [Castán Broto and Bulkeley, 2013](#_ENREF_9); [Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013](#_ENREF_7)). No one assumes that the urban is the only scale at which to act: cities also work at higher scales through international networks such as ICLEI and C40 to lobby for change, access resources and information, and to address issues that cannot be addressed locally ([Bulkeley, 2005](#_ENREF_5)). But cities do have the potential to adapt to inevitable climate change ([Bicknell et al., 2009](#_ENREF_3)) , to decarbonise the social-technical infrastructure and utilities on which urban life depends ([Castán Broto and Bulkeley, 2013](#_ENREF_7), [Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013](#_ENREF_6)), and to reduce resource throughputs in response to possible resource constraints and to mitigate against future *dangerous* climate change (Rutherford 2014).

However, Bulkeley and Betsill (2013:138) identify a growing gap between rhetoric and reality when climate and economic development policies clash. The overarching strategic thinking of policy makers in local authorities and other statutory and economic development agencies, it is argued, is shaped within an overall logic that demands that the maximisation of a city’s employment and business opportunities in competition with other cities. In the urban politics of ‘entrepreneurialism’ (Harvey 1989) cities must compete for mobile inward investment, and consequently policy makers will inevitably measure visions of urban futures against the needs of competitiveness, discounting those that do not work within this paradigm ([Cox and Jonas, 1993](#_ENREF_9)) with a “dull compulsion” (Peck 2014). Thus climate policy choices are driven by strategic selectivity ([Jonas et al., 2004](#_ENREF_14)) whereby cities develop policy that responds to specific climate change threats in ways that are “made to fit comfortably with ideas of competition, globalisation and security in ‘post political’ configurations of urban governance” (Davidson and Iveson 2015:545) that do not challenge overarching entrepreneurial accumulation strategies ([Béal, 2011](#_ENREF_1)).

Consequently, in the context of climate change, Erik Swyngedouw (2010) argues that the need to avoid future climate ‘calamity’ is framed as being so obvious that no-one of goodwill would refute it. We are ‘all in it together’. He, and others (see Kenis and Mathijs [2014a, b]; Raco [2015]; Davidson and Iveson [2015]) argue that in this context urban sustainability strategies are often characterised by technocratic, bland, vague commitments to ‘smart cities’ and to ‘sustainable development’ that do not challenge the underlying logic of neoliberalisation, or longstanding inequalities and forms of dominance and oppression. ‘Post Politics’ means the ‘political’ – a space of antagonism – is replaced by ‘politics’ – based on consensus, technocratic management and participation in which the parameters of possible outcomes are defined by uncontested conceptions of what are ‘sensible’ adjustments to a ‘policed’ order that maintains and reproduces existing power relations.

While he does not claim that climate policy-making is *completely* uncontested, Swyngedouw argues that the post political forecloses more radical visions of socio-environmental futures that constitute fundamental challenges to neoliberal accumulation strategies such as ‘degrowth’, economic localisation, the need to consider the needs of other species and future generations, or the need for simpler, more low tech, convivial economies (see North 2010a, b). Challenges to the inherent unsustainability of neoliberal capitalism performed by urban elites, or uneven geographies of energy production and consumption, are neutered (Davidson and Iveson 2015:546). Critics who argue that elements of economic activity that underpin competitiveness but also produce significant greenhouse gas emissions should be discontinued are not taken seriously, their views rendered ‘deviant’, beyond the realms of the ‘sensible’ conceptions of the policed order. As a result, Inglofur Blüdorn (2015) argues that that current environmental policy is locked into a paradigm of fundamental *un*sustainability, in which a simulation of sustainability has tamed the challenges of the environmental new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Urban policy is to protect and police consumer capitalism and unsustainable levels of consumption, with the result that the radical action necessary to avoid calamitous climate change is not taken, and a vague commitment to ‘sustainability’ obscures a fundamentally *un*sustainable reality ([Blühdorn, 2007](#_ENREF_4)). While radical critics of neoliberal urbanisms argue for egalitarian conceptions of the city (Featherstone et al 2012) founded on an economic ethics for the Anthropocene ([Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010](#_ENREF_13)), the post-political thesis argues that such visions are off limits, and that antagonisms are repressed. Is this the case?



We (and others, see [Featherstone [2013](#_ENREF_19)]; Chatterton et al. [2013]; Larner [2015]; and Beveridge and Koch [2016]) argue that pessimistic and politically disempowering post-political perspectives over simplify and overestimate the extent that neoliberalisation *is* being rolled out in monolithic ways. Conversely, they underplay the extent that climate activists (for instance Transition activists – see North and Longhurst [2013]), environmentalists, and urban social movement activists more generally are building alternatives to the neoliberal ‘business as usual’ in ways that go beyond technocratic demands for policy reform. The ‘post-political’ arbitrarily sets the bar for what counts as real ‘politics’ too high, demanding heroic actions, the ‘disruption’ of the policed ‘sensible’, and a commitment to fundamental equality such as that in an urban riot, or in the occupations of the squares. It fails to recognise the political status of many of the grassroots challenges that might form the germ of an alternative to neoliberalism (Larner 2015). This, we and others argue, is politically disempowering and needlessly prescriptive ([Beveridge and Koch, 2016](#_ENREF_2)). Politics goes on in many, perhaps unexpected places: for example it has long been recognised that urban partnerships can spaces of conflict and negotiation rather than of uncontested technocratic management (Mackintosh, 1992, Hastings, 1996). Finally, as we show in this paper, Swyngedouw (2010) overestimates the extent that the need to avoid dangerous climate change *is* so uncritically accepted, as an immediate priority for which action should be taken, especially given austerity urbanism after the 2008 crash ([Peck, 2012](#_ENREF_23)). He comes dangerously close to reproducing ‘denialist’ tropes about climate change in potentially counter-productive and unintended ways (Blühdorn 2015). We argue that many city leaders see climate and sustainability as a *distraction* from, or at least not a priority, when set against, their core task - maximising economic growth. Growth coalitions (Logan and Molotch 1987) are unlikely to be convinced of the need to act on climate at all. There is, in short, no consensus on climate.

Hodson and Marvin (2013:2) argue that choices about how the transition to a low carbon society should be undertaken entail radically different visions of how we produce and use energy. Consequently, the concrete nature of this transition in policy terms, the scale at which it will happen, what interests advance and retard the process, and how conflictual or consensual this transition will be, is unclear. While the UK was the first country to adopt a statutory low carbon path, we know less about exactly how a transition will be implemented at a sub-national level and, consequently, Hodson and Martin advocate a "focus on the role of different places, geographies and social processes through which the transition ... will take place" (2013:3). To this end, Gibbs and Jonas (2000) advance a regime theoretical analysis (see Stone [1989]) of how the capacity to govern and to implement climate policy emerges in places. These approaches suggest we need a more nuanced understanding of who comes to the table to debate low carbon policy making, what arguments they make, who stays away, who opposes the process, and who supports what proposals (Bulkeley and Betsill 2013:150-151). Consequently, this paper argues that we can move beyond blanket condemnations of urban climate policy formation as irredeemably post political and develop a more nuanced understanding of how urban actors debate conflicting pressures, decide on priorities, and develop a capacity to govern that reconciles the need to avoid dangerous climate change with securing urban prosperity in a competitive neoliberal environment. This was the aim of our research project, Low Carbon Liverpool.

**Low Carbon Liverpool**

This paper draws on observations of the climate policy-making process in Liverpool between 2007 and 2016. The lead author of this paper had been a key player in the creation of ‘Transition Liverpool’ in 2007, one of the Transition Initiatives: community-based projects that explored how citizens can act locally to avoid dangerous climate change (North 2011, Mason and Whitehead 2012). While much of the work of Transition Liverpool had been valuable (North and Longhurst 2013), he wanted to explore the potential for action on climate at a city level, given that individual citizens cannot decarbonise urban infrastructure (Bulkeley et al 2014): environmentalists need to do more than ‘disrupt’, they need to join others in building alternatives. To progress this, he formed an alliance with sympathetic local policy-makers in the Chamber of Commerce and the city’s local economic development company, Liverpool Vision, and between 2009 and 2013 a UK Economic and Social Research Council-funded Knowledge Exchange Project Low Carbon Liverpool explored how climate and economic development policy interacted locally to balance economic development with what needs to be done to avoid dangerous climate change (North 2013).

Low Carbon Liverpool consisted of action research through which the three authors worked closely with officers from our local partner organisations to co-produce research questions, identify research methods, and discuss what the findings meant. Through a series of well attended public meetings, our perspectives and examples of what the researchers regarded as good practice were presented to a wider audience of policymakers, support agencies, and other civil society actors. Discussions using participatory methods explored the extent that the ideas presented might or might not work in the city. The final report (North and Barker 2011b) and a series of policy briefs, co-written with partners, was presented at a lively public meeting, hosted by a well-known local radio commentator which attracted a wide range of local agencies, councillors, environmental activists, and community members. Following that meeting, a growing group of collaborators established a Liverpool Green Partnership (LGP) to progress the report’s findings, supported by ESRC follow-on funding. LGP developed arguments for the city to bid to be European Green Capital, carried out an audit of the city’s environmental performance, and developed proposals to improve the strategic management of climate policy in the city.

Low Carbon Liverpool was a project built on knowledge exchange. For the academics, the project facilitated access to the ‘back room’ of local agenda setting and policy formation in return for supporting policy partners to flesh out what a low carbon agenda for the city would look like, thus meeting their policy-making needs. We had a ringside seat as policy makers grappled with, and contested, emerging understandings of what the implications of climate change might or might not mean for the city. We observed which proposals were accepted, which were rejected, and by whom. This in-depth insight into day-to-day policy-making processes allowed for a substantially more detailed case study than could be obtained from interviews with policy makers alone, and enabled us to observe if and how radical ideas are edited out of what is seen as ‘the sensible’, rather than assuming that they would be. To ensure methodological rigour, we concluded the project with a round of interviews with our partners where we tested our understandings of what we had observed both empirically, and in relation to the literature (Cochrane 1998).

**The (contested) evolution of low carbon policy in Liverpool**

In order to understand how pressures for sustainable development and competitiveness cut against each other in ways that are, we argue, more than consensual technocratic policy choices, it is first necessary to describe the evolution of climate policy in Liverpool, and the place of our research in relation to the policy making process.

Climate policy in Liverpool emerged in the early 2000s as a subset of sustainability, broadly conceived. This was a period of reflection about the city’s future after the battles of the ‘Militant’ years (1983-87) in which Liverpool’s local socialist council had (unsuccessfully) challenged central government for resources to alleviate the city’s deep-seated poverty (Frost and North 2013). At this time, some environmentally-minded local actors argued that Liverpool should accept that it was a post-industrial, shrinking city but that there were positive elements to this: Victorian parks, Georgian architecture, uncongested roads, low house prices, and a clean River Mersey. It should embrace this contraction as an opportunity to create a liveable city. In line with this way of thinking, in 2003 an Ecological Footprint Study (City of Liverpool 2003) emerged through the Local Agenda 21 process that argued that two-and-a-half planets would be maintain the lifestyle of the average Merseysider. It argued that the best way to shrink the city’s ecological footprint would be to focus on the areas of greatest pressure, including transport, waste, water treatment, and energy use, and recomended an awareness campaign to promote behaviour change.

Rejecting the shrinking city approach, when the New Labour government pushed cities to bring statutory players together to in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in order to develop a more strategic vision for their city, the city’s LSP Liverpool First rejected the ‘shrinking city’ perspective. It argued that growth could be re-ignited by building a visitor economy that harnessed the city’s strong cultural offer and its ability to draw on significant European Union funding. Reflecting this, Liverpool First’s (2009) vision was of a city that was “competitive on the world stage with a sustainable business sector.” It argued that the city needed to address lagging problems including low growth, the GVA gap with other regions, low levels of entrepreneurial activity, and a “cycle of worklessness, benefits, poor educational attainment and poor health” ([Liverpool First, 2009](#_ENREF_42)). This strategy of culture-led regeneration seemingly paid off when the city won European Capital of Culture in 2008 (Garcia et al 2010; Connolly 2011), the new Liverpool One shopping centre was opened in 1998, and the city centre seemed newly revitalised by the visitor economy.

This did not mean climate policy was ignored. The LSPs had to adopt a number of statutory national indicators (NIs) on which they would be judged, and one of these had to be an adaptation target ([Porter et al., 2015](#_ENREF_25)). Like 97% of other LSPs, (Pearce and Cooper, 2011) Liverpool First adopted NI188, ‘planning to adapt to climate change’. The Department for Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) insisted that local authorities who were in a position to do so and who wanted to apply for funding in this respect should adopt a mitigation target, so Liverpool First also adopted NI185 ‘CO2 reduction from Local Authority operations’ rather than the more challenging NI186 for ‘per capita reduction in CO2 emissions in the Local Authority area’. The local authority argued that a limited number of indicators could be adopted overall, and that adopting two out of three climate change indicators showed what they regarded to be a high commitment to climate change actions. At this time, local authority officers argued that NI 186 was not a useful indicator for driving climate policy as, they argued, the cause and effect of changes measured were highly retrospective and often were outside the control of the city council. Two thirds of local authorities were, though, more ambitious and did adopt NI186 (Pearce and Cooper, 2011:204).

Taking climate policy forward, between 2008 and 2009 Liverpool First developed a Climate Change Strategic Framework that recognised that “Liverpool accepts the urgent role that it has to play in slowing and reversing the growth of greenhouse gasses”, i.e. for mitigation as well as adaptation. It set a target of reducing carbon emissions by 35% by 2020 (on a 2006 baseline), which was in line with national targets of cuts of 80% by 2050. It focused on cuts in housing and domestic emissions, commerce and industry, and transport (Liverpool City Council, 2009).

In 2006 the Stern Report on climate change had argued that the economic costs of early mitigation outweighed the costs of adaptation to a changing climate alone (Stern 2006). Prompted by this, the city region carried out a ‘mini Stern’ ([DTZ, 2009](#_ENREF_11)), and analysed the economic impact of EU and UK climate change legislation on the city in terms of opportunities and threats (Regeneris Consulting 2009). City council officers argue that the City Council then built on this work to influence the developing role of the city-region’s other economic development body, the Mersey Partnership, which adopted low carbon as one of four key priority areas for economic development: the knowledge economy; the cultural and visitor economy; the new Liverpool Two port capable of handling the largest post-Panamax ships; and the low carbon economy. The LEPs low carbon manager summarised the shift from footprint analysis to climate as business opportunity thus:

*“At the time, the Stern Report was just coming out … mini Stern reports were all the rage so that was the first time we got somebody in who people respected, consultants who they’d heard of, they crunched the numbers and actually said, ‘do you realise this is the size of the sector, do you realise how many people work in it?’”*

Convinced that ‘there are jobs in this’, seemingly, low carbon was on the agenda for The Mersey Partnership.

As their response to the economic crisis that had broken out in 2008, after the 2010 General Election the new Coalition Government cut public spending, abolished RDAs and the programmes they had run, and replaced LSPs with Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs). In Liverpool, The Mersey Partnership became the Liverpool City Region LEP. The coalition abolished climate targets, and, rather than continuing to focus on cutting emissions, the LEP’s low carbon economy strategy focussed on developing a new low carbon business sector as a new source of growth, and, embracing new opportunities for offshore wind power generation in Liverpool Bay (The Mersey Partnership 2010). In 2011 the LEP commissioned a Sustainable Energy Action Plan (SEAP) (Liverpool City Region Local Enterprise Partnership 2012) which identified and prioritised a detailed inventory of potential low carbon energy projects. While the SEAP did not include any targets for emissions reduction, it was used to enable the City Council to make a commitment to membership of the European Covenant of Mayors on carbon mitigation. This commitment, the council felt, amounted to a cautious first step towards mitigation. Finally, a study of the city’s adaptation needs broadly gave the city a clean bill of health: it faced no existential climate threats (i.e. floods, water shortage, wildfires).

To summarise, in the discussion above we see an early engagement with one-planet living and the acceptance of emissions reduction targets. We then see a rejection of the ‘shrinking city’ conception, and a commitment to culture-led growth which culminated in the 2008 Capital of Culture year and subsequent counter-cyclical city centre (but not more widely spread) revitalisation (see Boland [2010]). In 2010 the policy focus moves away from emissions monitoring and reduction (i.e. mitigation) as central government removes the requirement for local emissions reduction targets, towards adaptation, energy security, and to low carbon as a new source of jobs, businesses and growth. In short, the outcome is in line with the post political thesis. The city focuses on growth, energy security, adaptation to specific climate threats (of which there were few), and sustainability broadly conceived. But was there a consensus on this? Was enough being done to mitigate against dangerous climate change? We argued not.

**Low Carbon Liverpool’s critique**

The research phase of Low Carbon Liverpool occurred during the transition between the New Labour and Coalition administrations, a time when explicit climate targets were abolished, and low carbon was reconceptualised by the LEP as a source of growth. We suggested an alternative path that aimed to take policy makers’ conceptions around securing the city’s economic welfare seriously, as well as do what we felt was necessary in order for Liverpool to make its contribution to avoiding dangerous climate change in a significant way. We did not, and do not, accept that the options were *only* submission to the policed order or disruption: a third option is negotiation and engagement in which there is a potential openness to new ideas. Arguing that subaltern actors are not able to progress decarbonisation alone, we wanted to work with policy makers in the city who wanted to take climate seriously, believing that engagement would be better than disruption, but also refusing to limit our recommendations to what would be taken as ‘the sensible’ by our partners.

Consequently, our report (North and Barker 2011) challenged conceptualisations of low carbon as just a new source of growth *today* (in the form of new jobs and businesses), which would decouple growth from C02 emissions *in the future*. It argued that a city which was lucky enough to be located in the high latitudes and which faces very few direct climate threats itself should take its ‘geographies of responsibility’ (Massey, 2004) for current and in-the-pipeline climate change more seriously. Liverpool is recognised by UNESCO as a world heritage site as a result of its key role in the creation of the global mercantile trading system, the system that was responsible for the historical emissions that have led to the anthropogenic global warming that is adversely affecting those in the majority world located in less favoured and less resilient locations. In line with an ethics for the Anthropocene, the report asked if enough thought was going into the responsibilities of the city for greenhouse gas emissions embodied in goods produced elsewhere by consumed in the city, for reducing its own emissions to allow the right to development by others in the global South, and about the rights of other species and future generations.

It argued that low carbon should not be a separate sector, as a source of growth. Reflecting the declining availability and rising costs of fossil fuel, and increasing limits on the ability of the planet’s ecosystems to absorb waste, we argued for an audit of the city region’s energy consumption and for emissions reduction strategies to be embedded into the LEP’s core economic strategy, so the knowledge, visitor and port economies were all ‘low carbon’. We questioned whether unsustainable growth that generated jobs and businesses today could be maintained into the future. A comprehensive low carbon economic strategy would support emissions reduction across the city region economy as a whole, but should specifically ensure that new businesses engage with low carbon practices from the outset, prioritise emissions reduction from the largest emitters, and phase out (perhaps profitable) economic activities that are fundamentally unsustainable. The report pointed to opportunities for revitalising manufacturing and for retrofitting the city’s housing stock that could provide jobs for those that the city’s service sector, visitor-led revitalisation had not reached. It suggested a focus on supporting the creation of convivial, egalitarian and socially-inclusive ways of creating low carbon forms of prosperity, rather than growth, uncritically conceived.

The report concluded by arguing that the city should engage in a strategic conversation about its future. Specifically, it argued:

“This conversation should be held as part of a future bid to be European Green Capital. Capital of Culture status celebrated and confirmed the city’s rebirth. A target of achieving Green Capital status would provide a focus for and energise the transformation to a low carbon city.” (North and Barker 2011:105).

European Green Capital status is awarded through a competitive process to a city that has shown significant environmental performance, and which can inspire others to do the same[[1]](#footnote-1). Recognising that strategic approaches to the transition to a low carbon economy at a city level were often disappointing in practice, we argued that a bid would focus the transition, and provide a process and route map that could be managed and seemed achievable given current resources.

**The response**

The Green Capital recommendation caught the imagination locally. To work up a potential bid, we and our partners in the Chamber of Commerce and Liverpool Vision were joined by a wider group of officials from a range of public sector agencies in a wider Liverpool Green Partnership (LGP). The researchers won a second round of ESRC funding which was used to co-produce an audit of the city’s environmental performance in line with Green Capital criteria, which suggested a bid would be both credible and a useful step along the road to wider decarbonisation. When subsequent public meetings indicated that there was considerable support for a bid, LGP decided to seek to formalise itself into a body able to provide a strategic approach to the city’s environmental performance, arguing that this could (and should) not be left to local authorities alone.

This was at a time of considerable political flux, both nationally after the 2010 election and the imposition of austerity, and in the form of local institutional reconfiguration when Joe Anderson became the city of Liverpool’s first executive Mayor in early 2012. Discussions with senior Liverpool city councillors suggested that LGP’s agenda might be an attractive way for the new Mayor to stamp his mark on the city, especially if the Labour Party also won the mayorality of Bristol, in which case the two cities with executive Mayors could be powerful allies. To secure the Mayor’s approval of the proposed strategy, a dinner for the Mayor, hosted by the Bishop of Liverpool, was organised at which our partners in LGP told us they expected that this proposal would be signed off. It was not to be. Instead, Mayor Anderson decided to establish a ‘Mayoral Commission for Sustainable Development’ to make recommendations about what the city’s sustainability strategy should be. Labour did not, in fact win the Bristol mayoralty, and when Bristol was designated European Green Capital for 2015 and it was judged that the award would not return to the UK for a number of years Mayor Anderson decided that a bid would not be made at that time.

LGP continued to meet. In response to a call for evidence to the Mayoral Commission, LGP recommended that New York City’s PlaNYC[[2]](#footnote-2) might be a model for a comprehensive approach to creating a climate-proofed city that also maintained its competitiveness. LGP quoted New York City’s Mayor Bloomberg approvingly:

“To thrive economically, we must create a setting where talented entrepreneurs—and the businesses they grow—want to be. … quality of life, (is) no longer a vague nicety but a tangible feature that business leaders consider when deciding where to locate or expand: where do talented workers want to live, in an age when they can choose to live anywhere? They don’t consider great parks or clean air to be a frill”. (City of New York 2007:9).

Through 2013 and 2014 the Mayoral Commission on Sustainable Development was recruited and gathered evidence from a range of stakeholders. However, once the gelling focus of a Green Capital bid, and the process of continuous improvement of climate policy through rounds of bids that would be judged by external EU experts had been removed from the table, LGP lost its focus. Many LGP members began to attend the newly established Local Nature Partnership that had the advantage of being on a statutory footing, and which focused heavily on the economic benefits of green infrastructure. As a result of austerity, others lost their jobs or were moved onto core, rather than collaborative (post political, technocratic) partnership roles. In the absence of either the commitment by or capacity of LGP members to develop into a wider advocacy group arguing for a more explicitly pro-climate change development strategy for the city, meetings of the LGP struggled to be quorate as the deliberations of the Commission were awaited.

In March 2015[[3]](#footnote-3) the Mayoral Commission report did not identify any role for LGP. LGP briefly rebranded itself as ‘Gather Liverpool’, but struggled to identify a distinctive agenda and put itself into abeyance. The focus of discussions about the city’s future moved to the city region level in the context of the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ (Nurse 2015), and in 2015 the City Region’s local authorities agreed to the establishment of a city-region Mayor from 2017.

**Discussion: Liverpool Green Partnership as a post political phenomenon?**

We now turn to an analysis of the rise and fall of LGP as an intervention in the evolution of Liverpool’s climate policy, which we summarise in table one:

(Insert table one, around here)

Is this a post political, undemocratic and technocratic construction of the ‘sensible’ which aims to maintain the neoliberal ‘policed’ status quo, from which ‘politics’ is excised? We would argue for a more nuanced view, and would defend co-production as a legitimate method for constructing climate policy in agonistic, rather than antagonistic, ways. Unless ‘politics’ is regarded as of necessity containing the disruption of the ‘police order’ and fundamental commitment to equality (a view we find too limited), we argue that LGP developed its perspectives through discussion and engagement, not though technocratic administration. We organised well attended, lively and professionally-run meetings which provided a space in which public sector officers, private sector actors, and environmentally-minded and community-based activists could come together to discuss the issues in constructive and respectful, rather than antagonistic ways. The Chamber of Commerce mobilised local businesses, while the researchers’ connections to the city’s Transition Towns movement mobilised environmental and community actors who bought different views. Local authority officers and elected members were interested in hearing the results of funded research which was supported by and validated through the involvement of the local partners – especially the Chamber of Commerce, a private sector organisation. The local partners provided logistical support and advice on how to present the project’s findings in ways that decision makers would find persuasive. On their advice a design company was contracted to professionally produce the project’s outputs, good quality meeting rooms were booked, and meetings were chaired by a local radio commentator or the cabinet member for climate change. The involvement of the partners provided forms of validation that meant that the ideas were given a hearing that activist or purely academic voices would struggle to replicate.

Recognising that this was an independent academic project, our partners did not make any attempt to veto any of the more critical comments we made. We said that we would be happier to say what we thought and have our arguments rejected than water them down, and were told by one our partners that this was ‘refreshing’. That is not to say that there were no attempts to limit what was ‘the sensible’. During participant observation we regularly observed steering comments from economic development managers such as: “this is not about hair shirts … if low carbon doesn’t generate jobs and businesses we’ll find a sector that will.” Remembering the Liverpool of the 1980s, pro-growth advocates argued “those of you who are critical of growth, and you are right to be, should think about what a city without growth looks like”. “Who can be against growth?”, one of our LGP partners asked. We had to respond to these challenges. Should we disruptive, explicitly challenge these discourses, antagonistically, and perhaps lose our partners? The post political perspective suggests that this is too great a risk to be taken, and it is through such processes that the ‘sensible’ is policed. We felt that co-production suggested a third path - agonistic debate. We chose the latter, and identify four set of debates through which the agenda was moved on.

*Debates (1): bid for Green Capital?*

Given the ubiquity of urban entrepreneurialism and the impact of the Capital of Culture on the city’s perceived revitalisation, the researchers judged that a Green Capital bid would be attractive. As a private sector LGP partner put it:

“*I think it’s on the back of the big events that had happened here in the city, it was very demonstrable that footfall, and what it catalysed and the sense of pride. … I think that fired people’s imagination as well. So and also I think the strategic approach as well that it was something big, organised, you could market on it, its creativity, and Liverpool is a very creative place.”*

This is in line with entrepreneurial urbanism. A decision to engage by actively constructing their arguments in ways that both the research team and those whom they wish to influence could agree required some compromises, but, we would argue, was more than a one way para-political accommodation to dominant neoliberal discourses. The researchers were inspired by the examples of Hamburg and Nantes as Green Capitals that were not world-leading climate cities, but port cities that had made concrete steps towards socially-inclusive sustainability from which Liverpool could learn. Discussions with environmental activists in those cities suggested that the Green Capital process was far from perfect, but did enable gains to be made. The researchers hoped that the audit of what the city’s strengths and weaknesses in relation to sustainability were would focus and catalyse the transition to a low carbon economy by mapping the city’s environmental performance, co-ordinating responses to address weaknesses, and putting pressure on recalcitrant or lagging agencies to improve. We would be able to access expert advice as the bid was scrutinised, on the assumption that winning cities rarely won at the first attempt and addressed weaknesses in subsequent bids.

Our judgement, therefore, was that the benefits of the audit and bidding process made the necessary accommodation to neoliberal tropes worthwhile as this would open up space for discussion. We were partly successful. The audit process *did* identify some useful issues, although when the Mayor decided that the city would not make a bid at that time as he did not believe the city would win what LGP regarded as the real opportunity - improving the city’s environmental performance through a series of bids before (eventually) winning the prize - was not taken up. Winning or not, some critics were concerned that, given that the strategic decision had previously been made to focus on culture-led growth rather than embrace the quality of life benefits of shrinkage, a Green Capital bid would “pollute the brand”. “It’s not very Liverpool, is it?” one sceptic said. While advocates of the post political would argue that this is exactly what they would expect, this is, we would argue, political contestation over policy choices, not the uncontroversial rolling out of consensual neoliberalism.

*Debates (2): a strategic or project-based approach?*

During discussions about a response to the Mayoral Commission a second bargain was made: recommending PlaNYC as model of a strategic urban response to climate change. In line with post political conceptions that cities *should* be ‘global’, the link to New York fitted with Liverpool’s newly-established narrative as a revitalised ‘world city’ with longstanding transatlantic cultural and trading connections. For their part, the researchers could see that the recommendation worked with the grain of entrepreneurial urbanism while emphasising the importance of long term sustainability and adaptation to climate change within a context of strategic competitiveness. More importantly, and against conceptions that this is just a post political accommodation with neoliberalisation, academic research suggested that PlaNYC seemed to be taking climate change seriously, and nodded towards social inclusion and environmental justice ([Rosan, 2012](#_ENREF_28)).

In our interviews, however, officers unconvinced by the strategic approach argued that measuring Liverpool against New York City was unfair and inappropriate, and that consequently PlaNYC was not a good model for the city. A better comparison would be with cities of similar size and social economic and political conditions, and in that context the city performed well, they argued. They argued that the SEAP was the most pragmatic way of moving forward through an identification of the most cost effective (in commercial terms) and deliverable infrastructure projects, and that they should be judged on its deliverables. Other LGP partners found this approach limited and uninspiring. LGP recommended PlaNYC to the Mayor’s Commission, and this was accepted. LGP members argued that this was an example of the agenda being moved on.

*Debates (3): targets and monitoring.*

The third opportunity to advance the agenda came when the researchers argued that LGP should recommend that the Commission adopt ICLEI’s[[4]](#footnote-4) methodology for an in-depth analysis of the material processes, practices and the metabolism of the city such as that adopted by many climate policy-leading cities ([Kennedy et al., 2011](#_ENREF_27), [Rutherford, 2014)](#_ENREF_46). This, we argued, should lead to the development of a strategic and comprehensive greenhouse gas reduction strategy, including emissions reduction targets going forward. Recognising the privatised and dispersed way in which many urban services are delivered and the need for a greater understanding of the way business investment decisions affect the provision and delivery of often high carbon urban services (Bulkeley and Betsill 2013:144), we argued that in order to progress strategic emissions reduction at the urban level LGP representation needed be widened to include decision makers from most of the local players responsible for the city’s greenhouse gas emissions (economically significant companies, social landlords, and public transport and utility providers). The inspiration here was the Los Angeles Regional Collaborative for Climate Action and Sustainability (LARC[[5]](#footnote-5)) which fosters a network of local and regional decision-makers in the Los Angeles County to carry out climate mitigation and adaptation work supported by research on local climate impacts and information management systems.

While this recommendation did go forward in LGP’s evidence to the Commission, there was no consensus about it. A local authority respondent explained the council’s doubts about the utility of developing local climate targets:

*” they’ll (the indicators, and how to quantify them) all change. I’ve never worked in local* government *where you’ve actually got to the end of a monitoring period and the monitor date, it’s changed, so I would go along the line of not to get too hung up on it****. …*** *Do as much as you can”.*

Another private sector LGP partner summed up this technocratic, pragmatic perspective:

“*There is a general reluctance to go any further than a 20% reduction by 2020 … My personal view is that it's just a lack of ambition of key stakeholders and the lack of willingness to be solely accountable for targets. …* ***They want to do the work but don’t want to be measured****”* (emphasis original).

There are contextual reasons for this preference for the pragmatic to the strategic. Given that the newly elected Coalition Government had abolished national targets, it can be hard to see the benefits of monitoring contested numbers like greenhouse gas emissions when there is no centrally-imposed requirement to do so, little agreement on what to count, or on what the numbers mean. Austerity urbanism hit the public sector hard in Liverpool (Jones et al 2015). Liverpool City Council lost £330 million, 58 per cent of its funding, through government cuts. Public sector organisations lost capacity as staff (including some of our key allies) were made redundant or reassigned. Perhaps understandably, officers struggling to cope with austerity were sceptical about the utility of and accuracy of collecting local data in arrears. A local authority respondent put it thus:

“*If you’ve been driven by indicators and monitoring, and all this nice ICLEI, C40 stuff … I think that it’s almost to me like a luxury to go through the monitoring side of it because … the city council’s being cut by a third, so the idea of losing another load of jobs, but actually having somebody there monitoring previous figures that change … with a time lag of three to four years … that’s probably not a current option. It’s a tough ask that one…”*

The Mayoral Commission did not take up LGP’s recommendation to embark on the ICLEI methodology. Contra to a post-political concern that there is consensus about the ‘obvious’ need to avoid dangerous climate change, this perspective encapsulates precisely why we do *not* agree on what its significance is (Hulme 2009).

*Debates (4): limits to the willingness, and capacity, to act*

While post political assumptions about the need for sustainability being accepted as ‘obvious’ and ‘uncontested’ might fit the political culture under New Labour before 2010, this was less the case with the arrival of the Coalition. Rather than a technocratic, privatised elite, the temporary and informal ‘coalition of the willing’ that emerged in the interstices in a period of institutional fragmentation around a particular project (a Green Capital bid), and which had attracted two tranches of academic funding at a time of significant public spending cuts, did not attract members with “a domain of command power” (Harding 209:35) able or willing to formalise itself into an institution able to decide on and then implement policy.

Given this lack of command power, strategic decisions (such as whether or not to make a Green Capital bid at this time) were made, not by this elite, but first by the Mayor and his senior officers, and then communicated *to* LGP (sometimes by email) rather than discussed *with* them. LGP was reminded that the Mayor would decide what climate policy should be, not technocratic partners, even if the latters’ recommendations had been developed through a number of well-attended meetings that, if not radical democracy, were far from exclusive, privatised technocratic elite decision making. This suggests that the introduction of executive mayors into UK cities is central to the events in Liverpool. That an executive mayor has considerable power to enable a policy proposal to either be advanced, or stopped in its tracks challenges the explanatory power of more networked analyses of local governance.

Local politics also matters. While the first stage of the Low Carbon Liverpool project had involved a wide range of participants in its lively public meetings at which alternatives were debated, to some, including the researchers, the establishment of the Commission looked like delaying tactics. By 2014, the Green Party had replaced the Liberal Democrats as the official opposition on Liverpool Council, with four seats out of ninety. Previously supportive Labour councillors now excoriated the Green Capital project as one of the ‘leafy south of the city”. Given austerity, the ability of the city to maintain its future prosperity and handle successive rounds of public spending cuts, not climate, was the focus for the Labour administration. In their turn, environmental activists publically attacked us for working with the Chamber of Commerce, ‘the enemy’. They, and Liverpool Green Party, were unconvinced that the city could be a *credible* European Green Capital, having little faith in the ability of the Labour Party to either take it seriously or make an effective bid. More radical environmental voices preferred to commit their time to the Green Party, to Transition Liverpool, or to opposing the building of executive housing on parkland; i.e. to disruptive practices.

Consequently, when policy recommendations that did not resonate with neoliberal tropes were edited out of the discussions by the Mayoral Commission, there were too few radical voices still at the table to argue for them. The refusal of some of the city’s environmental groups to engage with allies who shared their frustration at the lack of a strategic vision and the slow pace of change when it was possible through the Green Capital proposal seems misplaced if the transition to a low carbon city, and changes to the infrastructure necessary to progress this, are to be achieved. We would argue that a celebration of ‘disruption’ and ‘disrupters’ does not lead to the creation of durable solutions to entrenched problems like climate change. The disruption was the awareness of the potentially catastrophic implications of climate change that emerged in the late 2000s. The task now, was to do what we felt was necessary to do something about it. Unfortunately, LGP was not up to the task.

**Conclusion**

We would accept that a case can be made that this is a story of a process of neoliberalisation in line with the post political thesis. Arguments about the need to take action to explicitly avoid dangerous climate change that were antagonistic to neoliberal tropes were advanced, but not acted on. Low carbon policy got on the agenda if advocated in ways that enabled economic development managers who focus on growth to agree with them, in line with their view of what is the ‘sensible’. Some of LGP’s recommendations were accepted, others rejected, perhaps as the arguments were more persuasive than other, rather than because they were ‘neoliberal’ in content. Particularly difficult was making arguments sufficiently robust to inform concrete investment and policy making choices if they did not resonate with unexamined conceptions of economic development. When we discussed concerns that we were moderating our arguments by, for example acceding to the recommendation of PlaNYC and not pushing alternatives to growth in explicit ways, our partners told us that we were “being grownups, aware of what you really need to do to change things rather than just oppose, using your skills far more effectively to make a difference”. But over time, even the post-political blandness of the Ecological Footprint Study and the commitment to emissions reduction targets up to 2020 was edited out of the discussion. While there has been much valuable work on a project-by-project basis, there has been no comprehensive attempt to reduce the city’s emissions to a level necessary to avoid climate crisis beyond that achieved through economic restructuring in a post-industrial city.

So far, this can be read precisely in line with the post political thesis as radical voices are edited out. We have no objection to this reading, but it is limited. Reading for latent possibilities rather than assumed closure would suggest that the agenda, if not the implementation, *had* been moved on as a result of LGP’s alliance of academics, activists, and sympathetic officers. The Mayoral Commission *did* undertake the recommended conversation about the city’s future, and its report featured PlaNYC as best practice. The Commission recommended the establishment of an integrated energy strategy and an energy company for the city, re-regulating public transport, and a Northern Environmental Commission that could become a force for to address climate change at the regional scale. While progress on advancing the recommendations has been affected by the institutional reconfiguration around the introduction of the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, negotiating the devolution agreements, and the introduction of a city region mayor in May 2017, our local authority respondents assure us that the door to a future Green Capital bid has *not* been closed (although the Mayor is also exploring a Commonwealth Games bid); the city region’s SEAP and Climate Change Strategy are under review; and the City Council have committed to reviewing carbon mitigation progress to date with a view to considering how to approach future targeting in the context of austerity. Greening the north of the city with new parks and addressing energy poverty is on the on the agenda. This suggests that negotiating with partners and taking their ideas seriously rather than disrupting them can advance the agenda, and forms of economic development that take climate seriously are to be welcomed not presumptively dismissed as neoliberal.

This is going beyond challenging silence; not only disrupting, but *enacting* a different socio-environmental future for the city, something activist citizens cannot do alone. This strategy could have been progressed more effectively in Liverpool with more effective grassroots mobilisation at the urban scale able to produce governing regimes committed to more radical change. It is not the case that debate or contestation about possible socio-environmental futures will inevitably be closed down. There are debates to be had about what ‘the sensible’ looks like, and the task is to construct movements able to enact them rather than assume that they will fail.

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