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The Bristol Green Capital Partnership: an exemplar of reflexive governance for sustainable urban development?

The theory of 'reflexive governance' prioritises process over outcomes and advocates participatory procedures, valorising multiple sources of knowledge, mutual learning and continuous evolution of organisational forms. Through the lens of reflexive governance, we explore the evolution of Bristol Green Capital Partnership, which, since 2008, has played a pivotal role in animating the environmental debate within Bristol, especially in the European Green Capital programme (2015). We conclude that the BGCP represents a 'bounded' example of reflexive governance, one that exhibits advanced forms of deliberation and coproduction but, ultimately, addresses too narrow a constituency of environmental, business and green activist interests.

Keywords: reflexive governance, European Green Capital, Bristol, sustainable urban development, co-production

Introduction

In June 2013, the European Commission awarded Bristol the title European Green Capital 2015. The European Green Capital Award (EGCA) has, since 2010, recognised cities that have attained high environmental standards and articulate ambitious plans. Bristol remains the only British city upon which this accolade has been conferred, reflecting the achievements of a decade of collaborative endeavour locally. Indeed, the use of the narrative of the 'green capital' in Bristol pre-dates its formal adoption by the European Union. In 2003, Bristol City Council and its core statutory, business and community partners published Bristol's first 'Community Strategy'. This described the city as 'a green capital in Europe, creating sustainable communities and improving quality of life' (Bristol Partnership, 2003, 28). In 2007, the same partners founded the Bristol Green Capital Partnership (BGCP), committed to promoting 'a low carbon city with a high quality of life'. The BGCP has since evolved from a small core of activists into a partnership, formally a community-interest company, comprising over 800 members, incorporating large transnational corporations and small civil-society groups. The BGCP has played a pivotal role in cultivating the green-capital narrative within Bristol.

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This collaborative environmentalism represents, we argue, a particular (in the British context), approach to the 'urban sustainability fix' – the local 'settlement' between economic, environmental and social demands (While et al., 2004) – that reflects the city's essential prosperity, lack of an orthodox growth-oriented governance 'regime', and flourishing civil society. Thus we situate our study of the BGCP in the context of the broader debate on sustainable urban futures (Raco and Flint, 2012; Hodson and Marvin, 2014). To what extent is it possible to transcend a post-political 'greenwashed' urban entrepreneurialism that consolidates dominant narratives of growth and normalises socio-economic inequality and environmental degradation (North and Nurse, 2014)? To what extent is it possible to conceive of alternative forms of 'green' entrepreneurialism and entertain diverse sustainable ideologies (Ersoy and Larner, 2019)?

To explore these questions, we interpret the BGCP experience through the lens of reflexive governance theory, a normative 'pathway' for sustainable development, one based not on technological advancement but on institutional innovation as a response to complexity (Loorbach, 2010; Kemp and Loorbach, 2006; Stone-Jovicich, 2015; Feindt and Weiland, 2018). In practice, this framework focuses primarily on the *process* of governance: incorporating and valorising multiple forms of knowledge from statutory, business and community sectors; adjusting participants' cognitive and normative beliefs and generating alternative understandings of problems; and, initiating a cycle of continuous institutional adaptation (Voss et al., 2006; Meadowcroft and Steurer, 2013; Feindt and Weiland, 2018).

The reflexive-governance literature comprises, primarily, theoretical and/or normative contributions. Here, we present an empirical case study of Bristol. Our initial hypothesis is that the distinctive participative approach of the BGCP can be construed as an 'exemplar' of reflexive governance. Empirically, we find that the adoption of 'reflexive' forms of governance in Bristol has, indeed, been influenced by the learning process inherent in the EGCA competition, especially the emphasis it places on partnership, participation and co-production. Bristol's stated aspirations as European Green Capital were not manifest (wholly) in a spectacular event that might have been expected from an orthodox urban growth coalition, but elevate a set of ambitions oriented towards citizen focus and city-wide inclusivity alongside raising the city's international profile and investment potential (Ersoy and Larner, 2019). That said, we conclude that the BGCP experience represents a highly *bounded* example of reflexive governance. BGCP membership and participation are drawn largely from groups that afford an a priori priority to green debates and issues. Engagement with the broader business community and general public has been more limited. Our conclusions thus question Bristol's self-identity as a 'green capital' and the practicability of the reflexive-governance ideal.

The paper comprises four further sections. The next section provides a brief introduction to the theory of reflexive governance, emphasising the primacy afforded to process, knowledge exchange and institutional adaptation. The following section sets out a concise economic and political background to Bristol, underlining its distinctive characteristics in the UK context, and its prosperity and historic difficulties in building collaborative governance forms locally. The next section describes the evolution of the BGCP, foregrounding the symbiotic relationship between the development of the partnership and Bristol's participation in the EGCA competition. A following section articulates a critique of the partnership as an exemplar of reflexive governance, reviewing evidence of process, knowledge exchange and adaptation.

Reflexive governance

It is commonly argued that the heterogeneous structures and processes that underpin individual and collective action in pursuit of sustainable development require a comprehensive governance framework that valorises scientific, political and everyday knowledge (Folke et al., 2005; Lemos and Agrawal, 2006; Wyborn, 2015). However, the essential complexity of socio-ecological interactions makes it difficult for urban governance to respond to this challenge (Westley et al., 2011). Indeed, there exists an 'ingenuity gap' of *Rumsfeldian* magnitude:

> the disproportion between the known dimensions on which we base our actions and the unknown dimensions that are affected by these actions is directly related to the relationship between the (relatively small) number of dimensions that we recognize, and the (relatively large) number that we do not. Hence, the increase in our knowledge about our role in the environment cannot keep pace with the increase of the unknown impact of our actions on that environment. (Westley et al., 2011, 764)

The theory of reflexive governance echoes the heightened awareness that 'mastery' of such a complex world is impossible (Beck et al., 2003). Modernist approaches to problem solving, premised on scientific and bureaucratic rationality, are increasingly poorly suited to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century (Meadowcroft and Steurer, 2013). Indeed, traditional market and regulatory responses to ecological and resource crisis have failed to effect the transformational outcomes required (Feindt and Weiland, 2018). Reflexive-governance theory has evolved, in this context, to offer a theoretical framework for understanding a 'learning-based approach to governance' (Pahl-Wostl, 2009; De Schutter and Lenoble, 2010). Instead of aggregating individual choices expressed through the market against a background of externalities, uncertainty and uneven information, there is a need, it is argued, for a continuous 'reflexive' learning process for participants in governance, which is adaptable and shaped according to problems and issues that actors raise in relation to

the changing economic, environmental and social contexts (Brousseau and Glachant, 2011). Reflexive-governance theory responds to the call for the development of new non-market or non-bureaucratic modes of regulation sensitive to complex societal challenges. It provides for a framework in which participatory procedures support deliberation and mutual learning between individuals and organisations (Voss et al., 2006).

Reflexive governance rejects the 'linear' technocratic management of problems that can be clearly defined and delineated and focuses on the collective definition of problems and the processes and types of responses to these. The aim is to organise the collective search for integrated solutions to bring about more fruitful paths of societal development. The emphasis within the reflexive-governance framework on continuous practice and 'learning by doing' requires us to amend our traditional ideas of knowledge creation, based on disciplinary and cognitive knowledge, towards new forms of knowledge that capture the broader pluralistic social and economic context through dialogue and co-production (Gibbons et al., 1994; Jasanoff, 2004; Nowotny et al., 2001; Ersoy, 2017). Reflexive governance foregrounds an iterative process and adaptive management practices (see also Gunderson and Light, 2006; Armitage et al., 2008), where the behaviours and actions of organisations change according to a deeper understanding of the beliefs and values of partners engendered in the decision-making process (Argyris and Schon, 1978). It focuses on knowledge exchange (Innes and Booher, 2010), but also addresses environmental issues, the interaction between knowledge and power, and science and governance as a form of co-productive multi-level governance (Ostrom, 2010; Wyborn, 2015).

In short, the defining features of reflexive governance are:

1 equivalence afforded to process and outcome (Voss et al., 2006);
2 a practice of continuous 'learning by doing' that valorises multiple forms of knowledge – scientific, political, quotidian; and
3 an ongoing process of organisational adaptation in response to this exercise in institutional learning (Meadowcroft and Steurer, 2013).

In practice, we are seeking evidence of these attributes in the Bristol context.

Methodology

Our methodology is centred on a qualitative case study of the evolution of the BGCP. We have sought to construct a 'thick-descriptive' narrative of this history, one that foregrounds the subjective accounts of key informants and interprets these in the changing local, national and European context.

To build this narrative, we have drawn on two principal methods:

- A review of local, national and European policy and practice literature. We have surveyed key statutory documents (e.g. local land-use plans, corporate strategies),

reports and lobbying documents produced by local business associations and civil society networks, EGCA bidding guidance, the Bristol EGCA bids and evaluation reports of the Bristol 2015 event(s).

- A series of semi-structured interviews, starting in 2009 and ongoing, with key Bristol stakeholders. We adopted a purposive, 'snowball' approach to sampling, the objective of which was to interview as diverse as possible a sample of respondents who played influential roles in key phases of development of the BGCP, the origins of the partnership, the three EGCA bids, the Bristol Green Capital 2015 event(s), and legacy planning. In total, we conducted over thirty interviews with local-authority politicians and officers (e.g. planners, environmental managers); past and present BGCP actors (including founder members); and representatives of other statutory organisations (health, education, regeneration), private utilities, business networks and individual firms, voluntary and community sector groups and further and higher-education institutions.

Bristol

Bristol, population 460,000, is the largest city in South West England. It is conspicuously more prosperous than the seven other English core cities. Nearly half (48.5 per cent) of Bristol residents are educated to degree level, compared to 38.2 per cent nationally (ONS, 2016), and Bristol is the only English city, except London, with a productivity rate (GVA per hour worked) superior to the UK average (ONS, 2017). This prosperity – the result of a diverse local economy built on aerospace, creative industries, finance and business services (Tallon, 2007) – is due primarily to locational and path-dependent attributes (Bristol's proximity to London, its skilled workforce, the legacy of its mercantile rather than manufacturing history) rather than to policy outcomes (Boddy et al., 2004). It also masks a population polarised in terms of wealth. One in six of the city's residents live in the 10 per cent most disadvantaged neighbourhoods within England (CLG, 2015). There is a marked disparity between the dynamic city centre and affluent western suburbs and the more disadvantaged eastern inner city and southern periphery (Bristol City Council, 2011).

In the late twentieth century, in contrast to cities such as Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester, which witnessed the formation of coherent urban growth coalitions and regimes (Barber and Hall, 2008; Ward, 2003; While et al., 2004), Bristol was characterised by an antagonistic mode of governance. The city lacked strategic and collaborative agency, which inhibited its capacity to compete for central government investment and gave rise to considerable conflict over local development schemes (Malpass, 1994; Stewart, 1996; DiGaetano and Klemanski, 1993; Oatley and May, 1999; Bassett, 1996; Bassett et al., 2002; Tallon, 2007); 'complacent, introspective, fragmented … Bristol allowed – encouraged even – public and private interests to indulge in civic dispute

which related more to intra-organisational tensions and ambitions rather than to the greater good of Bristol' (Stewart, 1998, 4).

Multiple fault lines defined political relationships: within Bristol City Council, between the traditional 'blue-collar' Labour group, which advocated comprehensive redevelopment, and an emergent cohort of professional Labour councillors espousing a 'growth-management' agenda (DiGaetano and Klemanski, 1993; Bassett, 1996); between the city council, the former Avon County Council and its constituent districts, Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, marked by a collective failure to deliver housing growth or comprehensive transport solutions in the urban fringe (Stewart, 1998); and between the council, business (the Bristol Chamber of Commerce remained peripheral to the politics of strategic urban change (DiGaetano and Klemanski, 1993; Bassett, 1996; Stewart, 1998)) and civil society.

Bristol is home to a heterogeneous and dynamic voluntary and community sector, comprising more than 2,800 groups and 600 social enterprises. The sector has been described variously as entrepreneurial, liberal and radical, and has often defined itself in opposition to local authority (initially the M32 during the 1960s) and private development schemes (most notably opposing the opening of Tesco in the Bohemian Stokes Croft neighbourhood in inner-city Bristol).

> The movement cuts across a number of issues and campaigns – anti-capitalist/anti-globalization, peace, squatting, eco-protest and the more unpopular third world solidarity and justice campaigns which mingle together with closer links to each other than to more formal organizations with similar interests. (Purdue et al., 2004, 283)

The past decade has witnessed the (re)building of strategic leadership capacity at city level, with the election of Bristol's first directly elected mayor in 2012, and at city-region level – a mayoral combined authority was instituted in 2016. However, the impact of these changes is, at the time of writing, contested. For example, the (Bristol) Mayor's *One City Plan* (Bristol City Council, 2019) has been lauded as an example of successful strategic collaboration, whereas the rejection by the Planning Inspectorate of the (West of England) Joint Spatial Plan in August 2019 suggests residual difficulties in planning for the wider city-region.

The evolution of the 'green-capital' narrative, the Bristol Green Capital Partnership and the European Green Capital Award

The term 'green capital' entered the Bristol lexicon in the Community Strategy of 2003. However, the vision of a green capital was not precisely articulated locally at the time and the term would not assume real political significance until Bristol's participation in EGCA competition at the end of the decade. Prior to this, the discursive

terrain of sustainable development in Bristol was contested, with multiple 'green' narratives in circulation locally.

The local authority and core statutory partners in their formal plans – the Community Strategy (2003) and its successor the 2020 Plan: Bristol's Sustainable Community Strategy, and the statutory land-use plan for Bristol 2006–2026, Bristol Development Framework Core Strategy (2011) – articulated a conceptualisation of sustainable development that sought, explicitly, a pragmatic compromise between the goals of prosperity, inclusion and environmentalism. The twin strategies propounded a vision of Bristol as a leading European city – indeed, a 'green capital'. They articulated a common spatial strategy that sought to balance (low-carbon) economic development and environmental protection and address the widening differences in wealth and disadvantage across the city within a 'compact' growth model that prioritised investment in the city centre, South Bristol and the port suburb of Avonmouth. In effect, this reinforced the long-established strategic spatial-planning orientation of the local authority, with its focus on regeneration, residential densification and rejection of green-belt development. In this context, the 'green' narrative represented an effective 'rebranding' of the pre-existing 'growth management' ethos (DiGaetano and Klemanski, 1993). A local planning officer explained,

> we have to juggle the social, economic and green agendas … sustainable development is a social agenda, it's all about people … it's not all about environmental protection, it's about people, jobs and homes and all the resources to support that.

In contrast, West of England business interests embraced the green discourse, but drew very different conclusions about the balance of growth and constraint, and the appropriate scale for intervention. Indeed, they argued that economic growth, properly managed, was a fundamental underpinning of sustainable development. In 2011, Business West, the principal sub-regional business representation and advice organisation, published its 2050 Plan, a de facto spatial strategy for the West of England city-region – incorporating proposals for new tidal energy, transport and green infrastructure and new sub-regional governance mechanisms – inspired by the 1909 Burnham Plan for Chicago. This was a direct response to the perceived failure of strategic leadership of the four local authorities of the West of England. The 2050 Plan argued that growth was both inevitable and desirable and that it was necessary to plan for that growth. Growth represented also a prerequisite for generating additional employment opportunities and providing the finance (through development capture) to address key infrastructure deficits, especially transport. The 2050 Plan recognised climate change as a major challenge, and acknowledged statutory targets for carbon reduction, but reflected also a belief in the capacity of technological innovation to meet these challenges. A local business adviser observed,

> growth can be absolutely sustainable, depending on how you define sustainability. The absolute underpinning of our approach is a view that moving forward and growing is

> necessary for Bristol to carry on enjoying the prosperity, quality of life and health and well-being that it does and to improve it and to offer it to everyone.

Bristol environmental groups, unsurprisingly, advocated a stronger ecological approach than did the statutory and business sectors, based on a conception of environmental limits within which social and economic objectives would be constrained. Bristol's active voluntary and community sector had, since the 1960s, incorporated a vital environmental movement. Emerging, initially, to oppose new trunk-road schemes, the movement expanded in the 1970s, drawing on government funding to develop pioneering grass-roots recycling schemes (Brownlee, 2011). By 2012, the local green movement numbered over 150 organisations spanning the entire spectrum of environmental activism: green think tanks and pressure groups, energy cooperatives, waste-recycling groups, a local currency (the Bristol Pound), local food networks, community self-build housing groups and a vibrant local 'sharing' economy (BGCP, 2012). Bristol also became the location of choice for major national environmental actors: the Centre for Sustainable Energy, Sustrans, the Soil Association. The city thus accumulated a critical mass of green activism and expertise atypical in the UK context (Brownlee, 2011). These third-sector actors have proved pivotal in advancing the green-capital narrative. Responsibility for the BGCP project after its launch in 2007 was vested in the Momentum Group, a group of twelve representatives drawn from local government, business, education and civil society, including, crucially, high-profile and influential green activists. Through a range of initiatives – the Peak Oil Report commissioned by the group (BGCP, 2009), and its sponsorship of work on local food (BGCP, 2011) – the Momentum Group has challenged the public sector, business and the community to make changes in energy production and use, transport, waste management, local food and retail and construction to increase the resilience of the local economy. As one founder member explained, 'our role is to challenge the conventional growth model – the inevitably of growth – we would question the acceptability of high-carbon jobs'.

The year 2008 represented a critical threshold in the evolution of the BGCP. Several circumstances converged to provide a significantly increased profile to the green-capital narrative. In June 2008, Bristol's was designated England's first Cycling City, securing £11 million government investment in cycling infrastructure and education. In November 2008, Bristol was listed by green think tank Forum for the Future as Britain's most sustainable city in its Sustainable City Index, scoring strongly for cycling provision, recycling and composting, but poorly on public transport. Most importantly, in the same month, Bristol was short-listed as one of eight cities amongst thirty-five applicants for the title of European Green Capital 2010 (the eventual winner was Stockholm). The dominant narrative of Bristol's bid – which was opportunistic and led by Bristol City Council – was of a green, cohesive city in terms of organisational commitment and civic-society networks. However, it foregrounded primarily

technocratic knowledge, the capacity of the local authority to audit Bristol's past achievements and plans. There was also a strong aspiration to benchmark Bristol's progress against good practice in Europe: 'Bristol was beginning to get this reputation nationally as the greenest in the UK – you've got to caveat that massively – and we wanted to know how we measured up on a European level' (BGCP co-ordinator).

The perceived 'PR' triumph of achieving short-listing in the 2010 EGCA galvanised stakeholders within Bristol and provided a foundation for further bids in which the BGCP would play a far more pivotal role. The partnership itself had evolved from its origins as a small group to a network with more than 800 public, private and third-sector members. Participation in the EGCA thus provided a critical focus for local stakeholders:

> the competition was a distraction, but now it's an important motivating factor. Most people need to distil things into very simple ideas. They don't want complexity. The Green Capital competition provides a simple, short-term horizon. The big-picture narratives will sustain big-picture people, but we also need short-term things. What will we do tomorrow? (Local government manager)

The language of partnership and citizen participation was strengthened in Bristol's subsequent EGCA submissions. The nature and scope of the bids instrumentally followed the EGCA assessment criteria. The evaluation indicator 'Governance', for example, required environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions of urban life to be integrated for successful urban management.[1] A logic of 'co-production' emerged which valorised multiple forms of knowledge, the discursive rationality of the BGCP to convene the broader public conversation on the green agenda, to create the political 'space' that the technocratic rationality of the local authority could duly exploit. The process nonetheless remained very 'scientific' in terms of metrics permitted for recording and forecasting carbon emissions.

The second bid (2011) placed far greater emphasis on partnership and community capacity building, with a prominent role afforded to the BGCP. In the application, the city council highlighted the importance of working with industrial and commercial partners in the BGCP, an ongoing programme of awareness-raising and practical projects with citizens. The city actively engaged with citizens on noise issues, recognising the importance of their perception of noise, which was deemed very good practice by the European Commission. It emphasised some of the active bottom-up community-led innovation initiatives, including, for example, markets, a local exchange and trading (LET) currency system, festivals and an energy cooperative.

The third (successful) bid was built on a city-wide consultation process, facilitated by the city council, the BGCP and ARUP, in which individual citizens could register

1 See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/EGCA_EGLA_Rules_of_Contest.pdf (accessed 27 March 2020), 37.

their support online. With the 2015 application, the growing engagement with alternative actors in the city became more apparent in the co-creation of the bid. The vision statement was for a green, inclusionary and diverse city. The award would act as a catalyst to encourage existing green activity in Bristol. Beyond this, the aims and objectives of the project were not stated with any degree of precision. Bristol developed strong partnerships with a range of stakeholders, encompassing surrounding municipalities, universities, businesses and communities. There was a strong community involvement focusing on waste reduction and recycling of various waste streams, including waste electrical and electronic equipment, bikes and furniture.

In May 2014, Bristol City Council established a new company, Bristol 2015 Ltd, to project manage the implementation of Bristol's year as European Green Capital in 2015. This is a typical event-delivery structure, mirroring, for example, Liverpool's stewardship of the European Capital of Culture (2008). The relationship between Bristol 2015 and the BGCP has not been always clear or free of tension. Bristol 2015 was set up as a delivery vehicle for the challenges of a 'marketing and events'-type year but there has been some confusion, and indeed tension, over what the relationship was between the one-off landmark of '2015' and the established longer-term process of encouraging behaviour change locally:

> there is an understanding that the 2015 Company is not there to do long-term strategic and structural change, and that that has meant that the relationship with the partnership has steadily improved from what was quite definitely at that point a very difficult space – fundamentally because the partnership wanted it to be all about structure and strategy and the 2015 company wanted it all to be about events and marketing. (BGCP co-ordinator)

The objectives of Bristol's year as European Green Capital (2015) were:

1 local empowerment,
2 sustainability leadership (presenting Bristol as an exemplar of sustainable urban living),
3 enhancing Bristol's international profile and
4 financial leverage (the EGCA is funded wholly from local and/or national, rather than European Union, sources).

The total marketing and events budget for 2015 amounted to £12 million – £7 million funded by HM Government, £1 million by Bristol City Council, and the balance through private-sector sponsorship. The programme of activities for 2015, in contrast to high-profile mega-events, was characterised by a large number of small projects, many of which were very local in scope. These included a programme to award small grants to community groups active in food, transport and energy innovation; projects designed to encourage behaviour change on the part of Bristol citizens and businesses; educational projects (e.g. provision of green lesson plans and field trips for

local schools); and awareness raising through arts and culture. The principal output of 2015 has been the 'Bristol Method', an online knowledge-transfer platform comprising a series of modules presented as a 'how-to' guide on different thematic issues such as economy, energy and transport.

In 2014, the BGCP was registered as an independent community-interest company and became, formally, a social enterprise. Bristol City Council has continued to fund the partnership to explore how to run the BGCP as an independent legacy organisation after 2015. The European Commission does not provide for a formal evaluation of EGCA outcomes; assessments are conducted locally. The outcomes of 2015 have thus been lauded within Bristol itself (Bristol, 2015; 2016; Bristol City Council, 2016) but are difficult to quantify given the lack of specific objectives and baseline against which to measure 'success' (Bundred, 2016). It has been recognised that the year 2015 is only the beginning of a long-term strategy for the city:

> One of our own success criteria for our contribution to Bristol 2015 was that we created genuine momentum for change. There's no doubt that's happened, creating a very real sense that the work doesn't stop here. (BGCP co-ordinator)

Discussion: Bristol as exemplar of reflexive governance

Bristol's success in securing European Green Capital status in 2015 represents a prima facie triumph for a city in which, as noted above, the forging of collaborative relationships, reflective or otherwise, has historically proved a formidable challenge. However, to what extent does the BGCP represent an exemplar of reflexive governance?

First, we were seeking evidence, in the Bristol context, of equivalence afforded in governance to process and outcomes. The BGCP has provided a deliberative space for Bristol, a crucible in which different forms of stakeholder knowledge are applied to the (re)consideration of the challenge of sustainable urban development and potential response(s), consistent with the ideal of reflexive governance – 'if you've got something to say, join' (local authority manager). The 800-plus members of the BGCP are required to pledge support for the broadly defined objective of realising a 'low-carbon city with a high quality of life', but beyond this the partnership makes no attempt to force a consensus or singular vision. The primary challenge for the BGCP has not been to ensure that all members communicate with a single voice but to ensure that the aggregate voice achieves impact; that is, influence within each partner's *particular* constituency (e.g. business, workforce, networks, society). The obvious analogy is with a political party:

> you're unlikely to agree with every bit of the manifesto but you are happy to sign up to it on the basis that you know that it has the potential to be generally influential to the

> left or the right in the direction of travel that you're seeking to go. I actually think the biggest challenge that we're trying to address with the partnership is actually making sure that it has a voice that is influential as opposed to a voice which is just a set of conversations that never really impact the general direction of the city towards a more sustainable green future. (BGCP coordinator)

The governance of the BGCP thus acknowledges that problems are best understood through multiple frames rather than the pursuit of all-inclusive consensus (BGCP coordinator). In this respect, the BGCP represents a good example of 'reflexive action' as defined by Termeer et al. (2015), one that is not consensus-based, as per many conceptualisations of deliberative governance (cf. Healey, 2005), but one in which participants strive for a flexible process that is meaningful from multiple perspectives, for multiple reasons (Daviter, 2017).

Second, the existence of reflexive-governance forms suggests a process in which multiple forms of knowledge are valorised. The BGCP is notable for its exceptionally diverse membership; 'I do not know of another partnership in which a multinational German insurance company would sit down with a dreadlocked activist from St Pauls' (BGCP co-ordinator). However, the BGCP is essentially a confederation of sector-specific and/or thematic networks. There is not, therefore, a homogeneity of commitment and participation on the part of all partners to all activities: 'discussions about renewable energy in Bristol attract many suits and few community activists, whereas meetings about local food attract few suits' (local authority manager). More fundamentally, BGCP membership is drawn largely from organisations that exhibit an a priori interest in the 'green' agenda. The core BGCP members are the local authority and other statutory agencies, utilities, energy suppliers, a multitude of civil-society environmental groups and *selected* corporate interests. If the BGCP is, indeed, a crucible of reflexive governance, as we have argued above, it is a highly *bounded* one in which a multiplicity of *specifically environmental* rationalities is disseminated. It is in this respect that the Bristol experience falls most short of the reflexive-governance ideal. There is, for example, a strong representation of multinational civil engineering interests. This is, perhaps, a legacy of the traditional framing of the sustainable-city discourse as an infrastructure investment challenge and, thus, appropriated by engineers, but it is also indicative of the direction of travel of that discourse: 'that is where they [civil engineering consultancies] have got to go … whether it's systems thinking or soft infrastructure it is equally important as how the big concrete pipes are that carry the sewage water out' (BGCP co-ordinator). Broader business engagement has been uneven. Respondents acknowledged that firms are primarily interested in shareholder value; if there is a business case for engaging with the green agenda, they will do so. Likewise, and notwithstanding certain high-profile projects such as Knowle West Media Centre and Easton and Lawrence Hill Neighbourhood Management, the BGCP has achieved limited salience within the more disadvantaged communities

of Bristol where there is a fundamental dissonance between the aspiration to achieve success on the European stage and the preoccupation with immediate questions of well-being in neighbourhoods afflicted by multiple deprivation:

> the environmental dimension of sustainable development has no purchase in poor areas. Social justice has a strong purchase. You have to sell the city as a just city first. This is a difficult sell as it means giving things up. The only things that have relevance in an environmental sense are lighting and safe play areas. Housing is seen as a nice place to live. Only the planner thinks in terms of high-density housing. (Regeneration worker)

Third, the manifestation of an ongoing process of organisational adaptation is central to reflexive governance. We have argued that the EGCA competitive process has played a crucial catalytic role in cultivating new links between the statutory, business, voluntary and community sectors:

> there's been a wonderful symbiosis between the growth and the development of the partnership, and the bidding process. The partnership started before the EGC award was even dreamt of. That's quite important, and basically the partnership has grown as a result of us bidding again and again, but also the partnership growing has helped us bid again and again and again, so it's very, very symbiotic. (BGCP coordinator)

Leadership and collaboration in Bristol are often dependent on the imposition of formal requirements of partnership working by external actors such as, in this case, the European Union. The EGCA provides a clear(er) focus but requires acceptance of the 'rules of the game' of the European Commission and its conceptualisation of the sustainable city, an example of 'steering from a distance' (Epstein, 2015). Bristol's participation in the EGCA thus suggests a strategy of narrowing (in the short term, at least) the scope of the task of realising a low-carbon city with a high quality of life to make it more manageable, often aligning the task with a pre-existing strategy, structure and processes, that of the EGCA (Epstein, 2015).

The BGCP process has evolved, in the context of the EGCA, as a bona fide example of co-production – as opposed to co-decision, as the local authority retains formal political authority – between the BGCP, Bristol City Council and other stakeholders. In practice, the European Commission is interested, initially, in the municipality and its associated green evidence base. The first EGCA bid was opportunistic and, fundamentally, local-authority-led, interpreting the EGCA bid process as essentially an audit trail focusing on past achievements and future plans. Bristol's submission was premised on an optimistic assumption that the capacity of English local authorities to gather data would prove an asset. The secondary task is that of demonstrating to the Commission the city's competence in facilitating citizen action. There is, however, no doubt that the BGCP has played a crucial role in convening the conversation on

the green-capital narrative within the city at large, one that the local authority, given its politically constrained space (evidenced by local opposition to, for example, high-profile mayoral projects such as resident parking zones and twenty-miles-per-hour speed-limit zones), is unable to play. The BGCP, with its pioneering green edge, has thus been fundamental in terms of creating a political space – foregrounding, initially, other dimensions of behaviour change, e.g. cycling and recycling – into which the council, with its statutory powers and resources (and, in due course, the public at large) can manoeuvre.

Conclusions

Returning to the debate on urban futures, we have argued that Bristol represents, perhaps, an atypical approach to the 'urban sustainability fix' in the UK context. It is important to reaffirm the influence of local context here. A prosperous city, Bristol has escaped the nadir of de-industrialisation and environmental degradation experienced elsewhere. The salience of the green-capital narrative partly reflects this affluence (Brownlee, 2011), and a historic complacency about the ongoing economic success of the city, evidenced by the paucity of a classic pro-growth urban regime. It also reflects the confluence of multiple contextual social and political factors; the influence of the local environmental lobby, with its origins in decades of activism and in an established professional elite; the intellectual capital provided by a critical mass of national environmental actors locally; and the disposition of the political and officer elite within Bristol City Council. In Bristol, while differences of substance between the local authority and 'green' partners exist, in contrast to other UK cities, there is less a sense that environmental interests are left to oppose an apparently antagonistic council from the margins (cf. While et al., 2004). In short, Bristol represents a prima facie ideal incubator for the processes that characterise reflexive governance.

However, whilst it is possible to argue that Bristol Green Capital Partnership, within the framework of governance it sets for itself, displays many 'reflexive' characteristics, it provides a discursive space, an interface for diverse voices and forms of knowledge that eschews the pursuit of simple consensus. It has exhibited considerable institutional adaptability, partly in response to the exhortations of the European Green Capital competition, evolving from a small core group of stakeholders, to a large and heterogeneous membership organisation, to a community-interest company – the space within which it has achieved this metamorphosis remains tightly bounded, populated primarily by actors that exhibit an a priori interest in the 'green' agenda, rather than being representative of mainstream public or business opinion. Our findings, therefore, challenge Bristol's self-image as a 'green capital' (cf. Brownlee, 2011). They also shed light on the utility of the theory of reflexive governance in this context. The framework sets out a practical approach to inclusion, learning and

adaptation. However, its focus on process, discourse and inclusion is achieved at the expense of a broader consideration of tensions that define the actions required to realise the sustainability of cities, including Bristol.

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