

Can climate commissions own a city's future?

Dr Matthew Lane

16 December 2019

A question long pondered by urban theorists such as myself, ownership of the city as a spatial, material, and conceptual entity finds increased practical resonance in the ambitions of the ESRC-funded [PCAN](#) network.

The adoption of place-based “Mini Stern Reviews” (such [as this one](#) for Bristol), and the establishment of city decarbonisation “roadmaps” (following the interest in the [Leeds carbon roadmap](#), produced by PCAN co-investigator [Andy Gouldson](#) and team at the University of Leeds), has meant issues of ownership and responsibility loom large as civil servants and academics alike continue to digest the magnitude of the challenge before us. This has been brought into sharp focus by climate emergency declarations in places across the UK, often with considerably more ambitious self-imposed deadlines for achieving net zero emissions than the government’s 2050 target.

If “place” is going to be the basis for climate action, however, we must confront the contested nature of its meaning as it pertains to the management of urban climate futures. Is placed-based action to climate commissions what governance is to government?

The question of who owns the city and its future was a central topic at the recent PCAN (Place-Based Climate Action Network) researchers meeting, held at the London School of Economics and Political Science on 26 November 2019. A platform to harness the critical energy of academics involved with PCAN, the research team is focusing on both the institutional contexts from which the climate commissions emerge, and how they ultimately come to affect the places and communities they seek to represent.

The first climate commission was formed in [Leeds](#) in 2017, prior to the establishment of PCAN. Building on the Leeds model, the five-year ESRC network will see further new climate commissions established in Belfast and Edinburgh in January 2020. Closely following the process of commission formation in the three cities, the recently established PCAN ethnography working group will explore the following themes across the cities: “Achieving Independence”; “Maximising Representation”; “Formulating Institutionality”; and “Understanding Affect”.

Quantifying the past and the future

Broaching each of the above themes, as the city of Edinburgh’s decarbonisation roadmap continues to take shape, attention has turned to the question of achievability, and to the role of the [soon-to-be-established climate commission](#) in guiding, steering and managing this agenda. Its relationship to the city government is, therefore, a complex one, to be characterised by the requisite balance of independence and accountability. How to achieve this balance was central to the debate that took place in Edinburgh City Chambers on the afternoon of Friday 25 October 2019.

“It might be sensible for the council not to run it at all and for the commission to be entirely independent.”

These words, from a member of the city’s policy and sustainability committee, were instigated by the presentation by PCAN team members of the Mini Stern Review for Edinburgh, which outlines the harsh reality of the city’s aspirations to achieve net zero by 2030. Assembled to observe the long-awaited official announcement of the proposed climate commission, the reflections were met with surprise by those in the public gallery. Confronted with a series of reports detailing the magnitude of the task in front of them however, it is perhaps understandable for a city government to seek ways to share in the responsibility for the identification of solutions to problems that themselves have long lacked clear ownership.

The notion that climate change and unsustainable levels of urbanisation are challenges that must be governed proactively is a considerably more radical break from the traditional role of local authorities than is often assumed.

As a result, against the backdrop of both squeezed resource bases – still enveloped by the lingering shadow of austerity – and a mandate for devolution as the key to unlocking socio-technical innovation at the local scale, civil society's engagement with climate governance finds support across the political spectrum. However, in pursuing an aspiration for independence, while devolution is something well understood from the perspective of the state, considerably less thought and attention has been paid to how this might play out across other parts of society, particularly within private sector organisations. Organisations, moreover, for whom the concept of "place" has long been subordinate to the more financially determinable (and asset-valuable) notion of *location*.

Owning the past and the future

The creation of a new institution, such as a city climate commission, requires us to be particularly attentive to the embeddedness of existing arrangements in order both to build on those that are most productive for our cities, and to engage head on with those that are the least.

With this in mind, what, in the context of a place-based climate commission, are we looking for when we seek to establish adequate representation? Should Edinburgh and Belfast, aided by their relationship to Leeds, seek a representative model, broadly capturing key industry sectors while ensuring a suitably geographical spread in its membership? Alternatively, should a climate commission focus its attention on the most carbon-intensive organisations currently present within the city, along with stakeholders who have already started to drive systemic and progressive change in their communities? While the answer to this question is likely to be both, it speaks to the need for closer engagement with our understanding not just of who owns any particular city, but of what "the city" actually is.

Are – to illustrate the above point – Belfast, Edinburgh, and Leeds merely derivatives of a well defined, and shared, understanding of the city as a concept (both sustainable and unsustainable), circulated from place to place? Or are they complex and uniquely material places in and of themselves, upon which we then seek to map our own preconceptions about what a city is and what it should become? This is a crucial question that we must confront as we aspire to partake in the practice of place-based climate governance.

In the meantime, might we be inclined to revisit the temporalities often associated with institutional beginnings and temper our ambitions in accordance with the conceptual magnitude of the task we have set? As the ongoing reshaping and adaptive capacity of the [Leeds Climate Commission](#) serves to demonstrate, these are initiatives requiring constant care and attention, ill-suited to well-meaning but outdated attempts to identify clear cause and effect relationships, easily transferable to networked partner cities near and far.

Framed not merely as the starting gun for action then, but as the finish line for decades (even centuries), of urban theorising, might we, in the form of climate commissions, have found an entity with a real mandate for ownership of the future? Only time will tell. For now, there is much work, and much learning, to be done.

Dr Matthew Lane is a post-doctoral researcher in urban climate governance at the University of Edinburgh, School of Geosciences. With a background in urban theory, his research examines the geo-political challenges posed to spatial urban planning and governance by discourses of sustainability. He will be leading the recently established PCAN Ethnography working group that will examine the ongoing evolution of climate commissions across the three cities of Belfast, Edinburgh, and Leeds.