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Examining Participatory Governance in a Devolving UK: insights from national parks policy development in Northern Ireland

Abstract

This paper provides a contemporary examination of policy making and participatory practice in the context of devolving governance in the UK. The paper takes Northern Ireland as its focus and is particularly timely considering the context of devolved governance, the ongoing transition from conflict to relative peace and the potential for rejuvenating democracy through participatory governance. The paper concentrates on one particular policy process, namely the attempted designation of a national park in the Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). A thematic analysis of qualitative data is drawn upon to analyse the structural factors that framed the policy making process and the role of power in determining how consultation processes were initiated, designed and undertaken. Using Lukes' model (1974; 2005) as an analytical framework, power is shown to manifest at multiple levels within the policy making process to influence policy outcomes. The paper reveals how the persistence of a top-down approach to policy development combined with a highly parochial political outlook undermined attempts to designate a Mourne National Park. The paper concludes that, given the immaturity of recently devolved government in Northern Ireland, in this instance, the democratising intentions of devolved governance have not been met. This has implications for Northern Ireland's recent reform of public administration which devolves certain planning powers to local authority level, and the management of the internationally significant Mourne landscape.

Key Words:

National parks, governance, power, public consultation, partnerships

Introduction

National parks were designated in England and Wales throughout the second half of the twentieth century (under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act). Despite recommendations since 1947, no national parks were designated in Scotland or Northern Ireland during this period due primarily to landowner opposition and political circumstances (Shoard, 1987; Bell and Stockdale, 2015a). The prospect of national park designation gained renewed impetus in both regions following political devolution in 1999 when the then UK government devolved specific powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Changes in the fields of environmental and political governance provide the context within which a new national parks agenda emerged. The notion that the process of governing society has undergone a conceptual shift from government to governance has been widely debated (Edwards, 2001; Goodwin, 2008; Lockwood, 2010; Davies, 2011; Stoker, 2011; Hall, 2011; Eagles et al., 2013). In the UK, New Labour (1997) embraced a governance agenda as the drive for more participative modes of governing gained momentum over the course of the 1990s (Healey, 2006). Decentralisation, through political devolution (1998-1999) for the UK regions, provided an opportunity to engrain participatory processes in governing practice and enable more locally tailored policy development.

National park designation emerged as one of the first policy agendas in the newly devolved regions of Scotland and Northern Ireland (Rettie, 2001; MNPWP, 2007). Even prior to devolution (1999), Donald Dewar, the then Secretary of State for Scotland, declared his wish to designate Scottish national parks (The Scottish Office, 1997). A preliminary national parks consultation across Scotland (February 1998) informed detailed national park proposals

(SNH, 1999). In the first few months of the newly devolved Scottish Parliament a National Park Bill was consulted upon and debated before being passed as the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 (Rettie, 2001). Site specific consultation was later employed to inform the designation of two national parks in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs (2003) and the Cairngorms (2004). Meanwhile, an attempt to introduce Northern Ireland's first national park in the Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) failed. This research analyses the Mourne national park policy process to examine the practice of participatory governance in Northern Ireland in the early years of devolution. The empirical analysis focusses on the initiation of the national parks agenda in 2002, before examining the formal consultation process undertaken between 1st September 2006 and 31st January 2007. Building on previous academic critiques of the Mourne policy process (Bell and Stockdale, 2015a; 2015b; 2015c) the emphasis here is on an additional aspect; namely, the influence of wider structuring forces on participatory governance, in particular the role of power in framing how consultation processes were initiated, designed and undertaken. These structural factors provide the vehicle for examining power in this paper and are explored under three overarching themes: initiating national parks policy, governance structures and setting of the agenda and the consultation process and government's response. The findings help to shed light on the likely success of Northern Ireland's recent reform of public administration which devolved planning powers to new local councils (Knox, 2006).

The remainder of the paper is set out in five parts. In the first part, the governing context within which the new national parks agenda (post 1997) emerged in the UK is discussed. In the second part, literature relating to public participation and partnerships is reviewed and a framework for analysing power outlined. Part three provides the context for the Mourne case study and explains the methodology adopted (a qualitative case study approach). The

fourth part empirically examines the three themes listed above. In the final part, the key findings are reviewed and wider inferences are drawn about politics, power and decision making in the context of a devolving UK, specifically with regard to the most recent reform of public administration in Northern Ireland and prospects for the future management of Northern Ireland's significant landscapes.

Evolving Forms of Governing in the UK

The traditional 'Westminster model' of Government and politics in the UK transmits legislative authority from the Crown through the UK Parliament, incorporating parliamentary sovereignty, accountability through elections and strong cabinet government (Rhodes, 1997). Therefore, 'government' implies national level processes and top-down managerial processes (Stoker, 1998). The term 'governance' emerged during the 1980s to describe how local government authority was being compromised by the involvement of non-state actors in governing processes (Rhodes, 1996; Jessop, 1997; Stoker, 1998). In the absence of a commonly agreed definition, governance is aptly referred to by Rhodes (1996: 652-653), as a term to describe the 'new process of governing...or the new method by which society is governed'. Governance is often associated with the involvement of non-state actors in the process of governing which is realised through partnerships and public participation (Eagles, 2013; Griffin, 2012; Cornwall, 2002; Stoker, 1998). The governance agenda came to prominence with the election of New Labour (1997) who promised democratic renewal through constitutional change and more participative forms of governing.

Political devolution to the UK regions (1998-1999) potentially signalled the beginning of a new political culture aimed at a more inclusive, locally responsive, proximate and accountable form of politics (Mitchell, 2000; Adams and Robinson, 2002). However, 'there

was no parallel in Northern Ireland for the extensive debate in Scotland about how devolution might usher in a new, more democratic, political style' (Wilford and Wilson, 2001: 6). In Northern Ireland, devolution was essentially driven by a desire to end sectarian conflict. Amidst escalating civil conflict, from 1972 power was removed from local politicians and local government in Northern Ireland (Knox, 2012) as the region was ruled from Westminster (Direct Rule). The Belfast Agreement (or Good Friday Agreement), signed in 1998, resulted in the return of some political powers to Northern Ireland in December 1999. Following a series of setbacks and Northern Ireland Assembly suspensions, devolved government was finally secured in 2007 following the St. Andrew's Agreement. Economic, environmental and land use planning were amongst the legislative matters transferred to the devolved institutions. Within a Northern Ireland context devolution has progressed a stage further with certain planning powers devolved from a central agency (Planning Service NI) to a new structure of local government in 2015.

Fundamental to the notion of a shift from 'government to governance' is understanding how dominant a position the state adopts within the political process (Peters, 2000; Pierre, 2000). While 'governance tends to be associated with more informal, decentralised and pluralistic decision making structures' (Griffin, 2012: 210), Davies (2011: 60) detected little evidence of governments devolving substantial power to governance networks. Marsh et al. (2003: 332) caution:

'Politics may be characterised by plurality' but it does not necessarily 'reflect a pluralist power structure' (cited in Griffin, 2012: 215).

Participation and inclusion can confuse who has authority as decision making can become further removed from elected political structures (Skelcher, 2000; Gaventa, 2006). Given this

accountability gap or ‘democratic deficit’ (Rhodes, 2000: 84) new forms of governing can work against the enhancement of democracy. For example, Swyngedouw (2005) claimed that governance is mired by constraints on who is allowed to participate, opaque and diffuse representation and unclear lines of accountability. Understanding the relationship and interactions between the state and civil society requires close attention to governance structures and appreciation of the diverse ways in which power can manifest during the governing process.

Public Ponsultation, Partnerships and Power

While participatory governance predates Labour’s constitutional change agenda, political devolution in the UK ‘provided an opportunity to institutionalise [participatory] techniques as legitimate means of developing policy’ (Thompson, 2003: 54). This opportunity was even more relevant to Northern Ireland where citizen engagement within the political/ democratic process has traditionally been constrained (Wilford and Wilson, 2001; McAlister, 2010). The erosion of local political accountability through ‘Direct Rule’ is said to have created a ‘democratic void’ (McAlister, 2010: 544) or ‘democratic deficit’ (Wilford and Wilson, 2001: 3; Wilford et al., 2003). While it may be false to assume that ‘opportunities for participation were relatively non-existent during the period of direct rule’ (McAlister, 2010: 539) there do appear to have been fewer opportunities (relative to other parts of the UK) for civic society to influence the political process. The Northern Ireland Assembly Engagement Strategy (NIA, 2010: 5) recognised that, due to Direct Rule, parliamentary engagement is a relatively new phenomenon for Northern Ireland with a ‘perceived disconnect between politics/democracy and the public’. In this context, devolution and the creation of a regional Northern Ireland Assembly, offered an opportunity to deliver democratic renewal, through more proximate and locally responsive governing. Examination of the Mourne national parks policy process

provides insights into the democratic integrity of governance practice in this post devolution era. The emergence of a national parks agenda corresponded with a period of upheaval in terms of local government reorganisation in Northern Ireland. A Review of Public Administration (RPA) was launched by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2002 to evaluate arrangements for public administration and make recommendations for more accountable and effective public service delivery (Colhoun, 2007). However, implementation of RPA was a 'tortuous' process dogged by sectarian politics (Knox, 2012: 119). For example, an originally proposed seven council model was widely criticised for its potential to contribute to the 'balkanisation' of Northern Ireland through a regional East/West sectarian split (Birrell, 2008; Knox, 2008). Meanwhile, the recommendation by the Independent Boundaries Commissioner to incorporate some districts into Belfast City Council sparked disagreement and ensuing deadlock between Northern Ireland's two largest political parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein (Knox, 2012). The nationalist Sinn Fein accused the DUP of attempting to gerrymander boundaries as proposed by the independent commissioner, out of fear of nationalist control of Belfast City Council (O'Hara, 2010). Eleven new super councils eventually became operational in April 2015 with local government (i.e. the super councils) assuming responsibility for the majority of key planning functions (which were previously administered centrally through Planning NI - formerly the Planning Service). Through 'community planning' councils are required to genuinely engage communities and individuals to create a vision for their area and make more locally responsive decisions (Cave, 2012).

Citizen engagement can depend on the compliance of actors with the 'rules of engagement' as set out by the public sector (Clegg, 1989; McAreavey, 2008; Taylor, 2003). Public consultation can provide a mechanism for taking the 'pulse of public opinion' or become a

voice gathering exercise to ‘secure legitimacy for policies’ (tokenism) (Cornwall, 2004: 2). According to Shand and Arnberg (1996), public consultation is initiated from ‘the assumption that governments will decide’ (Bishop and Davis, 2002: 22). This resonates with the thoughts of Arnstein (1969: 216 and 219): ‘it [consultation] offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account’. While certain stakeholders are likely to be more powerful on particular issues, government often holds the ‘real’ power to determine the weight given to particular issues during policy making.

Consultation should therefore be ‘predicated on an acceptance by policy makers that those being consulted have the capacity not only to comment, but to influence the final disposition of the policy’ (Bishop and Davis, 2002: 22). In Northern Ireland, Murray (2010: 3) claims:

‘citizen input is openly encouraged, [and] facilitated...but arguably behind the scenes the levers of cautious control are at work in steering policy agendas towards particular views of the public interest’.

Elsewhere too, the degree to which public consultation outcomes fed through to inform policy decisions has also been questioned. For example, the relationship between the consultation outcome and the design of the Cairngorms National Park (CNP) has been widely critiqued (Illsley and Richardson, 2004; Ferguson and Forster, 2005; Thompson, 2006; Rettie, 2010). Key features of the Cairngorms National Park (CNP) were deemed to have been based less on the results of consultation and more on political bargaining between Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Local Authorities, District councillors and Scottish Ministers. Rettie (2001) concluded that ultimate power rested with the ‘political arm of society’ in deciding critical aspects of the CNP (Rettie, 2010: 134-137), sharing the views of

Illsley and Richardson (2004: 237): ‘the consultation was merely an attempt to persuade participants of the legitimacy of a position predetermined by political considerations’.

Given that the consultation process was conducted through a partnership structure (the Mourne National Park Working Party), it is necessary to review literature relating to the democratic credentials of partnerships. Partnership working has become a fundamental component of UK national park management (UKANPA, 2010). Even in the USA, the country that first introduced wilderness, state owned parks, ‘partnership parks’ have adopted public-private partnerships to guide management (Hamin, 2001: 124). However, a critical literature has emerged in a variety of contexts concerning the apparent ‘fragile democratic legitimacy of partnerships’ (Sable, 1996: 96). Notwithstanding the partnership approach adopted by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), Stockdale and Barker (2009) detected low levels of community inclusion in the early years of national park designation.

Moreover, government invitation to all stakeholders to participate will not necessarily lead to equal participation as the legitimacy of partnerships can be undermined by issues of power, representation, lack of accountability and resource differentials (Taylor, 2003; 2007). First, the initiator of the partnership is afforded disproportionate influence in choosing who is invited to participate; accordingly, ‘an exercise of power is evident in the very construction of the partnership’ (Shortall, 2004: 117).

Second, partnerships can suffer from an accountability gap as responsibility and power is transferred away from elected political structures to unelected partnership members (Skelcher, 2000). While partnership board places are sometimes reserved for locally elected representatives, this practice varies considerably (Skelcher, 2000). Furthermore, the

partnerships can contribute to the growing power base of particular actors (Shortall, 2004; Woods, 2005a) as individuals frequently occupy positions on several partnership boards ('usual suspects'). Additional issues emerge concerning whom representatives speak for and what interests they represent within the community (Derkzen and Bock, 2009).

Third, resource differentials can determine the relative influence of partners (Taylor, 2007). While the control of resources and land traditionally afforded status, wealth and power to the landowning elite (Woods, 1997), the new system of rural governance has been said to give disproportionate influence to funders and partnership managers (Woods, 2005b). According to Woods (2005b: 170), all modes of governing privilege certain voices over others and 'concentrate power in line with the distribution of valued resources'. Given the potential for tension and power struggles between partnership members with disparate interests and agendas it is necessary to appreciate the influence of power within the partnership setting (Shortall, 2004; Derkzen et al., 2008; Derkzen and Bock, 2009). Equally, the influence of power is likely to be evident within the consultation arena.

In order to understand the diverse manifestations of power, Lukes' (1974; 2005) three stage model of power, which builds on previous power studies, is adopted in this paper as a framework for guiding power analysis. The first dimension, based on the work of Dahl (1957), focused on *overt* power examining observable behaviour and decision making. The second dimension, centering on the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1962), concentrated on *covert* power and the suppression of difficult issues through controlling the agenda. Bachrach and Baratz (1962: 6) claim that power can be exercised by 'confining the scope of decision-making to relatively "safe" issues' (cited in Lukes, 1974: 18). Therefore as Barnes (1988) explains, power can be exercised without it being openly observable through conflict;

people may have the capacity to exert power but choose not to exercise it. In a rural development context, McAreavey (2006: 100) witnessed power in the second dimension in the form of power tactics to influence and control the agenda and determine how, and whether, decisions are reached. Furthermore, the second dimension of power was shown by Sturzager (2010) to limit new housing in the English countryside as the less powerful, typically those not on parish councils, were excluded from decision making processes, thus allowing powerful anti-development interests to dominate..

Lukes (1974) proposed a third view of power claiming: ‘the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place’ (p23). In a rural governance context powerful actors not only have the potential to suppress involvement but they can shape the views of those who do participate (the powerless). Typically the powerless can be unaware that their real interests are being threatened and therefore make no attempt to resist the powerful (*latent* aspect of power). Sturzager (2010) and Sturzager and Shucksmith (2011) demonstrated how in particular localities in rural England the elite have succeeded in limiting new rural housing provision by embracing the dominant sustainability ideology to define what constitutes legitimate development. As a result, the powerless (often those on lower incomes) were said to support the sustainability concept while being unaware that they are being disadvantaged by it (through limiting the availability of affordable housing).

Lukes (2005) revisited and developed his view of third dimensional power, taking account of criticisms leveled at his thesis, particularly concerning the structural aspects of power (Isaac, 1987; Hayward, 1998). Lukes clarified his thoughts on the influence of structure: ‘social life can only be properly understood as an interplay of *power* and *structure* to make choices and

pursue strategies within given limits' (2005: 69). According to McAreevey (2008), Lukes' (2005) view of power is appropriate for analysing power in rural development as it recognises individual power relations, framed within wider social structures. McAreevey (2008: 48) stated:

'power is about individuals *and groups* having the means and the ability to achieve goals that further their interests, all in the context of this larger social system'.

Lukes' (2005) updated work recognises that individual action can be constrained or enabled by wider structuring forces (Isaac, 1987; Hayward, 1998), such as socio-political context, social hierarchy or participatory formats, which provides an ideal framework for examining power within governance structures and specifically the role of power in influencing the outcome of the Mourne national park policy process.

Local Context and Methodology

The empirical findings presented in this paper are drawn from qualitative data collected from a Northern Ireland case study, namely the proposal to designate the Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) as Northern Ireland's first national park. Before detailing the methodology employed an overview of the local Mourne context is provided.

The Mournes is one of eight AONB's in Northern Ireland. The area is a highly contested landscape accommodating a plethora of competing land uses. While the Mourne AONB is protected by a range of national, European and International designations, over 50,000 people inhabit the area (MNPWP, 2007). The Mourne Trustees (Fourteen Trustee groups claim to legally own approximately 25,000 acres (Mourne Trustees, 2010), alongside the Water Service, the Forest Service and the National Trust, own large tracts of the High Mournes.

However, the entire area has a highly fractured land ownership pattern consisting of over 1500 private farm holdings (53% of land in the Mourne is actively farmed) with an average farm size of 15 hectares (CAAN, 2007). With the exception of government and National Trust owned land and a number of short Rights of Way (approximately 18 kilometres, with some permissive pathways (Mitchell, 1999)), public access to private land in the Mourne is de facto, granted by custom rather than legal right (CAAN, 2007). Occupiers Liability is therefore a concern amongst some Mourne landowners and the way in which land has been held in families for several generations and in some instances acquired through paying off annuities (Bell and Stockdale, 2015c), has engrained a sense of parochialism and local defensiveness of private land ownership rights, which many perceive national park designation will erode.

Traditional economies in the Mourne include agriculture, fishing, forestry and small scale quarrying, while the area has a rich recreational legacy. With approximately 150,000 visitors per annum, tourism contributes significantly to local employment and business revenue (Buchanan and Partners Ltd. 2006). In addition to localised management pressures arising from intense recreational use of the Mourne (for example, trampling, path erosion and malicious fires (MHT, 2011), quarrying, infrastructural developments, intensive farming and speculative one-off house building threaten the natural heritage of the area (MHT, 2007). The Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT), established in 1997, is an independent private charitable body which works in partnership with local stakeholders to provide for the management of the Mourne AONB. However, the MHT possesses no statutory management powers and in comparison to other parts of the UK are poorly resourced and receive limited protection through the planning system. In this context, the MHT revived the idea of a national park in 1999, proposing a 'celtic national park' for the Mourne (Mitchell, 1999).

This paper examines the governance structures employed to progress national park policy in Northern Ireland, focussing primarily on the wider structural factors that framed the public consultation exercise in the Mourne AONB. Stakeholder feedback from those involved in the consultation exercise (such as organisers, participants or observers) provided the primary data source. Given the importance of ‘preparatory reading’ and ‘exploratory work’ prior to conducting interviews (May, 2001: 132), a range of documentary material was gathered and analysed. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed and interview candidates were identified from the initial documentary analysis and through referral (snowball sampling). Several snowballs were initiated to ensure the interview profile did not comprise interviewees with one particular outlook or belief.

All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Interview participants were offered confidentiality through a process of anonymity. The identity of individuals involved in the research process (for the most part) remains confidential (most interviewees are referred to by their stakeholder grouping). In certain circumstances, following consent from the individual, their identity has been revealed (in such instances interviewees have been referred to by name or organisation).

21 interviews were conducted in the Mournes (2011/12) and the interview sample included: farmers and trustees (3), management body representatives (2), local residents (1), politicians (6), community representatives (1), government officials (2), business and tourism representatives (3), conservationists (2) and consultation facilitators (1).

Given the time lapse between the empirical research (2011/12) and the process (2002-2012) under investigation, it is acknowledged that memory recall was a potential weakness of the interview method. Indeed, post consultation experiences had the potential to distort stakeholder perspectives of the original consultation process. However, the opportunity to examine post-event stakeholder perspectives facilitated a longer-term assessment of the designation process. For example, the time lapse between the public consultation and the interviews allowed a number of interviewees to speak openly, freely and on 'reflection', which facilitated deeper understanding of the consultation. As Richards (1996: 200) sums up:

‘the further from the events they [interviews] are [conducted], the less reliable the information, (though the more willing they may be to talk)’.

Given that the research was concerned with structural and power aspects of the policy process, it was necessary to interview elites, such as those who had an influential role in setting the agenda and defining the parameters of the process (for example, politicians and government officials). As Richards (1996: 199) explains:

‘the whole notion of an elite, implies a group of individuals, who hold, or have held a privileged position in society and...are likely to have had more influence on political outcomes than general members of the public’.

Elite interviews can potentially ‘shed light on the hidden elements of political action that are not clear from analysis of political outcomes, or of other primary sources’ (Tansey, 2009: 7). Conversely, the reliability of elite interview material can be undermined by interviewees who seek to slant their account of particular events (Tansey, 2009). While elite actors provided critical sources of information on the events and processes under investigation, the array of research contacts included in the interview schedule represented a key strength of the research, as the empirical analysis was informed by a breadth of first-hand stakeholder insights.

The data was analysed thematically, following the phases set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). ‘Active’ re-reading of transcripts informed the creation of codes. Data analysis software package (NVivo9) assisted the reconstruction of the data set; some codes were merged and more focussed codes were defined. An original 65 codes were organised into preliminary themes and following a period of reflection a series of overarching themes were confirmed. Three themes relating to structural aspects of the policy process are analysed in this paper: initiating national park policy; governance structures and agenda setting; and the consultation process and government response. In each, the power dynamics between different stakeholders are examined using Lukes’ framework.

Initiating National Parks Policy

While the prospect of national park designation in Northern Ireland was quashed by financial constraints and other political priorities prior to devolution (Bell and Stockdale, 2015a), the Environment Minister (Dermot Nesbitt) in the new Northern Ireland Executive decided behind closed doors to progress a national park designation specifically in the Mourne (BBC, 2002):

“His [Dermot Nesbitt’s] focus was not on should we designate a national park in Northern Ireland, it was we should designate a national park in the Mourne specifically. So as officials we thought that’s fine but we can’t just proceed because you want one” (interview with former Department of the Environment Official).

EUROPARC Consulting, commissioned by the Department of the Environment (DoE), concluded that the Mourne was the most appropriate location (Bungay et al., 2002), which according to a former DoE official, gave the Minister’s proposal some “*credibility*” and

justification. Several stakeholders felt the debate should have been launched at a regional level (as in Scotland) to discuss the principle and merits of national parks for Northern Ireland (to inform draft primary legislation) and identify possible location(s). In the absence of such discussion into the need for a Northern Irish national park and the most suitable location for it, stakeholders perceived the proposed Mourne national park as a ‘done deal’:

“We were wrong in going only for a Mourne national park and localising it in that sense...he [the Minister] panicked the issue, was so positive and so definite that he was announcing the provision for a national park and that immediately created opposition, local farmers etc. felt that this was a done deal...” (Conservationist).

The decision to proceed in the Mourne locality without public input or a regional level debate about the principle of national parks in Northern Ireland generated immediate opposition amongst some Mourne landowners. This hampered the work of the Mourne National Park Working Party (MNPWP), a government appointed committee, who were tasked with undertaking a formal consultation process in the Mournes. Furthermore, the temporary suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly (on 11th February 2002) was deemed to have further hindered progression of national parks policy, principally because it delayed the drafting of primary legislation.

In contrast to Scotland where detailed proposals and legislation (the National Parks (Scotland) Act, 2000) were laid out prior to local consultation (SNH, 2001), the Mourne National Park consultation was launched in the absence of any up-to-date primary legislation. This legislative context directly influenced the level and form of stakeholder engagement during the policy process in the Mournes. The stalling of primary legislation in Northern

Ireland gave Mourne landowners a window of opportunity to oppose and render a national park politically unworkable:

“Government thought they were going to force this upon the people of the Mournes, but some landowners weren’t going to let that happen. We were all aware from an early stage that the correct legislation didn’t exist so that bought people time in a way to start building opposition to make it a political nightmare” (Mourne farmer).

This legislative vacuum, and accordingly lack of detailed information about what a national park would mean for local stakeholders, critically undermined the work of the MNPWP:

“We were sent out there to answer questions we didn’t have an answer to ourselves which left us very much ‘hung out to dry’ because we couldn’t actually tell them [the public] anything” (MNPWP member).

Notably, an absence of information around possible national park structures (eg. aims, management arrangements and planning functions) led to perceived, and at times irrational, fears which were allowed to fester and snowball perpetuating a ‘fear of the unknown’ (Bell and Stockdale, 2009: 317). A farmer commented:

“People in Thailand had rice fields taken off them and turned into golf courses for tourists you know, even though they were short of food...things like that were telling me national parks weren’t a good thing”.

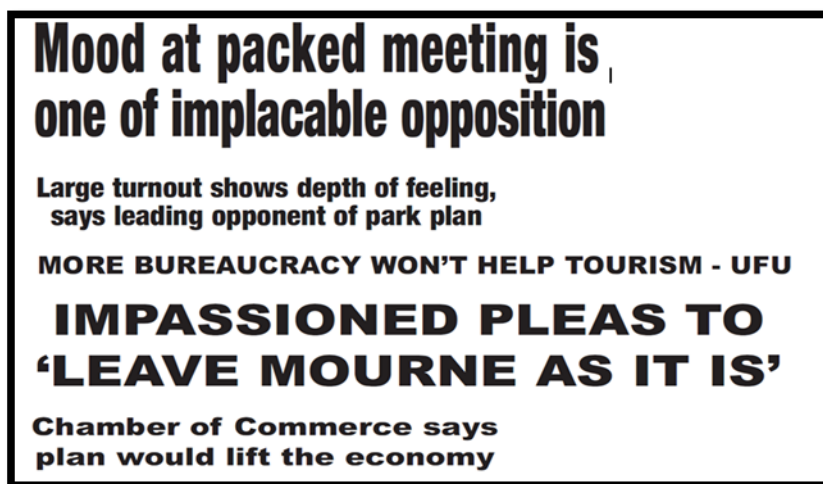
National park opponents were able to prey on this level of uncertainty and lack of detail about what a national park would mean in practice by supposedly spreading mistruths: *“As many times as you reassured them they wouldn’t listen, they wanted to keep these fears floating about in order to build up their propaganda machine”* (MNPWP member). A number of

interviewees even felt that the local media was utilised by national park opponents to capitalise on this local uncertainty:

“There was never adequate information laid out in the local press for people to understand what national park meant...the very vociferous minority kept submitting very negative articles and letters to the papers who kept publishing them...some of the things they were saying were ridiculous but how is an uninformed community supposed to know that” (MNPWP member).

On one occasion the Mourne Observer (local newspaper) dedicated a three page spread almost entirely to the anti-national park cause. Figure 1 reproduces the headlines it contained, and notably only makes reference to possible economic benefits from designation.

Figure 1 Headlines from the Mourne Observer



Source: (Ramsden, 2012)

A Mourne resident equated this significant media attention with significant opposition which fuelled personal doubt and uncertainty:

“Well you know there was something in the [Mourne] Observer every week so it was clear there was big opposition [to a national park] and it made me think, maybe this isn’t such a good thing for us”.

While Woods (2010) demonstrated the influence of *national* news media in reproducing rural discourses and amplifying the impact of rural protests, the above quotes illustrate the role of *local* news media (namely the local newspaper) in shaping popular beliefs and local opinion. This has resonance with the third dimension of power (Lukes, 2005); the perpetuation of mistruths about the impacts of a possible land use designation could be interpreted as an attempt by powerful individuals (landowners and farmers) at the local level to manipulate the views of other actors. The powerless fail to recognise the potential benefits and therefore choose to oppose designation in line with the interests of the powerful, even though these may be contradictory to their own real interests. For example, national park designation may be in the real interests of some local stakeholders through new financial opportunities. Alternatively, national park induced house price inflation may limit the ability of young people to live in the area. Not surprisingly, no interviewee admitted to intentionally disseminating mistruths or misinformation; however, regardless of whether fears were real, imagined or simply voiced to bolster an anti-national park campaign, the lack of information on national park structures and possible impacts/benefits meant people were unable to make an informed choice as to how national park might affect their real interests. This atmosphere of uncertainty was an ideal breeding ground for national park opponents to gain power and influence the values and thoughts of an uninformed public.

Governance Structures and Setting of the Agenda

The Mourne national park consultation was undertaken by a government appointed committee; the Mourne National Park Working Party (MNPWP), which was commissioned to ‘open up’ the national park debate and report local views. The MNPWP comprised a chairman (a former local District Councillor, who lives outside the proposed national park boundary, and appointed following public advertisement) and a range of statutory and non-statutory actors nominated from a number of organisations and interests: recreational and sporting (1), environmental (7), tourism (1), business (1), farming and landowning (6), community (2), as well as local elected representatives (7) (MNPWP, 2007).

Armed with the findings from various consultants’ reports (Buchanan, 2006; Annett and Scott, 2006; Mack et al., 2006) and three possible boundary options (Farmer and Martin, 2005), the MNPWP conducted a formal consultation from 1st September 2006 until 31st January 2007. The tensions which surfaced during the attempt to identify a possible Mourne National Park boundary represent a microcosm of the highly political and historically contentious issue of public administration and local government boundaries in Northern Ireland. Bell and Stockdale (2015c) addressed this issue, demonstrating the added complexity of identifying a national park boundary in the Mourne, given the ongoing tensions over political control, power and representation within the reconfigured councils.

The way in which government framed the public consultation was viewed by some as a government attempt to limit the debate to safe issues (power in the second dimension). The excerpt from interview below is typical of several such comments on this and highlights that topics such as, is there a need for a national park and what is the level of support for it, were not placed on the consultation agenda:

“...They never asked for a show of hands to see how many were opposed to national park...that question was never asked...they were afraid of a resounding no” (National park opponent).

A former DoE official explained that a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ discussion (about the designation of a national park) was not incorporated in the MNPWP agenda because the decision to designate a Mourne national park had already been made by the Minister. This pre-determined Ministerial decision (covert power) influenced how DoE officials sought to frame the MNPWP agenda:

“Nesbitt [the Minister] had decided to designate a Mourne national park, therefore the role of the MNPWP was to produce recommendations not discuss if there should be a national park...we felt we couldn’t go out there and do a piece of work which tested whether or not local people want it...” (MNPWP member).

Indeed the process of assembling the MNPWP proved controversial from the outset. Initially, the largest landowner in the Mournes (Mourne Trustees) was not invited onto the membership of the MNPWP:

“[the Mourne Trustees] Are the big stakeholder in this whole process; the people who were going to be most affected by a national park were not involved in the process initially...[the Mourne Trustees] should have been the people first consulted...it was only when the committee got up and running that one person within the committee pushed for [the Trustees] to be represented on it” (Mourne farmer).

Meanwhile, the inclusion of two National Trust representatives on the MNPWP provoked suspicion amongst landowners and raised doubts relating to government’s ulterior motives.

Some perceived the National Trust's membership to be a signal of government's true desire to nationalise the Mourne through national park designation. In the absence of legislation detailing the type/form of national park to be introduced, unfounded speculation grew:

"...There is a more sinister influence here. When the committee was established the National Trust had two people on the Working Party...the allegation was made that the government wanted the National Trust to take over the Mourne, the same as the Lake District, to re-nationalise the mountains" (Mourne farmer).

Trustee representation on the MNPWP was initially overlooked because their interests were deemed to be covered by farming representatives on the MNPWP (interview with DoE official). However, the Mourne Trustees viewed their initial exclusion from the MNPWP as an attempt by government to engineer the composition of the MNPWP to ensure the 'right people' were appointed to secure what the Trustees perceived to be government's preferred outcome (introducing a Mourne national park).

A MNPWP member also claimed: *"The committee [MNPWP], it was said by everyone everywhere, was completely unrepresentative"*. In common with evidence accrued from other critiques of rural partnerships (Shortall, 2004; Derkzen and Bock, 2009), the construction of the MNPWP became an exercise of power as government chose which interests to include. These findings resonate with the thoughts of Cornwall (2004). She cites the work of Alonso and Costa in a Brazilian context where government created spaces, comprising local elites, 'served to disarm any potential local opposition and effectively empty the invited space of its political significance' (Cornwall, 2004: 5). Instead of minimising dissent and disarming opposition, this perceived government manipulation of the consultation process had the reverse effect, fuelling a vociferous opposition campaign.

The allegation that government attempted to fill the MNPWP with pro-national park actors and reduce conflict/avoid difficult issues within the partnership (potentially power in the second dimension) was strongly refuted by a former DoE official:

“Absolutely not, we had some really difficult people on it...it was a genuine attempt to have an inclusive process...besides we asked the organisations to nominate individuals, we didn’t hand pick people”.

It is plausible that government sought an honest, fair and broad representation of Mourne stakeholder interests. It is also not inconceivable that, in pursuing a Mourne national park, government unwittingly failed to acknowledge the importance of including a major stakeholder group, such as the Mourne Trustees, who are legal owners of a significant proportion of the Mournes.

At the request of the MNPWP chairman, the Mourne Trustees were ultimately awarded two nominees. While a MNPWP member felt the strong representation of local people meant *“the community saw us [MNPWP] as one of them”*, others felt particular local stakeholders jeopardised the integrity of the MNPWP. For example the inclusion of the Mourne Heritage Trust, who in 1999 suggested the Mournes as a national park:

“They’re [the Mourne Heritage Trust] the ones who wanted the national park in the first place, so how can it be independent if those who want it are helping run the meetings?” (Mourne farmer).

In addition, farmer’s views of the MNPWP were tainted following a radio interview with the chairman of the MNPWP in which he openly reported his support for a Mournes national

park. This severely undermined the MNPWP's public image as an independent or neutral body:

"The consultation was flawed from day one because it wasn't independent; the chairman...came out [in a radio interview] and said he was all in favour of a national park" (Mourne farmer).

As outlined in the formal consultation report, comments regarding the integrity of the MNPWP were explicitly raised during public meetings (Inform Communications, 2008: 183-184). A locally elected councillor claimed:

"I do not believe that [the chairman] and [anonymous] are independent members of the Working Party [MNPWP]" (Local councillor).

A Mourne resident also expressed concerns over whether or not the MNPWP report would provide an accurate account of the consultation process and public opinion:

"I have concerns over [the chairman] submitting the consultation report and feel that a consultative body should produce it" (Mourne resident).

These statements demonstrate the sense of distrust within elements of the local community. Some individuals did not trust certain MNPWP members to put aside their vested or personal interests to act and make decisions for the greater good. Accordingly, in the minds of some, the legitimacy and democratic integrity of the consultation process was tainted by the make-up of the MNPWP and by prior rivalries between local stakeholders. The Mourne resident above seems to suggest that an outside body using independent facilitators may have been better placed to cut through local communal politics to provide a more open and transparent account of public opinion. However, such a body could have been accused of lacking local

knowledge or understanding. In the eyes of some, a statutory agency may have been a more legitimate option for conducting the consultation.

Examining the internal dynamics of the MNPWP revealed the challenge of reconciling competing stakeholder interests within a partnership structure. Prior stakeholder rivalries amongst MNPWP members directly influenced stakeholder relations:

“...throughout all the meetings it was [anonymous MNPWP member] trying to make his own name, it was another status seeking thing” (MNPWP member).

Achieving a consensus between MNPWP members with disparate interests and entrenched positions was also difficult as members of the MNPWP acknowledged:

“we all had very fixed positions from the start...there were those of us on the Working Party who had a wider ideal of national parks and saw them as something desirable...then those local representatives...largely to the farming community, were adamant that there will never be a national park in the Mourne, which made it so very difficult to agree on anything” (MNPWP member).

This same MNPWP member deemed the MNPWP *“a nonsense; it created division, it created argument and at no time within the three years of discussions did we ever agree a national park or not...”*, and another MNPWP member detected *“a total split within the Working Party”* which was highlighted by the resignation of two members in the final stages of the process (see below).

The polarised position of MNPWP members suggests that, contrary to the claims of some, the MNPWP was not solely comprised of national park sympathisers. However, the potential for partnerships to privilege certain voices and give disproportionate influence and power to

partnership managers (Woods, 2005b) was evident. During public meetings, MNPWP members sat at a top table and answered questions from the audience (confirmed at interview). One MNPWP member viewed this format of public meeting as giving power to the Chair and recalled:

“The dominant partner was the chairman...every meeting [he] would take over the whole meeting, he would answer all the questions and only brought in the members of the panel he saw fit...the very first meeting just ended up in a terrible row between the chairman and the public”.

Another interviewee alleged that the MNPWP chairman had attended secret meetings with stakeholder groups *“behind closed doors”* without any other members present. Whether these claims were true or not, it further demonstrates the lack of trust and level of suspicion amongst MNPWP members themselves. Meanwhile, another stakeholder – the Mourne Trustees – represented on the MNPWP were dissatisfied that their nominees were not invited by the chairman to join a MNPWP delegation to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to discuss farming issues (Mourne Trustees, 2010). Once again, the chairman appeared to exert significant influence and power in determining the relative involvement and influence of individual MNPWP members, and accordingly specific stakeholder interests.

Regardless of government’s intentions, power was exercised in the second dimension (Lukes, 2005). The power of the initiator (Shortall, 2004; Gaventa, 2006), in this case government, in determining the make-up of the MNPWP was interpreted by some as a deliberate attempt to populate the MNPWP with stakeholders who were sympathetic to a government agenda. In reality it was impossible to determine the validity of such claims. The opposing views of

MNPWP members suggested that members held differing views and a former DoE official suggested the exclusion of the Mourne Trustees may have been an honest oversight by government. Whether their initial exclusion was attributable to an illegitimate exercise of government power or insufficient (or lack of) stakeholder mapping, it was a major flaw to exclude the Trustees from the outset. As a result, the eventual Trustee inclusion in the MNPWP was shrouded in suspicion and fear concerning their future control of the area. In accordance with the thoughts of Healey (2006), the findings suggest that traditional ways of working operated below the camouflage of collaboration which influenced who got listened to and who shaped the policy.

The Consultation Process and Government's Response

The design or format of the MNPWP consultation was set by government and the independent consultation facilitators, and in effect restricted the public consultation process to public meetings. This went against a more varied format preferred by the MNPWP itself:

“We [the MNPWP] decided to hold workshops and surgeries but the Department [government] brought in one of these PR companies and they said hold public meetings. We told them we don't agree with this but the Department said no, these experts say hold a big public meeting” (MNPWP member).

Just as Taylor (2000: 2023) noted ‘the pressures to conform to a pre-determined official template’ in urban partnerships, the independent facilitator of the Mournes consultation felt that the format options for the consultation process were curtailed solely by government (not government and the facilitator as suggested by the MNPWP member above):

“I wouldn't like to suggest that I did what I was told but at the time, there was a kind of accepted way that these things were done which involved public meetings, sectoral

meetings, people putting their views in writing and we were working within that kind of framework...from day one, there was already a thought process of what the consultation may look like”.

This is perhaps reflective of the accepted format for conducting consultations in Northern Ireland: *“It tends to be done very traditionally, I don’t think there is much more consultation than the basics”* (DoE official). The apparent terms set out by government, by which the consultation was bound, were further reflected upon by a MNPWP member: *“Oh they [government] were all powerful because they produced all the funding for it”*. According to some, the attempt by government to hand over responsibility for designing the consultation to a partnership of local representatives was constrained by the institutional norms and practices of government at the time which resulted in a narrow range of consultation methods being employed. A resulting over-reliance on traditional consultation mechanisms (such as public meetings) limited effective engagement, gave a platform to vested interests, fuelled conflict and intimidation (Bell and Stockdale, 2015c) and ultimately undermined the government’s ability to take forward a controversial policy agenda in the Mourne. The findings raise doubts over how committed government were to assessing broad public opinion and whether there was a genuine attempt to incorporate community desires in the formulation of national parks policy.

The potential for conflict between opposing interests with individual agendas was apparent through an inability by MNPWP members to agree a final consultation report. The nominees of the Mourne Trustees (MNPWP members) felt their interpretation of the local views vented during the consultation process differed ‘so significantly’ to those being put forward in the consultation report, that they should submit their own minority report (Mourne Trustees,

2010). The Trustees claimed that the MNPWP report gave undue weight to the views of vested interest groups and MNPWP members and failed to give adequate expression to public views. The Trustees were particularly incensed that the MNPWP report underplayed the strength of the opposition to a national park and any new management arrangements. As the consultation report neared completion, the Trustees' request to submit a minority report was refused by the chairman of the MNPWP. Accordingly, the articulation of local interests was constrained by micro-level power differentials. Deeming their position untenable, the Trustees' nominees resigned from the MNPWP, choosing to submit an independent report to 'better reflect' the views heard (Mourne Trustees, 2010: 3-4).

Whether the interests of the Mourne Trustees were actually marginalised more than any other stakeholder grouping is difficult to judge. It was apparent from the Trustee's report that they felt, as legal providers of access to much of the high Mournes, they should have the overriding say on future management of the area: 'only the Mourne Trustees and the beneficial owners have the right to determine what can take place on their lands' (Mourne Trustees, 2010: para 4.13). Therefore any partnership structure aimed at facilitating broad stakeholder involvement, or consultation report providing a balanced summary of stakeholder views, was always likely to be contested by the Trustees. This example highlights the inevitability that not all preferences can be met through consultation and governance partnerships.

Submission of the MNPWP report (2007) was followed by a period of political inaction. A DoE press release (DoE, 2007) stated that the Environment Minister would consult with other inter-governmental agencies on the MNPWP recommendations. MNPWP members were bewildered that their hard work had been met with such an abject response:

“Foster [Environment Minister] was fairly dismissive of it [the report], she didn’t show a lot of interest. I was disappointed that we didn’t get an official report to tell us where things stood one way or the other” (MNPWP member).

Indeed, several interviewees interpreted this as demonstrating a hesitancy by the Minister (and therefore government) to further the national park agenda because of local opposition and discontent. The following interview excerpts perceived government’s inaction after receiving the MNPWP report to have stemmed from a nervousness about how to respond to a vociferous local ‘anti-national park’ stance (Community representative and former DoE official) and an inexperienced devolved institution with politicians concerned about how its response might affect future electoral outcomes (MNPWP member and Conservationist):

“The devolved Ministers [became] much more nervous about the vocal local voice...they were very sensitive to the local lobby” (Community representative).

“By that stage the full weight of the no lobby was known...and it would be fair to say the Minister got cold feet” (Former DoE official).

“In essence what you have is an Assembly bedding down with local politicians under pressure from local pressure groups and concerned about their vote” (MNPWP member).

“the opposition was such that they [politicians] could see how support for the national park would lose them votes but wouldn’t gain them anything, so even if they felt themselves favourably disposed towards it they took the pragmatic view that I’m just going to have to wind my neck in on this” (Conservationist).

Government was therefore reluctant to implement what would be a locally unpopular policy and rather than address the issue(s), simply chose not to respond to the report. One Northern Ireland Assembly member's (MLA) response to the MNPWP consultation read:

'Mr. Bradley [an MLA in South Down] does not want to be seen as being supportive although he does not state that he is opposed to the proposal' (Inform Communications, 2008: 78).

This statement typifies the hesitancy amongst some local politicians and the reluctance to appear publicly supportive.

Devolution initially (1999) then had a positive influence in terms of progressing the Mourne national park policy. The responsiveness of the devolved Environment Minister to local lobbying by local conservationists was influential (Bell and Stockdale, 2015a), however, the enhanced local accountability associated with devolved governing latterly resulted in political hesitancy (after 2007) in the face of local opposition and thus stalled national park progression.

A fundamental question emerges concerning political representation within a devolved Northern Ireland and the balance given to local and regional interests. Should politicians simply reflect the views of local people and risk being accused of lacking leadership and foresight: "*They (MLA's) were led rather than doing the leading*" (Conservationist). Conversely, should politicians be prepared to set aside concerns about losing local votes to take regionally important decisions? Margaret Ritchie, MP for the area, revealed that she was not prepared to provide strategic leadership for a Mourne national park: "*I will be very much guided by the outcome of that consultation but more importantly I will be guided by the*

[local] views of the people of the Mournes” (Mourne Observer, 2011: 29). Warren (2009: 208) posed the following question: ‘should the legitimate self-interest of the people of one region determine the fate of a national asset of international significance?’ From the outset (2002), unlike Scotland, the ‘national’ park issue in Northern Ireland has been discussed and debated at primarily the local level (i.e. within the Mournes). The Mourne national park exemplifies how a policy agenda of potentially regional (and local) economic and environmental significance is being, and potentially will continue to be, thwarted by an element of local opposition. Donnon and Wilson (1994: 2) observed: ‘[local communities] are often major change agents in socio-political processes of significance to many people beyond their locality and even beyond their state’. In the case of the Mournes, particular individuals within the community became major ‘anti-change agents’ resulting in an outcome which has significance to many people within and beyond the Mournes locality.

Out of recognition of the complex access issues which were illuminated during the Mourne consultation, the Environment Minister allocated £500,000 to improve access arrangements in the Mournes (DoE, 2007). Interviews suggest that there was considerable conjecture within the community about who and what this money was for. While one interviewee viewed this funding as “*direct assistance to landowners and farmers in the area*” another saw it as a “*concession to the conservationists because they weren’t getting their national park*”. Either way, only £273,934 of the funding allocated for access improvement was spent with minimal uptake from landowners. With landowners in the Mournes still exercising considerable control over access, the provision of access improvement grants became engulfed in landowner concerns relating to power and private control of land:

“Landowners turned the money down; they felt their control of the mountain was being undermined by improved access” (Conservationist).

“A lotta farmers immediately thought, she’s [Environment Minister] putting this money in to get new roads, gates and laneways into the mountains so she can tell everyone to come and walk the mountains. And people really got their backsides up and then they didn’t want it...I actually drew up a plan for fencing and a car park but I couldn’t get a Trustee to sign the application form...he was afraid if we took money that they [government] would take control of the mountain” (Mourne farmer).

The issue of access and the protection of private landowner interests emphasises the ongoing struggle for power and control in the Mourne. The thoughts of Parker (2008: 145) are applicable in the Northern Irish context:

‘property rights have become so entrenched and symbolic of personal freedom in many societies that efforts to re-organise or effect these, and the value that attaches to them, are typically met with fierce opposition’.

Current Northern Ireland public access and land ownership arrangements afford private landowners considerable influence and power in determining the future success of a Mourne national park. Therefore, the importance of gaining the support of private landowners may go some way towards explaining why the national park debate in Northern Ireland has been predominantly concentrated at the local level.

Conclusion

There has been much debate concerning the extent to which collaborative processes can achieve consensus, generate trust, neutralise conflict and equalise power differentials amongst actors with deeply opposing beliefs (Warner, 1997; Sidaway, 1998; Margerum,

2002; Healey, 2003; Innes, 2004). However, there is little evidence that any of the above factors materialised through the Northern Ireland national park consultation process as tensions were fuelled and diverging participant views became further entrenched.

If (as in Scotland) the first step had been to consult widely across Northern Ireland (through a national consultation exercise) to inform the drafting of primary legislation, a site specific designation (for example, in the Mournes) could have been pursued with a clearer understanding of possible national park structures and powers (aims, management structures, planning functions). As a result of this structural flaw, MNPWP members reported feeling helpless at their inability to answer questions during public meetings and local stakeholders revealed their frustration at the lack of information and answers to questions. This legislative context shaped the discourse taking place (or not taking place) in the public meeting arena which had direct implications for the inclusiveness of the consultation process. A resulting fear of the unknown and perceived national park restrictions saw an anti-national park campaign escalate and result in reduced involvement from the local community. The powerful role of the media in shaping public views in the Mournes was also apparent. Through circulating information and reporting the views of certain local interests, the local media contributed to reproducing and maintaining local uncertainty and doubt and accordingly reinforced the power of local elites (namely landowners).

Aided by Lukes' (1974; 2005) framework, which facilitated a broad appreciation of the diverse and subtle ways in which power can effect participatory governance, this paper has demonstrated how power can manifest at different stages of the policy making process. Firstly, those who initiate the process exercise considerable influence in determining the parameters of the discussion, including the issues to be addressed, who to include and what

format the consultation should take. The influence of government (power in the second dimension) was apparent in confining the national park debate to the Mourne locality, appointing members of the MNPWP, establishing the parameters for participatory methods employed and setting the MNPWP agenda.

Secondly, as the process is opened up for deliberation, micro-level power differentials can constrain participation and determine the expression of stakeholder interests within the partnership structure. The internal dynamics between MNPWP members exemplifies the difficulty associated with using a superimposed partnership, comprising diverse interests, to report the views of the local community. The partnership manager (chairman) was deemed to have exerted a controlling influence by limiting the involvement of some actors, privileging particular viewpoints, engaging in backstage negotiations and publicly announcing that he supported the introduction of a Mourne national park.

Thirdly, reporting the outcome of participatory processes constitutes an exercise of power, as those responsible can determine the level of consideration given to particular interests. By the end of the process the Mourne Trustees' perception of the consultation varied significantly from the narrative being developed in the MNPWP report which resulted in their resignation; perhaps this is the type of conflict government sought to avoid by initially excluding the Trustees. The level of disillusionment and opposition within the Mourne Trustees (Mourne Trustees, 2010) now represents a direct obstacle to any future designation of a Mourne national park.

Finally, decision makers (often government and politicians) retain the power to decide the relative weight given to those issues raised during consultation. Powerful actors at the micro-

level in the Mournes (the no national park lobby) directly influenced subsequent stages of the governing process as the Minister appeared reluctant to progress a Mourne national park amidst strong and vocal anti-national park sentiment. On the one hand, this could be viewed as more responsive governing, whereby the Minister chose not to impose an unsupported policy proposal. On the other hand, the Minister could be accused of procrastination and hesitancy for failing to offer a clear stance or leadership on the issue.

While the Mournes example demonstrates the influence of local and private landowning interests in determining the future management of the area, the inability to take forward the national parks policy agenda is perhaps symptomatic of a wider issue; the failings of the Northern Ireland Assembly as an effective legislative making body. Margaret Ritchie (MP for the area) acknowledged at interview that the failure to introduce national parks legislation possibly reflects the reality of firstly, a political system which prioritises local issues at the expense of wider regional issues and secondly, a body of elected representatives who are heavily influenced by very parochial interests:

“Politics here is local and people will be guided by not only the socio-economic aspect but by the views of those local people. I don’t think perhaps we are mature enough yet as a democracy to put aside the very localised interests...I think that is perhaps one of the indications coming from the fact we haven’t got this [national park] legislation” (Margaret Ritchie).

The future progression of national parks in Northern Ireland could depend on the level of political leadership and the ability of politicians at all levels to successfully negotiate between local and regional interests and public and personal (future votes) interests. Due to apparent opposition amongst some local stakeholders the present Environment Minister is not

currently minded to progress national parks legislation (BBC, 2014). The Mourne national park consultation process has demonstrated tensions between local and regional/national interests, the ongoing power differentials in decision making and the immaturity of recently devolved government in Northern Ireland. This does not bode well as Northern Ireland embarks on the next phase of decentralised governance: namely the return of planning powers to local government in Northern Ireland (under a reform of public administration (Knox, 2012)) which gives locally elected representatives (local councilors) a more significant role in determining planning applications. At a time when a more strategic, long-term vision is required to guide policy and decision making around land management in Northern Ireland, decisions could be about to become further politicised and orientated towards serving local and private individual interests at the expense of the wider public interest (if the experiences of the national park policy attempt are repeated).

Local authorities are often deemed to be disproportionately focussed on facilitating economic development at the expense of the environment (Illsley and Richardson, 2004). If Northern Ireland's internationally significant landscapes continue to suffer from a lack of strategic planning, management and protection, this vital resource upon which the future prosperity and well-being of society (both local and regional) depends, could be undermined by the pursuit of short-term economic development goals (Bell and Stockdale, 2015b). Given the lack of statutory management powers for AONB management bodies and the minimal planning protection afforded AONB's in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK, councils have assumed planning responsibilities without a comprehensive regional framework for landscape management and protection. With no immediate prospects of enhanced landscape designations and management arrangements, a holistic approach to community planning is required which values the multiple benefits of Northern Ireland's

landscapes (e.g. recreation, health, tourism), recognises the cumulative impact of development and the impact that local planning decisions have beyond one particular locality. Furthermore, a policy instrument, such as a land use or landscape strategy, modelled around the National Landscape Strategy in Ireland (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015) or the Scottish Land Use Strategy (Scottish Government, 2011), would assist by articulating a strategic vision and set of overarching principles to more effectively guide and influence decision making at local level. As in Scotland, this policy could be complemented by local authority led land use strategy pilot projects (Scottish Government, 2011) which offer innovative approaches to land use decision-making and provide practical solutions to managing the multitude of pressures on land.

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