Sustainable Consumption in the United Kingdom: The “Responsible” Consumer and Government at “Arm’s Length”

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The project of “sustainable consumption” encompasses broader concerns about how individual well-being and quality of life have been superseded by the quest for sustained economic growth. In 1999, the current UK Labour government revised their sustainable development approach, conceptually placing “people at the centre” and arguing for holistic strategies, thereby suggesting some redress of the above concerns. In light of this conceptual shift, this article inquires about the current state of sustainable consumption policy and practice in the United Kingdom. Focusing on the ideological foundations underpinning Labour’s approach to sustainable consumption, it highlights how the individual “rational” consumer is ascribed with responsibility for creating sustainable consumption patterns. In this environment, Labour chooses to practice sustainability at “arm’s length,” doing little to challenge the profligate resource consumption that typifies the United Kingdom today.

Keywords: sustainable consumption; UK politics; environmental policy

Consumer Choice or Public Goods?

In August 2003 the renowned UK think tank, the Fabian Society, launched a publication titled A Better Choice of Choice (Levett, 2003). The book’s central argument is that prevailing political ideologies in the United Kingdom lead to a focus on expanding the range of goods and services available for private consumption. This focus, although emphasizing individual choice, consequently reduces individuals’ ability to make other, more important choices; that is, although consumers may have access to a dizzying array of brands in the High Street, their ability to partake of vital public goods such as safe communities, clean streets, and effective schools is declining. Indeed, choice in the market does not equate with choice of liberty and quality of life, as the authors cited mounting evidence that rising gross domestic product (GDP) is now associated with declining well-being. Instead of focusing solely on economic growth, the author argued that environmental sustainability and quality of life need to become the key markers of social, political, and...
economic trends, with collective action being fostered through democratic institutions, facilitated by regulation and public provision (Levett, 2003).

Although the cause-and-effect relations implicit in this argument are indeed contestable and highly complex, this article does not seek to dissect them per se. Instead Levett’s book is used as a jumping-off point to explore a subset of his broader argument. These debates about quality of life taking precedence over economic growth echo arguments made by advocates of widespread changes to consumption patterns and practices. For example, contemporary levels and forms of consumption were highlighted in Agenda 21 as a key issue facing the future of global environmental sustainability (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development [UNCED], 1992). More specifically, the wasteful and inefficient overconsumption practices of postindustrial nations (e.g., the United States, many European Union countries, Japan, and Australia) were singled out as major culprits, particularly in the wake of the 1980s/early 1990s consumer booms and subsequent crashes, which for many commentators problematized “Western” consumption. As a solution, Agenda 21 argued, all individuals or institutions have a responsibility to adopt patterns of “sustainable consumption” if the ruinous cycles of produce-use-dispose are to be broken or at least made less ruinous. This “ruin” applies to not only the environmental damage that excessive consumption produces but also the impacts its inherent individualism has on community cohesion, social interactions, and the availability of public space—other than shopping centers—for positive collective action. Thus, advocates of sustainable consumption also emphasize quality of life over private consumption, making sustainable consumption an integral part of the debates that the Fabian Society has become engaged in (e.g., Sanne, 2002).

The question this article aims to consider is, in light of Levett’s argument, what is the state of sustainable consumption in the United Kingdom? More specifically, it seeks to question how underlying ideological commitments can give rise to certain politically favored policy options, which, in turn, are partially responsible for the impoverished impact that the sustainable consumption agenda has had on UK society. This article is based on research carried out as part of a doctoral thesis into sustainable consumption in the United Kingdom (Hobson, 2001b). Initial policy and secondary data material were collected between 1997 and 2001, and subsequently updated in late 2003. At both times, material was

1. Agenda 21 was one of the key documents to result from the 1992 World Commission on Environment and Development Rio Earth Summit. It outlined the main causes of global environmental degradation, along with broad solution pathways, and the actors involved in implementing these solutions, leading it to be considered the “blueprint” for sustainable development.
analyzed using qualitative coding techniques, in conjunction with analysis of primary interview data collected in the United Kingdom during 1997 to 1999 (see Hobson 2001a, 2002, for further discussion).

The article follows Levett’s and others’ arguments that broad, centralized structural policy shifts are vital to setting the tenor and direction of social change. It focuses predominantly on current government approaches to sustainable consumption, although other policy actors will also be discussed by way of contrast. As will be shown, the current Labour government has, since 1999, placed sustainability and quality of life as central to citizens’ well-being, appearing to preempt Levett’s arguments. If this is the case, the project of sustainable consumption should be an integral part of government policy. This article broadly considers whether this is so, or whether the state of sustainable consumption in the United Kingdom adds weight to Levett’s argument about how an individual-choice doctrine is reducing UK citizens’ ability to create sustainable collective outcomes.

Defining Sustainable Consumption: Economy, Environment, and Society

The central role that sustainable consumption has within debates about well-being or quality of life versus economic growth can be further understood by briefly outlining some ways in which the term has been interpreted. These differences of emphasis present not only variations in linguistic interpretations of the term but also different value systems and highlight how opting for one type of sustainable consumption over another is an active choice. The variations in both how sustainable consumption is defined, along with subsequent policy actions taken under its banner, can be categorized crudely in terms of which facet of sustainability—that is, environment, economy, or society—is considered utmost. For example, advocates that focus primarily on environmental sustainability argue absolute levels of consumption and resource use must be reduced by between 50% to 90% of current levels (e.g., Australia’s Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organization: see Millet, 2002). In addition, the environmental impacts of goods consumed must be reconsidered. This entails altering types of consumption, such as moving toward the production and purchasing of organic food.

Focus on social sustainability highlights the gross inequities that global and national consumption patterns create and enforce, linking sustainable consumption to concepts such as social justice and community vitality (e.g., Church Action on Poverty, 2002; Demos, 2002; see also Jordan and O’Riordan, 2000; Shuman, 2000; Williams & Windebank, 2002). Here, solutions favor the creation of “sustainable livelihoods,”
where individuals have equal access to basic needs and where the current cultural emphasis on conspicuous consumption is superceded by greater focus on local community initiatives that provide sustainable goods and sense of well-being, for example, community vegetable gardens.

Finally, economy-first advocates stress the continuation of current consumption practices for purposes of economic growth and development. Rather than reducing amounts consumed per se, the resource efficiency of production methods and consumption practices need to be maximized (e.g., the work of the Factor 10 Institute; see www.factor10-institute.org). This implicates not only the “greening” of business processes (managerial and material) but also individual resource-use practices, for example, advocating “reuse, recycle, and repair” actions to consumers. This interpretation takes a win-win approach and non-threatening stance toward global markets, focusing on voluntary rather than prescriptive changes to practices. As a result it has gained the most political support in postindustrial nations such as the United Kingdom. Here, a market-orientated, “resource-efficiency-while-maximizing-profits” paradigm has prevailed in government and business since the rise of environmental issues on the international political agenda (e.g., see Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment, 1998; Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2000).

With this approach goes a suite of policy tools that aim to persuade and inform key social actors about the changes they can make to promote sustainability. These include: voluntary sustainable production initiatives to green business production and consumption (e.g., ISO 14001, Global Action Plan’s Action at Work program); consumer labeling initiatives to inform shoppers about the environmental impact of their purchases; infrastructure initiatives to provide facilities for sustainable consumption practices (e.g., the provision of recycling facilities); legislation and regulation; and public campaigns, to win the “hearts and minds” of intended audiences. Altogether, this suite of so-called new environmental policy instruments has become a highly visible part of the UK policy landscape (for further discussion see Jordan, Wurzel, & Zito, 2003).

Although the above categorizations of sustainable consumption without doubt simplify complex and overlapping arguments, they serve to highlight contrasting interpretations available. Indeed, it has been

2. This term is often used in relation to the consumption needs of “developing” countries, for example, Agenda 21. However, it has been increasingly used to conceptualize the inequalities in postindustrial countries, which current forms of consumption are believed to reinforce.

3. For more information on Global Action Plan and their work see www.globalactionplan.org.
strongly argued that the most satisfactory approach to any aspect of sustainability is one that encapsulates all of the above three facets. Among advocates of this holistic approach is the current UK Labour government. Since being elected in 1997 (and re-elected in 2001) Labour have discursively shifted the emphasis away from sustainable development as primarily a task of increasing production and market efficiency, an approach inherited from the former Conservative government (e.g., UK Government, 1990; Department of the Environment, 1994). Instead, their 1999 sustainable development strategy, “A better quality of life” (see UK Government, 1999), emphasized sustainable economic, environment, and resource development. Here, they placed emphasis on the social dimensions of sustainability, through “putting people at the center” and building sustainable communities rather than forwarding piecemeal initiatives. This conceptual shift echoes the ongoing academic and nongovernmental organization (NGO) discussions highlighted by Levett about how quality of life and well-being better encapsulate the aims of sustainability than economic-focused indicators (see also Jacobs, 1997; Seik, 2001). In forwarding this quality-of-life agenda, sustainable consumption—understood by the Labour government as consumption that meets individual and community needs while maintaining sound levels of economic growth, which do not drain environmental resources or promote social inequity—has a pivotal conceptual role to play as part of an overall holistic sustainable development strategy. The question that therefore needs to be addressed is whether this discursive shift has become a policy reality, and what effects any new policies may have had on UK consumption practices to date.

**UK Approaches to Promoting Sustainable Consumption: Indicators, Information, and Revitalization of the Local**

Over the past decade, there have been numerous policy measures put in place to address issues of consumption and resource use in the United Kingdom. Although not considered a champion of the environment per se, Prime Minister Tony Blair made vocal international commitments to some aspects of sustainable development throughout the late 1990s and especially at the Rio +10 meeting in Johannesburg in 2002. With this commitment, and Labour’s revised approach to sustainable development detailed above, concrete initiatives followed that attempt to address different facets of sustainability, with varying emphasis placed on consumption. Although is it not credible to suggest that these initiatives exist for the sole purpose of creating sustainable consumption per se, this section aims to highlight new initiatives that nevertheless sit
within a broad remit of forwarding improved quality of life for UK citizens. Here, they are categorized under the broad headings of information, new policy bodies, financial incentives, regional regeneration, and legislation, and best practice.

INFORMATION

To chart the annual progress of sustainable development in the United Kingdom and provide easily accessible, quantified information about the “direction” of success in the United Kingdom, in 1999 Labour launched a suite of headline, national, and regional indicators. The headline indicators consist of 15 key markers of social change such as economic output, poverty and social exclusion, and air quality. By contrast, the national indicators consists of 147 indicators, a full assessment of which is available (UK Government Sustainable Development Unit, 2003). Information campaigns have also become a much-utilized policy tool that focus more directly on consumption. For example, a Green Claims Code aimed to provide best practice advice for business and consumers on making environmental claims about products and services (Department of Environment, Transport, and the Regions, 2000). A nation-wide 10 million sustainable consumption multimedia advertising campaign was launched in 1999 called “Are You Doing Your Bit.” This campaign aimed to promote the reduction of resources used in the home by suggesting small, “do-able” actions that can be changed with little cost or effort. Central policy has also received considerable support from various NGOs who, in keeping with traditional UK policy style (see Carter & Lowe, 1998; Haigh & Lanigan, 1995; Vogel, 1986; Weale et al., 2000), have often been relied on to help implement policy, filling welfare and environmental protection gaps left by the state. One example is the charity WasteWatch that provides information and promotes action on waste reduction, reuse, and recycling, working with community organizations, local and national government, businesses, and the public. Sustrans is a sustainable transport charity whose practical projects encourage people to walk, cycle, and use public transport to reduce motor traffic and its adverse effects. Finally, the charity Global Action Plan UK aims to find positive ways to persuade individuals to think about and change their lifestyle practices, taking the “small steps” approach. This includes an Action at Work program that aims to encourage employers and employees to work together to reduce resource use

4. The full list of 15 Headline Indicators are economic output, investment, employment, poverty and social exclusion, education, health, housing, crime, climate change, air quality, road traffic, river water quality, wildlife, land use, and waste.
and has been shown to make some positive impacts if support and resources are made available to program volunteers (Hobson, 2002).

NEW POLICY BODIES

To create rather than simply measure change, new policy forums have also been established. One example is the Carbon Trust launched in 2001. This independent, not-for-profit company was set to address UK resource consumption at the aggregate level, taking the lead in low-carbon technology and innovation in the United Kingdom through promoting more sustainable energy technologies and practices. The Sustainable Buildings Task Group was set up in 2003 by the Environment Secretary. It consists of builders, developers, planners, and environmental advisers whose remit is to “spearhead efforts to raise the environmental quality of buildings,” which, in turn, aims to affect energy and resource efficiency. In addition, the Sustainable Development Commission was established in 2000. The Commission is populated by members of the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Executive and 21 other members, “drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and from all parts of the United Kingdom” whose role is to “... advocate sustainable development across all sectors ... , review progress towards it, and build consensus on the actions needed” (Department for Environment, Transport, and the Regions, Scottish Executive, 2000). The above three examples are a few of several newly established sustainability committees, units, or trusts, either within or independent from government. Those outside of direct government control are independent on a day-to-day basis but still situated within the central policy community or network.

FINANCIAL INITIATIVES

Financial instruments have also been introduced. The most notable is the Climate Change Levy, announced in the 1999 budget. This is considered “a package of cost effective, flexible policies and measures in which all sectors of the UK’s economy and all parts of the UK play their part” (Department for Environment, Transport, and the Regions, Scottish Executive, 2000, n.p.; also Schrader 2002). In addition, in October 2002, Chancellor Gordon Brown’s planned rise in “green taxation”

5. As of April 1, 2001, the levy came into effect, applying to industry, commerce, agriculture, public administration and other services. It covers sales of coal, electricity, liquid petroleum gas, and natural gas. It is forecast to raise £1 billion in 2001-2002 but is proposed to be revenue neutral as all money will be recycled back to business through a 0.3% point cut in the rate of the employers National Insurance Contributions. Part of the levy also allows firms to enter into a negotiated agreement that reduces their levy by 80% in exchange for a binding commitment to improve energy efficiency.
was revealed, which consisted of doubling the rates charged to local authorities per ton of refuse sent to landfill (known as the Landfill Tax), with the aim of stimulating more efficient disposal practices at the local level.

REGIONAL REGENERATION

Beyond the above range of initiatives, Labour has forwarded its broad quality-of-life agenda by focusing, among other things, on regional regeneration. From a holistic sustainable consumption perspective, this is a key issue as strengthening regional empowerment, especially at the economic level, is considered one of the first steps to achieving sustainable communities (Shuman, 2000). This, in turn, fosters greater care for local environments, prompting individuals to think about the implications of their resource use and forging stronger social relations to replace the emotional role that mass consumption has for many people (Shuman, 2000). Although the strength of these “community-first” claims need to be intellectually scrutinized further (e.g., see Gibson & Cameron, 2001), some of its progressive central themes are echoed in Labour’s New Deal for Communities package. This seeks to initiate policy at the regional scale, focusing on specific local needs and deprivation “black spots” through establishing regional partnerships to deliver policy, eclipsing past top-down approaches. For example, the Neighborhood Renewal Fund has received several hundred million pounds of financing between 2001 and 2004, to produce local renewal strategies that will be part of community plans drawn up by local authorities.

LEGISLATION AND BEST PRACTICE

Some central policy initiatives were announced in 2003 that fed into a holistic approach to sustainable consumption and quality-of-life issues. Previous attempts to address concerns such as working hours, for example, the EU Working Hours Directive, have allegedly been rushed into regulation to avoid confrontation with business, thus making them largely ineffective (Blair, Karsten, & Leopald, 2001). However, the Department of Trade and Industry’s (2002) Work-Life Balance campaign aimed to convince employers that there are gains to be made from considering the quality of life of their employees. Indeed, this campaign was partially formalized in April 2003 when new Working Parents laws came into effect. Among new maternity and paternity rights, employees now have “the right to request” and employees “the duty to consider” flexible working practices for those with children. This is meant to help alleviate the “time squeeze” felt by so many working families and break the “work-spend” cycles so prevalent in high consumption countries (e.g., see Schor, 1993, 1998).
The long-awaited Energy White paper was launched in February 2003. This was heralded as a significant step forward in promoting the structural and service provision changes needed to progress the United Kingdom toward more sustainable uses of energy resources. Here, Labour set out a manifesto of concentrating future energy strategies away from nuclear and carbon-based energy and toward renewable power. It also emphasized increased energy efficiency to meet carbon-emission targets and pledged £348 million (although it has been subsequently estimated that £38 million is new money for programs beyond current spending commitments, with only £15 million per year for 4 years for research and development).

Overall, there have been some highly positive policy and civil society moves toward creating alternate means to address the negative impacts of excessive resource consumption, with many NGOs, think tanks, and academics enlivening debates about new ways to create equitable social progress. Moving away from traditional emphasis on regulation and legislation, Labour have preferred instead to utilize new arenas for information and best practice dissemination, innovative policy approaches, and new spending priorities. In this context, sustainable consumption has all but disappeared from central government lexicon, being mentioned directly very little in policy documents. Therefore, we are left to assume that sustainable consumption remains a central, if unspoken, plank in Labour’s sustainable development quality-of-life remit.

**Unsustainable Consumption in the United Kingdom**

And yet, despite all this good work, absolute levels of resource consumption continues to increase in the United Kingdom, with parallel declines in many individuals’ quality of life becoming the focus of great social and political debate. To begin with some crude figures, aggregate use of fossil fuels increased throughout the 1990s, as did waste production. Still increasing is the percentage of households with cars (Walker, Maher, Coulthard, Goddard, & Thomas, 2001) and car miles traveled, canceling out reductions in greenhouse gas emissions secured through fuel efficiency improvements. Of the estimated 28.2 million tons of municipal waste generated in England in 2000 and 2001, 25.1 million tons came from households, averaging half a ton of waste per person per year (WasteWatch, 2002). Of this waste, 85% is sent to municipal landfill sites (Office for National Statistics, 2000). Only 10% of household waste is recycled, putting the United Kingdom in the bottom of the European league of percentage of waste sent for recycling (Friends of the Earth, 2002). Household conspicuous consumption also continues to rise. The
2002 Household Final Consumption Expenditure figures showed an average 40% increase across all sectors between 1994 and 2001 (Walker et al., 2001), which is expected to increase further as real incomes triple by 2050 (Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2002). The sustainability of this growth is highly questionable, as the average adult debt has risen by 50% since 1997, totaling more than £5,000 per person excluding mortgage debts. Returning again to Labour’s Headline Indicators, the Quality of Life Barometer for 2003 showed that although economic output, employment, and number of woodland birds improves, there are no improvements in crime, education, health, crime, air quality, road traffic, and household waste management—all vital components to improving quality of life and well-being.

At the individual level, research suggests that the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable consumption have done little to promote changes to individual consumption practices, as the terms remain conceptually obscure and far from being publicly embraced (Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2000; Macnaghten & Jacobs, 1997). In addition, they are not high on public social concern agendas (see Cowe & Williams, 2000). Although when asked, individuals may say they want sustainable outcomes (Rayner, 2002), many fail to act on it. The Co-Operative Bank (2002) called this “30:3” syndrome; that is, 30% of individuals say they care about the environmental and ethical impacts of their purchases; yet the market share of green products rarely surpasses 3%. Their research concluded that approximately 5% of consumers in the United Kingdom are committed ethical consumers, whereas the remainder either care but do not act, or care more about value for money (Doane, 2001).

Some commentators argue that this pattern prevails as individual consumers are a long way from making the connections between consumption and social outcomes, such as in UK food production (e.g., Fort, 2001). Indeed, the comparative high costs of perishable goods in the United Kingdom has resulted in widespread talk of “rip-off Britain,” brought into sharper focus through media comparisons of food costs in the United Kingdom with countries in continental Europe. And as such, it appears that consumers want purchases to be cheaper still, with little consideration of the possible environmental impacts of this trend. Hopes that an environmental ethic would gradually infiltrate UK society as environmental knowledge and concern become common now appear doubtful. The 2001-2002 British Social Attitudes Survey shows that instead young people are becoming less environmentally friendly in their actions, displaying definite proconsumption attitudes and preferences (Park, Curtice, Thomson, Jarvis, & Bromley, 2002; Rayner, 2002).

Indeed, research suggests that popular economy-first sustainable consumption policies, such as product labeling and information cam-
Campaigns, do little to change individuals’ consumption preferences. For example, the policy tool of green product labeling seeks to inform consumer choice. However, research highlights how only 5% of UK consumers say they are influenced by labeling and product information. Instead, 24% of consumers are influenced primarily by friends and colleagues’ experiences and preferences (Cowen & Williams, 2000), often related to value for money and product quality. More intensive campaigns such as the Global Action Plan’s Action at Home program have created some changes to participants’ small, habitual behaviors such as turning taps off when brushing teeth and turning lights off after use, which collectively could amount to significant resource savings. However, few households wish to get involved in such intensive processes, citing lack of time, lack of interest, and negative preconceptions of “green agendas” as reasons (Hobson, 2002). For those who do get involved, changing more structurally embedded behaviors, such as transport use and housing, proves very difficult in the face of barriers such as availability of options, restrictive costs, and perceived lack of reliable information (Hobson, 2002, 2003).

Does this mean that sustainable consumption has little chance as a social project? In assessing the success and failures of sustainable consumption, research often focuses solely on the workings of the economy-first policy tools mentioned above (Brandon & Lewis, 1999; Cobern, Porter, Leeming, & Dwyer, 1995; Gouldson & Murphy, 1998; Smith, Blake, & Davies, 2000). Although undoubtedly the above is valuable work, the remainder of this article puts forward an argument that rather considers how sustainable consumption has been initiated as a political project, suggesting that the ideological foundations that government has brought to sustainable consumption has been highly affective of its uptake. The aim is to argue that despite talk of building sustainable communities and quality of life, current central polices are founded on an economy-first approach toward sustainability, which belies the calls for broader challenges to the central place consumption has in prevailing models of growth and well-being.

Labour: Managing Sustainable Consumption at “Arm’s Length”

Politically, Labour is often typified as a “centre-left” party. However, in practice, it embraces policies that appear to range across the political spectrum, notably an unashamed continuation of the previous Conservative government’s focus on wealth creation and market flexibility. For example, many senior Labour politicians have publicly subscribed to the belief that the economic forces of globalization are an indisputable,
unstoppable reality (see Coates & Hay, 2001). This has allowed little political space for forwarding alternative political agendas, with left-wing ideologies no longer being deemed viable or even worthy of mainstream debate in the United Kingdom. Instead, Labour argued that it is the government’s duty to harness the forces of globalization for the nation’s advantage because—as Tony Blair himself has put it—“There is money to be made and there are jobs to be created” (as cited in Carter & Lowe, 1998, p. 30). To make globalization work “for the people” of the United Kingdom, business competitiveness, markets not strangled by regulation, a flexible labor force, and growth in consumer choice (some of which might be green consumption) have a central ideological place. This stance has been typified as a mode of governance that policy scientists label “preference accommodation” (Coates & Hay, 2001). Here government accommodates business preferences and shapes policy to respond to these preferences, rather than attempting to shape the business communities’ ideas to suit the government’s policies. This has given rise to much criticism of the close relationship between Labour and some parts of the business community (e.g., Monbiot, 2000). Labour countered these claims by denying them and claiming that they are bringing business into policy networks, enabling the government to make informed and workable decisions in partnership with key social agents.

In terms of sustainability, after being elected Labour was quick to grasp the economy-first discourse as central to their approach (Gibbs, 2000; see also Blair, 1997). Initial policy approaches to sustainable consumption by Labour suggested that the responsibilities for changes in consumption patterns were primarily those of the domestic consumer. As the now-disbanded Department of Environment, Transport, and the Regions (1998) suggested: “Ultimately the burden on the UK’s environment is attributable to the choices and the actions of the consumers. To a great extent producers are, quite naturally, responding to meet the preferences of the customers” (p. 4).

Despite the broad changes in approaches to sustainable development discussed above, this perspective continued to predominate. For example, in 1999 the Department of Trade and Industry launched a White Paper on the current and future shape and operation of British markets called “Modern Markets: Confident Consumers” (Department of Trade and Industry [DTI], 1999). In this paper, sustainable consumption, from environmental and social perspectives, gets one mention. Instead, the reader is presented with a model of consumer and business relations as a “virtuous circle” where strong consumers armed with “reliable information” create strong businesses through demanding quality service—an embodiment of the neo-classical rational consumer operating in a free market, which typify mainstream economic approaches to sustainability. The “production” end of this equation, however, has
not been framed so prescriptively, to the criticism of some observers who argued that business also has to be given an equal share of the responsibility (e.g., Advisory Committee on Consumer Products and the Environment, 2002). This suggests that despite claims of holistic approaches to sustainability, and Labour practicing “joined up thinking”—where issues and departments do not act in isolation but work together to address social problems—Labour sees sustainable consumption as a primarily individualistic economic issue. Here, it can be addressed through providing the “correct” information to willing and responsible consumers, facilitating better consumption choices for the individual.

Reflecting on Labour’s core ideological values might shed some light on why this might be the case. First, there is the obvious point that Labour are advocates of free-market policies, often rejecting regulation that could possibly impinge on economic growth and market flexibility (although there are a few notable exceptions, such as the introduction of the Minimum Wage in 1998). Tony Blair has been a visible advocate of the opening up of global markets, showing support for the stalled Multilateral Investment Agreement and now the World Trade Organization, as well as forging close relationships and allegedly shaping policy to the advantage of leading global corporations (e.g., Monbiot, 2000).

More specifically, the concept of “responsibility” sheds further light on their stance to sustainability. Within Labour’s “third way” ideology (see Giddens, 1998, 2001), responsibility stands as a mutual obligation of citizen and state. Here, the government has the responsibility to facilitate and enable citizens to make sound choices by providing strong services within a climate of mutual trust and healthy democratic dialogue. In turn, the citizens’ responsibilities to the state include paying taxes and so on but also making a contribution to society by, for example, taking work where it is available rather than claiming benefits or giving time voluntarily to charities who provide community services beyond the ambit of the contemporary state.

To understand what this mutually responsible state-citizen relationship might look like in practice, the above example of the DTI’s virtuous circle is useful. In this model, the consumer—hypothetically speaking—reads and trusts the information provided on products about the environmental impacts of their consumption choices. These impacts would be signaled through devices such as environmental labeling programs or public information campaigns, which would have been introduced by government and industry working in partnership to produce voluntary best practice guidelines. In addition, as part of the ongoing third way project of enlivening active, responsible citizenry, the consumer cares enough about the environment to make the right choices. This suggests a modus operandi based on government as the facilitator of change, with the individual consumer being the primary responsive agent.
And as such, it is possible to argue that overall, the Labour government is attempting to fashion sustainable consumption at arm’s length. They have assisted in the development of policy networks, forwarded by the establishment of partnerships through active facilitation, such as the new policy forums detailed above. These work separately yet closely with the government, in accord with Labour’s perspective on government as consisting of “networks of institutions and individuals acting in partnerships held together by relations of trust” (Bevir & Rhodes, 2001, p. 18). Here, central government is a central node in a complex web of governance, built on and operating through the principles of trust, dialogue, and democracy. These networks, in turn, create mechanisms to inform organizational or individual choices, without the need for prescriptive policies or discourses. Added to this, they have also partially withdrawn from particular policy arenas (e.g., greening of business).

In understanding these trends, Burnham’s (2001) notion of “depoliticisation” is useful. He argued that this is “the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making” (p. 136). This stance lowers public expectations of government power and influence, offloading some responsibility for policy direction and success, as well as decreasing accountability. Another example of this approach can be seen in Labour’s continued commitment to their Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes. Here, a capital project such as a school or hospital is designed, built, financed, and managed by a private sector consortium for a 30-year period, removing the responsibility for the delivery of vital public infrastructures from government. Although on paper this may be seen as an efficient and economic way of delivering public services, extensive criticism has arisen in terms of not only how projects are managed but also how this approach shifts power and political accountability away from the public and into the hands of private profit-making organizations (e.g., Monbiot, 2000).

Referring back to the discussion above about the number of sustainability trusts, committees, and campaigns Labour have established since 1997, the depoliticisation argument has resonance with current UK policy on sustainable consumption. For example, the responsibility for nationwide environmental campaigns has been removed from central government and privatized, for example, the organization Environmental Campaigns (ENCAMS), which now runs the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign, among others. This places the responsibility for issues such as sustainable consumption at arm’s length from the government’s main remit, allowing it to share out the responsibility for such endeavors among other sets of actors and institutions. Perhaps such an approach is conducive to a holistic agenda of sustainable consumption, which requires that a multitude of policy actors be involved in forwarding quality of life for all. However, this arm’s length approach enables the government to claim that the mutual responsibilities, implicit in their
third way model of social democracy, places it within, but not always at the helm of these partnerships and networks of governance. In this context, it is up to extragovernment policy actors, particularly individuals as consumers, to raise the profile of the sustainable consumption agenda and take decisive action.

Concluding Remarks

Sustainable consumption as a social project is making little headway in the United Kingdom, as citizens’ consumption practices contribute little to creating a more equitable, sustainable society with satisfactory standards of quality of life for all. Although there have been some positive moves in the United Kingdom toward sustainable consumption, some of which are detailed in this article, they are occurring in a policy climate where government has partially removed itself from the responsibility of managing and directing the different arms of sustainable consumption policy, preferring instead to steer sustainability through policy networks, trusts, and market mechanisms. This is not to suggest that government, in itself, can be held wholly responsible for creating patterns of sustainable consumption at the national level. The ubiquitous position that consumption has in contemporary postindustrial societies such as the United Kingdom begs the question as to exactly which policies could achieve sustained economic viability and reduced consumption at the same time. Indeed, the new environmental policy instruments (Jordan et al., 2003) utilized by Labour have presented innovative and affective frameworks for addressing social problems. Rather, the aim here has been to argue that such a divisive and all-encompassing issue such as consumption requires more direct political leadership than is currently being offered. The reasons for this limited engagement are indeed multiple, and the main point made here is that the ideological foundations of Labour’s approach to sustainable consumption has partially contributed to the use of certain policy approaches that have so far failed to make any discernible impacts on current environmentally and socially degrading consumption practices in the United Kingdom.

For example, implicit in the ideological commitments of Labour is an understanding that the individual is deemed ultimately responsible for making sustainable consumption happen. This is not a surprising suggestion as individuals ultimately make resource use decisions, although obviously set within specific social contexts and constraints. What is interesting here are the normative and economic overtones of Labour’s approach, which—despite talk of sustainable communities—appears to cut out scales of action other than that of the (rational) individual. In the third way project, the individual citizen exists with a direct relationship
and obligation to the state, to take an active role in the enlivenment of social democracy. In practice, whether it concerns social welfare delivery or skills for the job market, the individual, not the state or other overarching institutions, has become the container and focus of provisioning, action, and information. Each citizen has to be able to absorb the challenges of shifting markets, to meet the new social contract of mutual obligation, to not expect “safety net” welfare services but rather to facilitate “job seekers allowances,” and to be “strong” consumers.

All of this adds up to few structural or ideological challenges to the place that consumption, an integral part of economic growth, has in the contemporary UK policy climate. Although NGOs, think tanks, and civil society organizations are making some impressive and innovative headway with many parts of the sustainable consumption agenda, their ability to influence government thinking, along with age-old cries for stronger leadership on these issues, appear to be doing little to steer central policy away from the economy-first model of sustainable consumption currently prevailing. As UK consumption practices at the individual and organizational level continue along profligate and inefficient pathways, the individual as a unit of social action is going to require some help negotiating the forces that promote unsustainable consumption in the United Kingdom beyond their own, often limited, purchasing practices.

This raises very important questions that require further consideration. The tone of this article has been suggestive of a “hidden” agenda in Labour’s sustainable consumption approaches, that is, to actually not challenge consumption head-on. This is really not a difficult argument to make given Labour’s ideological commitments to wealth creation and so on detailed above. Yet there are important questions to be asked as to whether the United Kingdom currently has the institutional architecture that allows new policy instruments to be wholly effective; that is, with all the political will in the world, and aside from Labour’s ideological commitments that suggest an arm’s length approach to sustainable consumption, is it an institutional rather than an ideological failure that is at the heart of the UK’s unsustainable consumption (or both)? And if so, what would sound institutions to address consumption in the UK look like, that may bridge the divide between the state and the individual that currently pervades government policy frameworks, in ideology and delivery? In addressing these questions, it might be further possible to unscramble the complex cause-and-effect relationships between ideology, policy, and social outcomes. The aim of this article has been to humbly open up this potential research agenda, by highlighting some discernible links between Labour’s stated political ideology, subsequent policy instruments, and some disparate social outcomes, in terms of (un)sustainable consumption in the United Kingdom.
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References


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