

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

18 January 2016

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Ferry, L. and Eckersley, P. (2016) 'Debate : climate change and 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) Paris—addressing the 'ultimate' wicked issue.', *Public money and management.*, 36 (4). pp. 241-242.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2016.1163021>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor Francis Group in *Public Money and Management* on 30/03/2016, available online at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09540962.2016.1163021>.

### Additional information:

---

### Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

**Words: 1277**

**Debate: Climate change and COP21 Paris – Addressing the ‘ultimate’  
wicked issue**

Laurence Ferry and Peter Eckersley

Laurence Ferry is Associate Professor in Accounting at Durham University Business School, UK

Peter Eckersley is a Research Associate at Newcastle University Business School, UK

In December 2015, a host of world leaders, non-governmental organisations and other actors assembled in Paris for the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP21) meeting on climate change. Some groups have questioned whether the resulting agreement to reduce emissions and carbon dioxide and other global warming gases may be sufficient to keep the increase in global temperatures below 2°C, the threshold above which we risk potentially catastrophic ‘runaway’ climate change (Stern, 2008). Nonetheless, it does represent the most ambitious and robust global compact on carbon dioxide reduction and climate adaptation measures since the Kyoto Protocol in 1997.

Pollitt (2015) writing in this journal, speaking later at a PMM event hosted by Lord Bichard at the House of Lords in October 2015 that both authors attended, and writing in his follow-up *Debate* piece in this journal in February (Pollitt, 2016), stressed how climate change is a ‘wicked’ issue. Rittel and Webber (1973) were the first to use this term to describe problems that encompassed a range of stakeholders (including non-state actors) and required decision-

makers to integrate objectives across different policy sectors. Furthermore, policy-makers can only really *address* (never really *solve*) wicked issues to ameliorate their negative impacts, and often have to take decisions based on incomplete or contradictory knowledge. This makes it very difficult to agree a common way forward, because some stakeholders may even disagree about the nature or extent of the problem. Crucially, however, they often need to change their behaviour to address the issue effectively: in other words they play a key role in policy implementation.

As this suggests, persuading some national governments to commit to carbon dioxide reductions may just be the easy part – delivering this agreement is likely to be the real challenge (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973). Indeed Ferry speaking in December 2015 at COP21, Cities and Regions Pavilion panel hosted by ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability Secretary General Gino Van Begin, highlighted that “the war will be lost or won during 'implementation' at sub-national government levels and such battles will require the active support and engagement of both businesses and civil society.”

In his debate piece, Pollitt outlines four ‘common denominators’ that he feels are required to address climate change effectively: more joined-up policy-making across and between levels of government; rapid response monitoring and evaluation to identify innovative practice; more long-term policy-making; and public engagement to persuade and cajole citizens to behave in a more environmentally-responsible manner. In addition, we would argue that public bodies also need to address working 'cultures' and not just their 'structures' in order to innovate (see Ferry et al 2017); as well as have the requisite skills to measure progress against objectives to reduce carbon dioxide.

Subnational governments have a key role to play in this process – something that the original Rio Earth Summit recognised back in 1992 through the Agenda 21 process, and which a number of academics (mostly geographers) have been stressing for some time (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2003). However, the wicked nature of the issue means that neither central nor sub-national governments have the capacity to achieve this alone. One author recently conducted a study of climate change governance in German and English cities, and found that the former were able to be more ambitious and hierarchical in policy-making arrangements because of the extra support they received from higher tiers of government (Eckersley, 2016). This support did not just relate to the amount of money the council received in direct grants and the freedom to levy local taxes (although these were important). Crucially, it also extended to the legal context (because the status of German councils is guaranteed in the constitution and they can rely on a more robust planning framework for sustainable development), technical advice, and the fact that they had not been required to relinquish control over local services such as transport and utilities. Overall, these factors meant that they exercised much more direct influence over other actors within the locality.

Councils in the UK have responded to their weaker position by collaborating with other local actors (including from the private sector, voluntary sector, neighbouring authorities and civil society), as they seek out additional support (Ferry, 2011). Given that climate change is a wicked issue that requires a response from interest groups and private citizens, as well as public bodies, this is a necessary course of action – the state cannot address the issue alone.

However, the UK Government's response is unlikely to address all of the common denominators that Pollitt identifies. For example, 'localism' will almost certainly lead to different tiers of government becoming *less* joined-up (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2013), and the

austerity agenda has not encouraged policy-makers to foster innovation or take a longer-term perspective (Ferry et al., 2017). In this regard, Ferry also mentioned at COP21 it is important that we understand modes of governing municipalities, partners and grassroots groups (Ahrens and Ferry, 2015) and ensure that accountability and transparency arrangements are robust (Ferry et al., 2015). Finally, the overall fragmentation and weakening of public institutions in the UK since the 1970s has reduced their influence over private actors, which makes the job of persuading (or particularly requiring) citizens and businesses to change their behaviour more challenging.

Nonetheless, considering how great the threat of a changing climate is for the future of existing human and natural systems, it is crucial that we succeed in this task (Grubnic et al., 2015). We therefore join the chorus for more ‘robust’ debate, but especially action, on sustainability.

## References

Ahrens, T. and Ferry, L. (2015), Newcastle City Council and the grassroots: accountability and budgeting under austerity. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 28, 6, pp. 909-933.

Bulkeley, H. and Betsill, M. (2003), *Cities and climate change: urban sustainability and global environmental governance* (New York, Routledge).

Eckersley, P. (2016), *Local climate governance in England and Germany: converging towards a hybrid model?*. (PhD thesis, Newcastle University).

Ferry, L. (2011). *A study of management accounting and control in governing the state: some lessons from a local government waste management service*. (PhD thesis, University of Warwick).

Ferry, L., Eckersley, P. and Zakaria, Z. (2015), Accountability and Transparency in English Local Government: Moving from “matching parts” to “awkward couple”?. *Financial Accountability and Management*, 31, 3, pp. 345-361.

Ferry, L., Coombs, H. and Eckersley, P. (in press, 2017), Budgetary stewardship, innovation and working culture: identifying the missing ingredient in English and Welsh local authorities’ recipes for austerity management. *Financial Accountability and Management*.

Grubnic, S., Thomson, T. and Georgakopoulos, G. (2015), New development: Managing and accounting for sustainable development across generations in public services—and call for papers. *Public Money and Management*, 35, 3, pp. 245–250.

Lowndes, V. and Pratchett, L. 2013. Local Governance under the Coalition Government: Austerity, Localism and the ‘Big Society’. *Local Government Studies*, 38, 1, pp. 21-40.

Pollitt, C. 2015. Wickedness will not wait: climate change and public management research. *Public Money and Management*, 35, 3, pp. 181-186.

Pollitt, C. 2016. Debate: Climate change – the ultimate wicked issue. *Public Money and Management*, 36, 2, pp. 78-80.

Pressman, J. L. and Wildavsky, A. 1973. *Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland; or why it's amazing that federal programs work at all* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

Rittel, H. W. J and Webber, M. 1973. Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, pp. 155–169.

Stern, N. 2008. The Economics of Climate Change. *The American Economic Review*, 98, pp. 1-37.

