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The Political Costs of Policy Coherence: Constructing a Rural Policy for Scotland¹

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ABSTRACT

It is not hard to find the complaint that a group of policies are incoherent, operate in silos or are unintegrated. The aspiration to coherence is widespread across all political systems: it is today's idea in good currency. Scholarship has identified conditions that support coherence: a strong constituency with a shared policy image. This article confirms that these are vital sources of more or less coherence, but explores the question of whether more coherence in one area comes at the cost of incoherence elsewhere.

Case study detail contrasts the Scottish Executive's projection of a unified *rural* policy, with the reality of a persistent Scottish *agricultural* sector, with contending (multiple) publics with separate and often conflicting agendas: the case study found no unified policy community with shared perceptions. While a lack of coordination *may* simply be the manifestation of poor policymaking, this piece argues that in other cases the practical limitations on policy harmonization have to be acknowledged. Imperfectly coordinated rural policy may be inevitable as coordination in particular niches is often a casualty of competing priorities. This article argues against over ambitious expectations about the feasibility of integration. Accordingly it suggests that the project to rid policy practice of incoherence is too heroic: instead this article rediscovers the virtues of bargaining among informed and relevant participants, and incremental politics.

Coherence as a Proxy for Planning?

The term coherence has broad currency both among academics and practitioners. It usually refers to an ambition to integrate activity in

related areas to ensure that desired outcomes are achieved and public money is used efficiently (see May et al. 2005a; Di Francesco, 2001; IPAA, 2002: 5). This article explores the conditions generating policy coherence – and the larger issue of whether incoherence constitutes policy failure – through an examination of the attempt to construct (post Devolution) a Scottish rural policy. This is of some importance in two senses. Firstly, the turn from agriculture policy to rural policy is widespread internationally. Secondly, the search for rural coherence is treated as a specific instance of a trend across policy fields to seek better policy integration.

In most discussions coherence is interpreted as predefined, intentional policy designed to maximize benefits; it is thus part of the family of rational comprehensive decision making. Accordingly the debate on coherence eventually reveals itself as a competition between a planning approach to policymaking as opposed to the more messy political approach of incrementalism. In advocating the latter Lindblom (1959: 82) did not warn against the ambition for prior agreement on objectives because the task was difficult, but because it was intellectually impossible. Lindblom (1979) proposed that decision makers *should not try* to be comprehensive, but he argued better policies emerged from conflict between specialists advancing competing aspects of policy. Coherence as a proxy for planning then is open to the many criticisms of planning advanced by Wildavsky and others (e.g. Dempster and Wildavsky, 1979). The present article questions the assumption that policymaking should attempt to integrate away the competition and friction of incremental politics in the name of coherence.

The current prominence of coherence as a concept can be traced in part to a diagnosis that says modern public administration suffers from fragmentation and coordination problems. In the United Kingdom context, references to departmentalism and policy chimneys or silos are prevalent: this has led the Blair administration to pursue ‘joined up’ government. However the joined up slogan is, as Hood (2005: 19) suggests, the newspeak equivalent of the oldspeak traditional governmental interest in coordination. As Hood (2005: 24) points out, the novel idea and arresting image of joined up government gives renewed appeal to rather well worn practices and ambitions (see also Page, 2005).

Though Hood and Page seem part of a new sense of unease at the joined up instinct, underpinning the current embrace of coherence is an assumption that it is a problem that, once diagnosed as deficient, needs fixing. May et al. (2005a) effectively demonstrate the widespread assumption that in different policy fields incoherence undermines policy delivery. With this normative political use as a backdrop, this article raises the question ‘Can all policies be coherent?’ It suggests that politicians in

routinely asserting they will deliver coherent policies are creating *apparent* performance problems for themselves.

This paper builds on two recent theoretical contributions that seek to account for varying levels of coherence. May et al. (2005b) note the currency of coherence in the literature and seek to explore the politics that generate more rather than less . . . Dery (1998) also looks at what fosters and inhibits coherence – focussing on institutional issues and difficulties. Both accept that many policy sets exhibit incoherence – and explore why that may be.

In examining Canadian and US Arctic policy, May et al. (2005b: 37) define policy coherence as ‘. . . a relative term that relates to the degree of integration between relevant components’. Comparisons are made between political settings where policies are, in their terms, *component-driven* and those where they are *coherent*. Policy areas where policy participants share underlying ideas or objectives – say transportation policy – are contrasted with jurisdictions – say family policy – where relevant elements such as infant nutrition and juvenile justice are not joined. Through their case material, they find (2005b: 53, 55) a lack of coherence attributable to a ‘limited overlap among groups that are associated with different Arctic policy components’ and ‘a diversity of components with little policy centrality and of interests that sort out by the components with little overlap’. They (2005b: 56) state that ‘. . . the lack of a clear constituency and the lack of a stable policy subsystem for the Arctic create a policy environment for which the politics of particular issues dominates policymaking for the Arctic’. They suggest that, ‘The result is a policy space labelled Arctic Policy for which in a very real sense there is “no there, there”’ (2005b: 56). May et al. (2005b: 58) conclude that the impact of interest group activity on policy coherence is negative where, ‘The constituencies for various components of these policies are much stronger than the constituencies for the policy area as a whole’.

Generalising May et al. (2005b: 37) ask, ‘What fosters integration of components into overarching policies?’. They point to the relationship between policy ideas or images (‘policy glue’), supportive institutional arrangements including governmental capacity, and a unified ‘policy public’ or client group (57). Interest group involvement helps determine whether policy components are aggregated into a larger coherent whole or whether the policy map is fragmented. An important distinction is made between ‘policies with publics’ and ‘policies without publics’. The former policy areas exhibit, ‘. . . varied interest groups, governmental agencies, and attentive citizens who have a stake in a given set of issues’ (May et al, 2005b: 38). In the latter case, the ‘. . . publics surrounding issues are not extensive and issue networks and policy communities are only weakly developed’. They argue (2005b: 38), ‘policies without publics

. . . [are] . . . less cohesive and less stable'. Pertinently they quote Bonnen (1992: 198) on rural policy in the United States,

Due to the diversity of rural policy there is no closely related or coherent bundle of issues to which most rural people respond and around which they might be organized. Thus, there is no natural constituency around which to form a broad-based, rural coalition.

This is in essence a central finding in our work on Scotland. The political rhetoric of an integrated rural policy is not matched by an appropriate interest group population. The thrust of their argument on policy (in)coherence can be seen at least implicitly an account of the *non-formation* of a policy community (Richardson and Jordan, 1979). Jordan (2005) has noted the importance of discourse as much as structures as features of policy communities: in other words the indicator of 'community-ness' is the extent of shared perceptions and problem definitions. The extent to which coherence can emerge in a given policy area is associated with powerful ideas or *policy image* that Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 7) saw as buttressing policy monopolies. These policy ideas they saw as, 'generally connected to core political values which can be communicated directly and simply through image and rhetoric'. Scottish rural policy does not have these associated features.

Dery (1998: 168) distinguishes between '*primary*' (or dominant) and '*byproduct* policy', one which makes sense in the context of another policy. For example, is a rural transport policy best viewed alongside rural health and education policies as part of a primary rural policy, or as a (byproduct) rural component of an overall *primary* transport policy? For byproduct policies, change most often comes indirectly as a consequence of changes in primary policies. By-product policies give way to primary policies due to policy prioritisation. Dery (1998: 173) notes changing policy ' . . . is necessarily entangled with changing a multitude of policies that no one can or should control . . . the conversion of a byproduct into a primary policy entails the subordination of prevalent values and well shielded conventions and practices to a new set of values'. If rural transport is a byproduct policy then changing rural transport policy would involve changing transport policy generally. As Dery (1998: 164) concludes, 'The question of priority is not only which objectives should enjoy a greater share of available resources, but more importantly, which goals shall confine the pursuit of which other goals.' Change in one policy area has consequences for others.

Dery approaches the issue of coherence from the perspective of the 'sequence' into which a given set of 'programs, decisions or actions' fits (1998: 168). Some governmental actions may appear incoherent when placed (and viewed) in one sequence; yet fit when viewed as part of an alternative sequence.

The *apparently* ‘failed’ attempt at Scottish rural policy coherence reported herein resembles Dery’s (1998: 169) example of the Immigration Absorption Ministry in Israel. Though notionally in charge of absorption policy, the Ministry ‘does not command the economy nor health, housing welfare or education. Instead the Ministry is largely a *policy taking* agency’ (italic added). ‘But it must take as given, and can only hope to marginally influence, the products of a multitude of policies and programs that aim at different sets of objectives’. Rural policy in Scotland is presented in Executive documents as though it were a primary focal point for policy activity, however, *in practice* disparate components still prevail, like agriculture and transport, as the substantive policy elements to which a rural policy tag is then attached.

The way in which policy initiatives are evaluated is influenced by the claims of coherence made by government. Politicians are tempted to claim the rhetorical benefits of coherence, but this paper suggests that promiscuous claiming is unrealistic and simply leads to policies being judged as failures even though these policies are perfectly defensible in other lights. This article in finding the persistence of component based as opposed to coherence in Scottish rural policy is not making a criticism of policies, but is questioning the need to ‘present’ policies as coherent.

Precisely how policymaking should be organised – what policies should be primary and what by-product – is likely to be as impossible to resolve as the discussion around the proper design of government in the face of fragmentation. There is a thread in public administration that says policy co-ordination can be achieved through reorganisation (see Haldane Report 1918). (Such notions are critically discussed in Gulick, 1937; Hammond, 1990; Simon, 1961; Seidman, 1975.) The reform optimists like Haldane assume that ‘getting the structure right will allow us to escape difficulties in co-ordinating goals that may themselves be incompatible . . .’ (Jordan, 1994: 68). Public administration scholars have debated the best allocation of departmental responsibilities and structures. But similar issues of priorities and sequence emerge as Dery noted for policy. The so-called principles of administrative design – such as purpose, process, clientele and place – provide conflicting emphases not straightforward solutions.

Coherence and integration seem to be logical solutions, particularly it seems to rural policy. There is agreement in the literature over what types of policies may be likely to be more byproduct or incoherent policies. For instance, Dery (1998: 174–5) argues that policies that are ‘newcomers’ and that ‘pertain to a specific segment of the population or a distinct area’ are likely to be byproduct policies. But while May et al. (2005b) accurately describe the desiderata of more or less coherent policy – image and a unified public – Dery’s identification of the cost of ‘more’ is also

needed. Dery uses Wildavsky (1979: 70–1) to make the point that ‘policy spaces are dense; any major move sets off series of changes, many of which – because they are large and connected – inevitably transform any problem they were originally supposed to solve’. Coherence in one area may undermine coherence elsewhere. Ironically politicians seem uncomfortable with an image of politics – different interests, turf wars, fighting one’s ‘own corner’ and consensus. Politicians often (even typically), assume de-politicization is preferable. But the incremental politics proposition is that there are policymaking virtues in exposing rather than masking conflict. Partisan mutual adjustment (Lindblom, 1965) seeks to respect the needs of adjacent policy fields. Incremental politics suggests focusing scarce analytical capacity precisely on boundary areas of contestation. While politicians find virtues in market solutions to education and health, there is a remaining normative preference for coordination over mutual adjustment. The merit of partisan mutual adjustment (PMA) is precisely because it *does not* assume some central capacity with comprehensive knowledge and an ability to prioritize. The PMA system assumes that niche expertise and commitment to the particulars of policies are virtues not defects.

The Scottish Rural Case: Policy Rhetoric and Political Reality

In the United Kingdom context, Greer (2003: 535) has argued, ‘Joined-up government is particularly relevant to tackling countryside crisis because it is not just those initiatives specifically directed at rural problems that are important. Broader policy themes . . . need to be integrated into a coordinated integrated rural policy that cross cuts functional policy sectors’. This is a strong theme in Scotland. In 1999, a Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive (i.e. Government) were (re)established as part of the UK-wide process of devolution. The devolved Scottish institutions were given responsibilities for areas including health, education and training, local government, social work, housing, criminal justice, the environment, and rural affairs – including agriculture, forestry and fisheries (see Keating, 2005). A key priority of the Executive has been a Scottish rural policy, promising a coherent primary type policy. In fact the outcome is better seen as a collection of byproduct policies and a primary farm-based (rather than rural) policy.

The *rhetoric* of the devolved Scottish political institutions suggests a coherent rural policy picture. The partnership agreement between the Liberal Democrats and the Labour parties to underpin the first Scottish Executive after Devolution included a commitment to a rural policy and associated institutional re-design. The Liberal Democrats made this a condition of their coalition manifesto for Scottish government.

Organisationally, devolution saw the creation of Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department (SEERAD).

Devolution arrived on the political agenda coincidentally with a redefinition of ‘rurality’. Thus devolution changes and institutional disruption tended to reflect the rural fashion. As with the creation of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in England, the removal of farming or agriculture from the departmental label suggested the reduction in agriculture’s centrality. This impression was further confirmed by the creation in Scotland of a Minister for Rural Development – rather than a Minister for Agriculture. Institutionally, a Scottish cabinet-level committee, the Ministerial Committee on Rural Development was established – along-side the Parliamentary Committee on Environment and Rural Affairs. A Scottish Executive Rural Core Network was established, consisting of senior Executive staff.

The priorities for the Labour – Liberal Democrat coalition that underpinned the first Scottish Executive were set out in ‘A Partnership for Scotland: An Agreement for the First Scottish Parliament’; an entire section of which was dedicated to Rural Scotland. It said, ‘We will work to support and enhance rural life, rural communities and the rural economy’. The early post-devolution document *Rural Scotland: A New Approach*, released in 2000, proclaimed, ‘Our vision is of a rural Scotland where everyone matters: every community, every family, every rural Scot’ (5). It enunciated four themes/aims ‘to create a rural Scotland’:

- Integral to Scotland’s success, dynamic in harnessing its traditional strengths, and with an appetite for change.
- Providing opportunity for our young people – so they don’t have to leave to get on.
- Offering a high quality of life to all its citizens, with access to services.
- Sustaining and making the most of its natural and cultural heritage.

This assembly of departmental structures, parliamentary and cabinet level committees and policy statements suggests a rural policy space replacing the old farming dominated world. It offers a narrative inviting consideration of these initiatives as a coherent primary policy sequence. However, the ‘rural’ was a largely rhetorical space, without a coherent policy image and with diffuse institutional support.

Farm Policy: The agricultural policy core to a rural world?

Historically in Scotland, as in most European countries, rural areas have been dominated by agricultural forms of economic activity, plus fishing

and forestry. It is therefore not surprising that agriculture is at the core of any attempt at a coherent or *primary* rural policy. The difficulty is to re-make the policy rural rather than agricultural. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) dominates, but within the CAP arrangements recent reforms from Agenda 2000 onwards have emphasised the movement away from payments to farmers for agricultural production to area payments (based on acreage), and subsequently payments for performing agri-environmental services or contributing to rural development objectives. This appears to de-emphasise the agricultural dominance within a rural policy – but this may be misleading. While the rhetoric of CAP reform is about the notion that *rural does not mean agriculture*² and rural development policy has been formally designated as the so-called second pillar of the CAP: mechanisms like ‘modulation’ enable farm payments to be moved from production (first pillar) to rural development schemes (second pillar). However, much of what is presently called rural development can be viewed as a type of agri-environmental measure. Farmers are still the main beneficiaries.

This rural turn in EU agricultural policy is evident in Scotland. Although Devolution shifted domestic agricultural responsibilities to the Scottish Executive, Scottish initiatives remain heavily shaped by Europe-wide CAP reform. The Executive’s ‘Forward Strategy for Scottish Agriculture’ released in 2001 asserts ‘the importance of treating farming as part of our rural development, not separate’. However, it also states ‘farming is only part of the rural economy, but a healthy rural economy needs a healthy farming industry’. To some degree these rhetorical innovations reflect continuing structural shifts, as in most developed nations, full-time farm employment is shrinking and farm operations are increasingly supported by off-farm incomes or are diversifying into non-farm businesses (see Slee et al. 2001).

Scottish ‘agricultural’ rural policy is as much shaped by Europe-wide agricultural policy reforms as it is by the domestic policy preferences. The *Forward Strategy* outlined the agricultural heart of any rural policy. It also covered diversification, tourism related to agriculture and training for farmers leaving the industry. Despite its title, the existing Scottish Rural Development Regulation (SRDR) – formulated prior to Devolution – has little mention of rural development but emphasises least favoured areas, agriculture and diversification. Rural development funds are now available through a Land Management Contract system implemented in 2005, with payments going to farmers for building farm trails and hosting farm visits, etc.

As part of the ‘ruralization’ of agriculture a social-inclusion agenda was emphasised in *Rural Scotland: A new approach*³ which was produced by the Ministerial Committee on Rural Development (MCRD). In 2000 the

MCRD's replacement, the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Rural Development's (CSCRD), released *Rural Scotland Taking Stock*, which reported on progress. Significantly it identified a broader constituency for a rural policy. Its contents included discussion of: Economic Development (adding tourism to agriculture, forestry, and fisheries), Social Inclusion (including access to training, transport, housing, welfare services and health) and Natural/Cultural Heritage (including environmental schemes and land reform). This diversity reflects the reality that large parts of rural Scotland are communities in the Highlands and Islands, where crofting⁴ is a dominant form of economic activity and where social inclusion and access to basic life opportunities are unusually important. The differences within the rural envelope may be as important as the similarities.

Enduring Differences: A Non-integrated Pattern of Interests

Judging by the rural policy rhetoric and administrative re-alignment it might be expected that rural development policies would now have eclipsed orthodox agricultural policy. The reality appears somewhat different. Confirmation of rural policy as persisting as a set of discrete policy compartments emerged from a series of elite interviews.⁵ These suggested little movement in the rural policy agenda. While the *Forward Strategy for Agriculture* has spawned a set of well-developed action plans and working groups, the companion *Rural Scotland* report has not had similarly clear consequences. The Executive's coalition agreement projected a picture of coherence – and must be judged as performing poorly against this self inflicted target.

While joined-up government is meant to be more than a series of collated byproduct policies, non-farm aspects of rural policy exist essentially as byproducts of other primary policy areas (transport, education, housing, etc). This article suggests that a case can be made that the aspiration for coherence is misplaced. In Scotland, compared to Westminster, the small scale is asserted as enabling a more joined-up approach (see Kellas, 1989: 233), yet rural policy seems comparable with the fragmented approach attributed to Westminster. There seems little evidence that Scotland delivers *more* coherence overall. Policy priorities exist irrespective of level of governance.

In general two broad styles of policy development and delivery can be identified – the *single dedicated vehicle* or, alternatively, *mainstreaming*. In the former, priorities necessitate specific policies and are the *raison d'être* for dedicated organisation; Dery (1998: 173) refers to 'single issue Czars'. In the latter style, 'by-product policy' targets are attained by the retooling of existing organisations and policies to take into account an additional

priority. Joined-up government has to be difficult or impossible if governments *want* policies that are mutually exclusive. Measures expanding into other spaces will have to recognise the other pressures. Complex policymaking is not necessarily the same as poor policymaking: it may be the opposite. Early occupants of policy space are fortunate because ‘newcomers will be forced to adjust to existing programs’ (Dery, 1998: 169, citing Wildavsky).

In Scotland, rural policy initiatives have tended to be addendums to existing policy areas. A SEERAD staff member commented in interview that, ‘The dilemma is in having a stand alone policy on rural development or going along with whatever the big show in town is and having a rural development bit to it. In this respect the two big shows in town are agricultural policy and social inequality’. Scottish rural policy has been forced into a position, as one interviewee put it, of ‘*mainstreaming by necessity*’. This is consistent with what Dery (1998: 170) notes as a tension between ‘a *policymaking* ministry, and a *policy taking*, or coordinating ministry’. SEERAD presents itself as a ministry dedicated to a comprehensive rural policy under direction of a dedicated minister, yet exists as a coordinating ministry reliant on the actions and priorities of other ministers and their departments.

A search of Scottish Legislation post devolution for the term ‘rural’ on the Lexis Nexus database identified a large number of CAP related implementation legislation/regulation mentions in Budget Acts, followed by single mentions in legislation relating to Housing, Local Planning, and Land Reform. By this basic indicator *rural* legislation turns out to be about farming budgets – and then a scattering of other fiefdoms.

Letterhead reorganisations have appeared. The ‘new’ departmental structures incorporate almost unchanged the old Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries department, with the ‘environment’ section housed in a separate building from ‘agriculture’ or the ‘CAP’ sections. Rural development staff are relatively few in number and control almost no budgetary resources. While rural development rhetoric is prominent, expenditure is still through agricultural schemes and direct payments. Indeed the Scottish Executive Bi-annual Expenditure Review (2004) document states that ‘Rural Development portfolio spending by SEERAD is mainly in support of the farming and fishing sectors’, explaining that spending on rural development is contingent on ‘spending across the Executive’s Departments’ (i.e. it is not a direct budget item for SEERAD, despite the departmental label). For example, Scottish Enterprise, the economic development agency of the Scottish Executive, has a ‘Rural Group’, concentrating on rural business development (largely, but not exclusively, outwith agriculture). Departments like Transport and Health have responsibilities for rural dimensions of their

policy areas. The 'Transport' budget includes 'Rural Transport Fund' spending, while the 'Housing' budget includes expenditure for the 'Rural Housing Partnership'.

The recent (2005) inquiry of the Scottish Parliament Environment and Rural Development Committee into rural development policy notes in its terms of reference,

Although the Minister for Environment and Rural Development is in charge of rural development policy, lots of policies and spending that affect rural areas (such as housing, transport, business development schemes, etc) are controlled by other ministers and departments. The Committee has therefore found it extremely difficult to assess how achievement against targets could be measured.

This may appear as failure from a coherence perspective; lots of components without a high level of integration, but from the Dery view the present byproduct nature of much of policy may be defensible. Changing a range of byproduct rural policies requires the Department to engage with the primary policies that other Departments control. The 'primary' style rural policy that the Scottish Executive has projected actually resembles rural policy taking. Policy aspirations about dislodging farm policy dominance are constrained by politics that requires the cooperation of farming interests.

Accounting for Rural Policy Incoherence: Group Diversity and Non coincident Policy Images

If, as May et al. (2005b) assert, niche patterns of group mobilisation inhibit coherence, then rural policy coherence in Scotland requires a coherent and mobilised rural policy public. This has yet to emerge. The pattern of group mobilisation fits that associated with policy incoherence. Such encompassing groups as are found are agricultural rather than rural in nature.

The orthodox thesis with respect to group life in agricultural policy is that the National Farmers' Union dominates (See Cox et al. 1986; Grant, 1983, 1995, 2005; Marsh and Smith, 2000). For Scotland, the analogue to the NFU is the NFU Scotland (NFUS). As Archer et al. (1980) intimated long before Devolution, 'The excellent working relationship between the officials of DAFS and NFUS officials means that the former have a fairly clear idea of what is, and what is not, acceptable to Scottish farmers, while the latter can be kept closely informed on what is possible and what can be aimed for'. Interviews suggest that its importance has not changed, albeit the agricultural space is more crowded by non-farm interests. In developing the *Forward Strategy* document, one civil servant commented in classic policy community terms,

If you didn't have them [NFUS] on board it is just a waste of time. The reason why they were incorporated is because they are a crucial part of the rural scene if you like, or the agricultural scene. . . . If you can bring people into the policymaking process who have got something to deliver in terms of expertise and representational ability then it makes it easier for us and it makes policy better. The NFUS can deliver both of those things: it has representational power and it has expertise. So therefore the NFU must always be, as long as present conditions remain, a significant part of the policymaking process.

Outwardly, the Scottish agricultural policy area appears a crowded space. A public consultation in Scotland on CAP (2003) included as responding under farming and land management NFU Scotland (NFUS), Scottish Crofting Foundation (SCF), Scottish Landowners' Federation (SLF), Scottish Organic Producers' Association (SOPA), National Sheep Association, North West Cattle Producers' Association, National Beef Association Scotland, Scottish Dairy Association, Scottish Tenant Farmers' Action Group. Yet these groups are often involved in a complex set of *complementary* relations. As a NFUS interviewee explained, 'We are technically competing over the same market for members but co-operate over policy'.

The Europe-wide processes of CAP reform have encouraged a degree of group mobilisation beyond farming interests (see for example Greer, 2005), Scotland has been no different. However the sector is still dominated by the NFUS, albeit with the presence of a range of specialised commodity and other groups, including retailers. Agri-environment issues are gaining the attention of both environmental and agricultural groups. The Executive's policy statements build on the input of a very diverse range of societal interests, including environmentalists, land owners, farmers, crofters, consumers, food companies, local governments, recreational rural land users and tourism organizations. Thus, the issue is whether the Executive can reflect a rural voice or rural contestation. The *Forward Strategy*, for instance, documents a series of working groups that open up policymaking and implementation to a more inclusive group of stakeholders. But a strong farming core means the Strategy remains largely unintegrated with broader rural issues. The result has been a byproduct-inspired approach of mainstreaming: where rural questions are made a normal part of policymaking in all sectors. But can these deliver the necessary rural policy public to propel a primary rural policy?

An accommodation has been struck between some environment groups and the farming sector on the basis that regular farming activities become funded for provision of environmental services. The formation of Scottish Environment Link, a grouping of 35 Scottish environmental NGOs, has facilitated a shared environmental view on agricultural

policy⁶ and the Executive takes representations from it, rather than separate member groups. Importantly, CAP funds provide the means to bind together the farmers' aims for sustaining their farm operation at the same time as accommodating the environmentalist desire for environmental integrity. The emerging principle is that farmers become providers of public goods, and that payments remain but be moved from rewarding production to supplying public goods. Some environmental groups adopt a different view, that payments should not be made for routine or normal farming practices, but they are marginalised and have moved on to new policy niches.

Clearly evident is the lack of a *distinctive rural voice* thus limiting progress on moving existing CAP reform measures further in the rural policy direction. The lack of genuinely rural representation on the CAP reform working group, and the fact that the bulk of new money for rural development comes from what was formerly price support or farm payments – and is therefore viewed as farmers' money – means, according to some policy staff interviewed, a rural turn in CAP must be incremental. While coherence has been achieved within an agricultural policy sub-domain, this particularised coherence challenges rather than assists a more general rurality.

While CAP reform and notions of 'multifunctionality' provide a broadly inclusive policy image for agricultural policy, the rural policy area lacks this type of policy glue. Interviews with SEERAD staff revealed that rural exceptionalism formed the basis of advocating a rural policy. One remarked, 'People always ask me why rural is any different. I need to justify a difference, even though some rural areas are better off, in order to get rural development policy taken seriously'. Some outwith the Executive are likewise unconvinced of the argument's merit. An NFUS interviewee remarked, 'Rural area issues are the same as in urban areas. Business problems are largely the same: red-tape and bureaucracy and labour shortages'.

Beyond the agricultural policy core, policymaking is adapting to discrete niches. Groups work largely independently on component issues with little overlap. Health groups work on health policy, with a rural component. In its Annual Rural Report (2004), the Executive reports initiatives it views as rural policy. It reports, for example, '... the Remote and Rural Areas Resource Initiative (RARARI) commissioned the UK Sector Skills Council, Skills for Health, to map the competencies required to provide a health service to a remote and rural community'.

While general groups for farming (NFUS) and the environment (Scottish Environment Link) are active in partnership across the agricultural policy sub-domain, there is no similar general group for non-farm, rural interests. The web sites and literature of the main big-player groups

active in non-agricultural rural policy as identified by searching ‘rural’ on the Scottish Executive web site were examined. All the big groups with national coverage had a regional or rural element to their policy. For example, the local government umbrella group COSLA has a Rural Affairs Executive group. British Medical Association Scotland has a ‘rural practice’ element in its policy advocacy work. The small business organisation, FSB Scotland, has a Rural Affairs policy for ‘rural entrepreneurialism’. The Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations has created a Rural Team, focussing upon rural public services levels. The Scottish Tourism Forum was an active policy participant in Land Reform discussions and over foot and mouth disease. These bodies usually do not work together; they work on separate policy matters with separate elements of the Scottish Executive.

Agricultural and agri-environment policy issues have dominated what is referred to as rural policy in Scotland. This reflected the dominance of a relatively settled policy community, while bound by a CAP reform-induced policy image of multifunctionality, and funding streams that allow such images to be legitimated without a loss of funding to farmers. Farmers can accept a relabelling of what they have always done so long as the payments keep coming. As encompassing groups the NFUS and Environment Link Scotland draw in the plethora of specialised niche groups, allowing coherence at the sub-domain level. Specialists survive as additions to, rather than competitors with agriculture and environment.

The largest interest group, the NFUS, is keen to engage positively in the rural policy debate. NFUS staff view it as an opportunity to secure ongoing income in line with CAP reform. One staff member acknowledged that ‘it is now very difficult to define the full-time farm’. It has taken the symbolic step of shaping its vision around references to rurality; saying it wants ‘to be seen as an outstanding rural organisation effectively representing farming and associated activity in the countryside’. It has traded seats on the EU COPA-COEAG committees in commodity areas for a seat on the Rural Development committee. It interprets the future of CAP as being in rural development, believing that incrementally farm payments will shift to second pillar rural development programs. For now, there are logical limits on how far it extends its advocacy beyond the farming public. For instance, moving to a non-farm rural policy would require payments to parties besides farmers or land managers. But as a farmers union, it cannot easily argue to extend such money beyond the farming constituency. This makes it a weak force for rural primary policy.

The NFUS is not the only group trying to cast itself in rural terms. The Rural Rebels emerged as a more radical offshoot of the Scottish Countryside Alliance and the NFUS. While the Scottish Countryside

Alliance, a counterpart to the English Countryside Alliance, was primarily set up to oppose the Scottish Parliament's attempts to ban fox hunting, its agenda has been broadened to capture more widespread support. People Too has its core constituency amongst those identifying as crofters and farmers in the Highlands and Islands. They resist the recasting of farmers as environmental service providers, and the acceptance of this process by the NFUS. Farmers For Action (FFA) emerged in England, but also soon made their presence felt in Scotland, particularly over milk pricing.

In addition to new groups emerging with claims of a new constituency, some old groups have sought to develop a rural strand to their work. Collectively, these organisations reflect the heightened profile of rural affairs and at the same time the absence of a clear agreed policy image. Some groups append rural matters to their existing specialisms, exacerbating compartmentalisation. Others promote small niche constituencies. The NFUS has been slow to embrace generic issues of rural relevance, such as public service provision and social inclusion. Indeed, its political representations, focused upon CAP, have remained squarely focused upon the needs of full-time farm businesses. But the NFUS has been involved in trying to stitch together a more permanent group that may foster a genuine rural policy public, albeit one that is limited to owners or users of rural land.

However, discussions of merger of the NFUS and SLF have shown obstacles to the development of a broad rural organisation. Impediments to amalgamation include (i) the rationalisation in the number of office bearers and paid staff; (ii) membership conservatism, (iii) a likelihood of a common view simply being a lowest common denominator one. More likely than merger is the NFUS becoming a hub for other organisations to work around. Such a network seems to already exist in an embryonic form, with the existence of the Scottish Countryside Information Exchange. While admitting that the prospect of a single rural organisation would be preferable, one civil service respondent registered scepticism given the divergent views of the NFUS, SLF and the Crofters' Foundation. He observed,

... if you had one body 'The national rural union' how would they achieve consensus? If they came to us and said X is a problem, this might make it difficult for constituent parts to get a proper hearing.

Executive Shaping of Policy Publics

The existence of a policy community-style consensus may be a necessary precondition for a rural policy – but it is less clear that such group

realignment can be consciously manipulated to deliver this. The Executive is pursuing different ways of shifting to a coherent rural policy. But in fact the absence of a credible rural voice has encouraged re-positioning by a range of groups (adopting pseudo-rural postures) to exploit a policy space, and the proliferation of 'flash' groups more radically seeking to shift the rural policy image of multifunctionality. Yet the incentives to move beyond existing publics, and indeed any attempts to broaden their publics, are small and ultimately resistible.

While policy staff in the civil service see the importance of fostering publics for policy areas, their attempts in the rural area have been unsuccessful. The Rural Forum, created in the 1990s, was a cross-section of interest groups, including agriculture, land users, environment and local government. However, it ran into problems of internal accountability, with statements and press releases reportedly being issued in the absence of internal agreement or consensus. In order to promote the *Rural Scotland: A New Approach* policy document, SEERAD formed the Scottish National Rural Partnership (SNRP), which included a range of groups and public agencies.⁷ A Rural Services sub-group was formed from interested members to examine implementation issues related to service provision in rural and remote area, however, in 2004 it was wound up due to poor attendance and the absence of a concrete plan for action. Groups are unwilling to leave behind their specialised policy components.

Conclusions

The article has found rural affairs in post devolution Scotland is a largely rhetorical space that can be better characterized as a series of byproduct policies. The findings here support those recorded by Browne for rural policy in the US (as noted by May et al. 2005b, 58); who observed that coherence was undermined by the '... dominance of a farm policy over broader images of rural policy and the limited number of interest groups that advance a non-farm rural policy'. Civil servants recognise the value of having a 'public' for their policies, albeit that they are pragmatic enough to recognise the difficulties in engineering a coherent voice. In Scotland civil servants were forced to append rural policy to other areas: a so-called 'mainstreaming by necessity' option.

However, as predicted by the May et al. (2005b) approach, the tendency is towards populating policy space without integration. Incentives for integration are evident where farm group viability or survival is at stake (a need to move to a broader constituency to survive) and where access to policy resources (public money) demands joint working. While

a proliferation of rural-branded groups is evident, they are unable to dislodge existing incumbents in allied areas (agriculture and general non-farm groups with rural specialisms), and largely lack the qualities that garner governmental support or grasp the attention of dominant groups as potentially valuable allies. Group integration remains an attractive yet resistible impulse.

Bold statements and glossy brochures make for convincing statements of intent, but action is less substantive. They are no substitute for a specific policy image. Put simply there is no evidence that key players have anything like a common (policy community style) view about what rural development looks like or could mean. When there is a primary agricultural policy and a scattering of by-products no policy image can serve as glue to bond together an expanded rural policy public.

The failure of a ministerial level coordinating committee to foster coherence – and the lack of accountability inherent in such an institutional design – highlights the difficulty in engineering coherence from within government. An additional salient point here is the impact of re-badging departments. While it is often concluded that the end of named agricultural departments would undermine farmer clientelism (see Grant, 1995), the creation of SEERAD lacks depth and substance as a *rural* institution.

The finding of Scottish rural policy as incoherent and characterised as a series of byproduct policies, resonates equally with both Dery and May et al. and raises the question, is it a ‘problem’ that can be fixed? Governmental objectives may, *for very good reasons*, be in conflict. While coherence might be desirable, there are frequently very good political and policy reasons for policy makers to equivocate. For example the encouragement of rural shops might encourage in-migration, but the local residents might then object to being ‘priced out’ of housing. A desire to encourage public access to the countryside might undermine agriculture. Rural schools might not be consistent with cost effective education.

The lack of a coherent rural policy may not be a policy oversight but reflect a lack of group agreement on problem definitions and solutions. The continuing stress on the agricultural aspects is not only a reflection of policy conservatism; but also a response to continuing farming needs in the area. It is easy to complain in any particular setting that the policy package is incoherent. But there is a distinction between ineffective or inconsistent policymaking and incoherent policymaking that is juggling competing goals (policy tensions). ‘Prizes for all’ is not realistic policymaking. In areas such as global warming and domestic security Governments may be making policy choices in apparent confusion, but they can be compromising between irreconcilable objectives.

The apparent ‘weakness’ of Scottish rural coherence fits in with May et al.’s (2005a: 14) broad comparison of different policy domains. They find substantive policy areas such as transportation typically offer greater coherence, but that for ‘identity-based and regional policies’ they find two contrasting worlds. ‘One is comprised of diverse issues and interests with limited targeting that make for less policy coherence (families, women, children and rural, and to a lesser extent urban politics). The other comprised of greater issue focus, less diverse interest involvement, and stronger targeting of policies’. In the real world limited integration in rural policy may have to be restricted to dealing with agri-environment matters, because they still exist as economically important issues and as a policy-taking area because of the primacy of other policies. This is the nature of policymaking in crowded spaces. The Scottish case considered here constitutes ‘failure’ only in so far as it falls short of stated policy aspirations: a horizontal rural policy. Indeed, one could argue that the Executive has been successful to the extent that it has started a debate which may shift the policy priority *away* from a sectoral agricultural policy. The incoherence reported in this case study is a reflection of the fact that changing policy priorities constitute a *push* away from a sectoral agriculture policy rather than the *pull* towards a non-farm rural policy. It may not have reached its policy destination but it has left the agricultural policy station. In that sense, the policy aspiration of coherence appears ‘rational’ as a political project to reduce farming influence via an incremental process. But recognising the benefits of coordination as a target should not mean that conflict is seen as dysfunctional.

This article concentrates on the Scottish case, yet some promising comparative angles emerge. Within Europe the best hypothesis would seem to be that countries with proportionately large rural populations and/or viable rural parties may sustain a shared policy image sufficient to bind together relevant networks. Agricultural and environmental groups may act as aggregators of by-product, sectoral interests to underpin the primary spatial interests of rural peoples. Some northern European nations – Finland for example – with some justification claim a coordinated policy and that fits the background suggested.⁸ Coordination is structural rather than a ‘stick on’ badge. Viable rurality is not simply something on a political wish list but has to reflect the prevailing group and organizational structures and the understandings.

Barriers to a rural policy are not parochial but reflect the cross cutting structure of public policies. The issue is how to balance the need for coherence in a variety of big budget areas such as housing, health and transport with coherence in the rural area. It is necessary to accept the existence of competing interest demands rather than assume the conflict away. The superficial management mantra of ‘more coherence’ or more

‘joined-up government’ needs to be supplemented by an understanding that the practicality (and even desirability) of coherence reflects the nature of the topic, the structure of political support, the homogeneity of policy definition, and other factors. Political will or the advice of consultancy studies are not enough.

Where the reform agenda optimistically sees few limits to the potential of redesign, the traditional bureaucratic culture recognises tradeoffs, contradictions, paradoxes and sees as naive the belief that conflict can be excised from political choice (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004: 160). How matters such as coherence are approached depends on the extent to which institutional memory influences plans to re-organise policy areas. Recent work in the United Kingdom has accepted that policymaking is about managing conflicts rather than sublimating them with ‘one leap’. Hood (2005: 22) points to the trade offs involved in coordination and Page points out (2005: 141) that the much disparaged policy ‘silos’ ‘exist for good reasons’. Conflict, incoherence and partisan mutual conflict may not represent administrative pathology, but the effective representation of legitimate, if diverse, political objectives which raises the level of information brought to a problem (Lindblom, 1979). Competition and conflict are the essence of politics: to deny their existence is unrealistic. The irony is that politicians seem unhappy with policymaking processes and models that accept the political nature of decisionmaking.

NOTES

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2. A shift to a coherent rural policy is championed and reproduced in the ‘rural studies’ literature. The academic discussion has tended to largely accept, albeit with some dissenting voices (Hoggart and Paniagua, 2001), that a post-productivist countryside is emerging (See for instance Marsden, 1998; Ilbery and Bowler, 1998; Halfacree, 1997). Marsden (1998, 107) sketches, ‘... a rural world where the certainties of agricultural production as the traditional “rural hub” are giving way to a much more polyvalent rural scene and regulatory structure.’ Such accounts illustrate the academic and policy currency of this ‘rural turn’.
3. This document draws to some extent on the past work (pre Devolution) undertaken by the Scottish Office, including a report on the ‘Quality of Rural Services in Scotland’ in the late 1990s. The recommendations emphasised action by COSLA, local authorities and Enterprise Agencies.
4. Crofting is a form of land use in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. It is typically a small land holding which is leased from a land owner for the purposes of agricultural production, typically lamb and beef for fattening on the lowlands and some vegetable production.
5. More than two dozen elite interviews were undertaken over the period 2002–2005 with staff from a number of key agricultural, environmental and rural/countryside interest groups. Additional interviews were carried out with policy orientated SEERAD staff. The interviews used semi-structured questions, covering development of their organisations, their links with both other interest group organisations and the civil service, and how they felt the Scottish rural agenda would unfold.
6. Its membership includes 35 groups, the better known of which includes; Friends of the Earth Scotland, The National Trust for Scotland, Ramblers’ Association Scotland, RSPB Scotland, Soil Association Scotland and WWF Scotland.

7. Its membership included; Confederation of British Industry Scotland, Communities Scotland, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Federation of Small Businesses, Forestry Commission, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, National Farmers Union Scotland, Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations, Scottish Crofting Foundation, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Environment LINK, Scottish Executive, Scottish Landowners Federation, Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Trades Union Congress, The Scottish Agricultural College and VisitScotland.
8. Comparison within the UK is also revealing. The Countryside Agency (CA) in England constitutes somewhat of an advocate for rural concerns and its use of 'rural proofing' to require Departments to consider the impact of policy change on rural concerns provides a tool for a 'mainstreaming style' of rural policy. The diversified base of English rural economies—particularly in the south—seemingly creates a rationale for central government sponsoring an institution with a dedicated mainstreaming function. The CA's impact in weaving rural concerns into the institutional fabric is of course another matter.

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