NEW ZEALAND'S ABANDONMENT OF THE CARBON NEUTRAL PUBLIC SERVICE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, New Zealand's (NZ) new National-led government abandoned the Carbon Neutral Public Service (CNPS) program, a Labour-led government initiative intended to help Government achieve carbon neutrality within its core agencies. This short analysis article provides an overview and brief assessment of the CNPS initiative. Drawing on relevant scholarly literature and public documents relating to NZ's climate change agenda, this paper finds that while the CNPS program suffered from a range of challenges, it nonetheless was demonstrating results. This paper also highlights that while the Labour-led government was keen to act on climate change mitigation, under the National-led government, NZ is no longer aiming to lead on carbon neutrality.

Policy relevance
As climate change mitigation policy continues to feature prominently on government agendas, it is important to understand the ethos and ambition of national programs designed to lead in this area. This is particularly relevant during times of political change, as demonstrated in NZ, where public sector carbon neutrality vanished with the out-going Labour-led government. This paper provides a brief analysis of the CNPS program, and highlights the National-led government's direction on climate change mitigation.

Keywords: New Zealand, Government organizations, Carbon neutral, Climate change policy

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is a monumentally important issue affecting communities from around the world. Recently there has been growing academic interest in examining international and national policies to address climate change (e.g. Okereke, Bulkeley, and Schroeder, 2009), with much attention focused on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's Kyoto Protocol and the economics of a global climate change solution. Internationally, carbon

emissions trading (ET), both via voluntary and regulated mechanisms, has become the preferred path for industrialized countries to mitigate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and a growing body of scholarly work exploring carbon markets and ET has emerged (e.g. Braun, 2009; Lohmann & Sexton, 2010); carbon tax has emerged as the alternative to ET (e.g. Zhang, Wang, and Huang, 2011). Academic attention to national climate mitigation strategies (e.g. Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, and Whitmarsh, 2007; Ye, Li, and Lingyun, 2007; Howarth & Foxall, 2010) is on the rise. As the literature suggests, governments from around the world are becoming conscious of the necessity to act on climate change (e.g. Pinkse & Kolk, 2009) and are beginning to develop long-term mitigation strategies (e.g. Bailey, 2007; Boston, 2008); the UK and Scottish Governments, for example, have set statutory targets for an 80% reduction in GHG emissions by 2050, relative to a 1990 baseline (Bebbington & Barter, 2011). The ultimate goal of achieving carbon neutrality (e.g. Gossling & Schumacher, 2010; Birchall, Ball, Mason & Milne, 2013) represents an idealised extension of these targets, and within this scope there is an emerging body of literature that explores the role of offsetting (e.g. Lovell, Bulkeley, and Liverman, 2009) and its actual effectiveness at reducing global emissions (e.g. Milne & Grubnic, 2011).

However, even when the notion of climate change and the need for an international response is accepted across national political parties, a unified and coherent policy response may remain elusive. In New Zealand (NZ), for example, where "Government has made many statements that indicate a commitment to sustainability and sustainable development" (Buhrs, 2008, p. 62), the creation of a national climate strategy is hampered by indecision and the desire to not get ahead of other countries (e.g. Chapman, 2006) that may have a greater mitigative impact. For NZ, like many countries, decarbonizing the economy has an array of social and economic implications

(e.g. Chapman & Boston, 2007), that are potentially outweighed by the insignificance of the country's overall contribution to the accumulation of atmospheric GHG emissions (e.g. Macey, 2007). With that said, while NZ's contribution to atmospheric GHG emissions is low, at about 0.2% (New Zealand Government, 2007a), NZ has the 11th highest emissions per capita, and is among the developed countries with the highest increase in emissions from 1990 levels (New Zealand Government, 2009a).

In 2007, in tandem with efforts to price carbon and develop an ET scheme (NZ Govt., 2007a),[i] Helen Clark's Labour government launched the Carbon Neutral Public Service (CNPS) program. While the core public sector[ii] accounts for only 2% of NZ's total GHG emissions, the aim of the program was to elevate NZ's international profile as a leader on climate change (New Zealand Government, 2007a) and demonstrate to organizations (both public and private) a practical methodology for achieving carbon neutrality. The program was terminated by John Key's National government in March 2009.

In contribution to an under-studied literature on public sector organizational carbon neutrality (Ball et al., 2009), the objective of this paper is to provide a brief overview and analysis of the now dismantled CNPS program, an initiative intended to help the NZ government achieve carbon neutrality within its core agencies. Further, given that the termination of the CNPS program followed a change in Government, the paper also aims to provide a glimpse of the National-led government's direction on climate change mitigation.

THE CARBON NEUTRAL PUBLIC SERVICE PROGRAM

Led by the Ministry for the Environment, the CNPS program's goal was to move the NZ government's 34 core public service departments, representing approximately 159,000 t-CO2e for base 2006/07 (New Zealand Government, 2008), towards carbon neutrality.[iii] Government understood that in order to encourage businesses and households to reduce their carbon footprint, it must do the same and demonstrate commitment to lowering its own footprint within its operations (New Zealand Government, 2007a; Clark, 2007).

The delivery of the program employed a staged approach, and it was acknowledged that the first stage of the program would be iterative, learning by doing (New Zealand Government, 2007a). Of the 34 core departments, six lead-core departments were tasked with developing plans to reach carbon neutrality (for the period of 2006/ 07 - 2011/ 12 financial year) by February 2008,[iv] while the remaining 28 core departments were only required to develop emission reduction plans by the same date, and expected to be well on their way to achieving carbon neutrality by 2012 (New Zealand Government, 2007a). Though the 34 core departments were mandated to go carbon neutral, the wider state sector, including Crown entities, schools and district health boards, for example, was only encouraged to undertake efforts to cut emissions.[v]

The budget for the CNPS program was $NZ10.4 million over three years. This sum included funding for energy audits and travel plans for the 34 core departments, and the offset portfolio for the 2006/ 07 - 2011/ 12 emissions from the six lead-core departments (New Zealand Government, 2007a). The offset portfolio of the remaining 28 core departments, however, was not included in the $NZ10.4 million, and government officials were in the process of

determining whether costs should be met by respective departments' baseline budget, or a further budget bid. Likewise funding for the six lead-core departments' offset portfolio beyond 2012 was also in discussion (New Zealand Government, 2008). In terms of reduction measures for the 34 core departments, while it was expected that financial savings would result over time, it was anticipated that departments would be required to absorb some costs in the short to medium term (New Zealand Government, 2007a).[vi]

The CNPS program operated within the guidelines of the Greenhouse Gas Protocol for achieving carbon neutrality, with inventories compliant to International Standards Organization specifications (New Zealand Government, 2008; Mason & Ball, 2008).[vii] Further, the program's approach for completing the emissions inventory was consistent with those employed by, for example, the World Resource Institute, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development, and the Landcare Research CarboNZero program (New Zealand Government, 2007a).

Under the CNPS program, there were three key steps to achieve carbon neutrality: (1) measure emissions; (2) reduce emissions; and, (3) offset the remaining emissions. For the first step, agencies were required to compile an accurate inventory that accounts for the GHG emissions associated with energy and electricity use, business travel and transport (including air travel), and waste sent to landfill. The data was organised around three scope categories, as per ISO specifications.[viii]

Step two required departments to identify, conceptualise and implement practices and programs to reduce emissions. Departments were expected to reduce their emissions as much as practical, within the "bounds of reasonableness and cost-effectiveness" (New Zealand Government, 2007a).[ix] Reduction efforts focused on three areas: energy efficiency, including energy audits and staff awareness building; travel, including the development of travel plans, instalment of video-conferencing, and procurement of fuel efficient vehicles; and, waste reduction and recycling.[x] Departments were encouraged to find "win-win' options that resulted in both cost and emissions savings relative to business as usual.[xi] In addition, departments were required to set realistic emission reduction targets. Given that departments were starting from different base-points, Government did not believe it appropriate to set a flat-rate target across the departments (New Zealand Government, 2007a).

The final stage for achieving carbon neutrality involved offsetting. Since it is not practical - and in some cases not technologically possible - to reduce GHG emissions to zero, the remaining unavoidable emissions required offsetting. The task of investigating offset options for the six lead-core departments was centralised, and assigned to the Ministry for the Environment. While it was accepted that all offset projects be located in NZ, with preference for forestry-related projects on Department of Conservation land (New Zealand Government, 2007a), some debate did surround the offset portfolio itself. Cabinet ultimately recommended that the six lead-core department offset portfolio include Kyoto-compliant offsets.[xii]

The Ministry for the Environment emphasised the need to focus on accelerated indigenous forest reversion on Crown land, as there was real capacity for ecological co-benefits and exposure to

gain public support. Moreover, this approach aligned with biodiversity goals, and was not limited by seed stock and seeding availability (New Zealand Government, 2007b). The quality of the offset was an important consideration given the program's need to maintain credibility. It was estimated by government that emissions associated with the six lead-core departments could be offset by the end of 2012 "through the reversion of indigenous forest on between 10,000 and 27,000 hectares" of Department of Conservation land (New Zealand Government, 2007a). In order to minimise risk associated with any one specific activity, and given their delayed timeline, a more diversified portfolio was crucial for the remaining 28 core departments (New Zealand Government, 2007b).

DISCUSSION

Challenges and outcomes of the CNPS program

The CNPS program grew out of the Labour-led government's desire to make "sustainability central to NZ's unique national identity" (Clark, 2006). This came at a time when sustainability and climate change were featuring predominantly on international agendas (e.g. Bailey, 2007; Boston, 2008), and Labour wanted to be bold in this area: "we could aim to be carbon neutral" (Clark, 2006).[xiii] Labour believed that carbon neutrality was "the way the world [would] move" and thus wanted to seize the "opportunity to be at the forefront" (Clark, 2007) of this global effort. While Labour's ambition was challenged by the opposition, who believed it unnecessary and economically dangerous to get ahead of other countries that may have a greater mitigative impact (e.g. Chapman, 2006), Prime Minister Clark believed that, "everything about having a carbon neutral public service made sense, it saved money; so it wasn't only good for the

environment, it was good for the bottom line of Government's budget" (Birchall et al., 2013, p.12). As a first step, Labour wanted to put Government's house in order.

In Labour's haste to launch the CNPS program, however, and notwithstanding the expectation that the program would develop and mature over time (New Zealand Government, 2007a), critical building blocks were overlooked and as a result the program met challenges along the way (e.g. Birchall et al, 2013).[xiv] Among these challenges, according to the majority of managers interviewed in the Birchall, Ball, Mason & Milne (2011) study, was the program's failure to effectively connect with senior management. Senior management play a critical role in the design and execution of new initiatives, had they been more effectively engaged in the CNPS program, those charged (core agencies' managers) with the delivery of the program would likely have met fewer obstacles.

However, given that the Prime Minister (and some among the lead-core six agencies) had identified in hindsight that the Ministry for the Environment may not have been the correct ministry to lead the program (e.g. Birchall et al., 2013), the problems may have been more endemic to the program itself. Along this line, in addition to a lack of benchmarking, the program suffered from a number of methodological problems. For example, while the program's method for achieving carbon neutrality was touted as being consistent with internationally recognised protocols, as indicated by the managers interviewed in the Birchall et al. (2013) study,[xv] the program's approach for inventory development and measuring data was inconsistent, with scope varying between agencies and emission conversion factors being changed at the last minute by the Ministry for the Environment. Moreover, the task of data gathering was hampered

by poor access in general, this was particularly the case for energy data related to rented buildings (Birchall et al., 2013; Mason & Ball, 2008).

Further, notwithstanding the CNPS program's mandate to consider mitigation options first (New Zealand Government, 2007a; Ball et al., 2009), the program included a heavy reliance on offsets to achieve carbon neutrality, (e.g. Birchall et al., 2013). The offset threshold (the point where managers decide emission reductions are no longer possible, and offsetting becomes the desired alternative) for the two most ambitious departments was only 13% (Ministry of Economic Development) and 19% (Department of Conservation), thus requiring the departments to offset some 87% and 81% of their emissions, respectively (e.g. Birchall et al., 2013). While offsetting does dominate corporate carbon management strategies (e.g. Jordan & Lorenzoni, 2007), given Government's aim to lead by example, the program's reliance on offsets "provides a contestable example to society" (Mason & Ball, 2008, p.9); a reliance on offsets holds the potential risk, as Gössling et al. (2007) suggest, of either directly or indirectly, encouraging a business-as-usual mentality.

Exacerbating the offset issue further, Government had identified only 50,000 hectares of land suitable and available for offset needs (New Zealand Government, 2007a). With the six lead-core agencies requiring between 10,000 and 27,000 hectares to offset their emissions alone, and given that the six lead-core agencies, by weight, represent only 16% of the 159,000 t-CO2e for the total core public service departments (New Zealand Government, 2008), Government's post-2012 liability would have exceeded the Department of Conservation's capabilities, therefore necessitating what would likely have proven a more costly option (Birchall, forthcoming).

In spite of these challenges, the program was charting new territory. Moreover, the 34 core departments identified over 300 actions to lower GHG emissions below business as usual (New Zealand Government, 2008), with further reductions expected once departments completed their energy audits and travel plans. In addition, as suggested by Birchall et al. (2013), in the process of developing their emissions inventory and management plan, management awareness and learning around organizational carbon mitigation increased substantially, as did inter-ministry/ department networking. Ultimately, because the program ended prematurely, it is difficult to project how organizational GHG emission reduction efforts would have evolved beyond the first commitment period.

The abandonment of the CNPS program and National's path forward on climate change mitigation

In November 2012 Prime Minister Key publicly acknowledged that the previous Government "may have had a stronger emphasis" on climate change (3 News, 2012), and reiterated that "we never wanted to be a world leader in climate change" (ONE, News, 2012). While Government concedes that the environment does matter, "[Government] wants to make sure that [it is] not prioritising that over everything else" (3 News, 2012).

Yet before National was elected to lead Government, it identified the importance of confronting climate change as part of its economic growth strategy: "National is committed to growing our economy. Confronting climate change will be a vital part of the policy mix for fueling that growth" (Key, 2007, p.4). For the National-led government, however, the CNPS program, was

not part of the policy mix. As Government explained: the "only achievement" of the CNPS program was "…to cost this country millions of dollars" (Smith, 2009a). Though this statement fails to account for the other outcomes of the initiative, mentioned above, it also implies that the CNPS program was discontinued for reasons of conventional neoliberal economic ideology. But, as Birchall et al., (2013) and Birchall, (forthcoming) indicate, a formal inquiry into the program's effectiveness (cost-benefits) did not occur, suggesting that the discontinuation of the program was politically motivated.

Further, while Smith (2009b) affirms that "dealing with climate change effects must be part of existing planning for Government...", and that "it is now business as usual," NZ public sector organizations continue to identify a lack of Government support and leadership for climate mitigation (e.g. Birchall, 2013). What's more, a study conducted by NZ's Office of the Auditor-General demonstrates that emissions quantification are in fact not business as usual for at least 53% of the 77 local authorities covered by their study (Office of the Auditor-General, 2011). This trend is common on a global scale as well, with the literature suggesting that while public sector decision-makers are indeed beginning to engage in the climate change discourse, priority for action remains low (e.g. Brody, Grover, Lindquist, and Vedlitz, 2010); in the absence of supportive policy from Government, it remains difficult for public organizations to make significant contributions to climate change mitigation (e.g. Betsill, 2001).

Moving forward, the Key administration's revised ET scheme is NZ's principal policy tool for achieving GHG emission reductions. However, though National's scheme did intend full obligation for the transport, electricity and industrial sectors on 1 January 2013, and the rest of the economy by 2015, Government announced a slowing of the next stage of the scheme, as

recommended by the Emissions Trading Scheme Review Panel (Smith, 2011). According to Smith (2011), this new path assuages the economic impact on the economy, while continuing to push the progress needed to stimulate investment in carbon abatement.

National's climate policy also includes a strong focus on research. Through the Centre for Agricultural Greenhouse Gas Research (CAGGR), Government continues to fund world-class research into emissions connected with the agriculture sector. Given NZ's unique emissions profile, with the agriculture sector accounting for approximately 50% of NZ's domestic GHG emissions (New Zealand Government, 2011), as compared to the developed-world average of 10% (New Zealand Government, 2009b), perhaps this is indeed a more logical contribution to climate change mitigation.

Another element of National's climate policy is the Energy Strategy. While under the Labour-led government the strategy placed sustainability as a core objective,[xvi] the new NZ Energy Strategy highlights the tie between economic performance, social wellbeing and energy security, emphasizing the importance of fossil fuels. Notwithstanding the new strategy's mandate for exploration, exploitation and utilization of fossil fuels, however, the strategy does acknowledge that environmental management is critical if NZ's economy is to reach its potential (Ministry of Economic Development, 2011).

As for its emissions reduction target, Government has adopted the goal of 50% reduction in CO2e, as compared to 1990 levels, by 2050 (New Zealand Government, 2009b). A "responsibility target" of 10-20% emissions reduction below 1990 levels by 2020 has also been adopted, however, this target is contingent "upon an effective global agreement" on climate change mitigation (New Zealand Government, 2009b), which in coming years may in fact prove elusive given the reluctance of critical emitters (for example China and the United States) to

form a global agreement on climate change mitigation. Additionally, Government recently announced that instead of signing onto the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol, which began 1 January 2013, NZ has made a voluntary pledge under the Framework Convention (New Zealand Government, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The abandonment of the CNPS program came on the heels of a change in national leadership, from a Labour-led (more liberal) to a National-led (more conservative) government. Though the program experienced serious challenges, according to Birchall et al. (2013), participants of the program suggested that the initiative delivered both emission reductions and cost savings, as well as significant learning around climate change and carbon management, and, despite failure to effectively connect with senior management, fostered a broadened network circle.

Perhaps, as an alternative to program termination, if the National-led government would have allowed the CNPS initiative to formally evolve into a Government-mandated (and financially supported) carbon management strategy, Government could have redefined its carbon agenda and nullified the need for offsetting (and particularly the high degree of reliance upon it). In this respect, transition to carbon management would have allowed Government to better capitalize on costs already incurred, the investment in learning around carbon accounting, and the leadership demonstrated both nationally and internationally.

Ultimately, notwithstanding efforts with the CAGGR, in terminating the CNPS program,

reshaping the ET scheme and the energy strategy to focus on economics rather than sustainability, and delaying Government's international commitment to mitigate climate change, the National-led government has demonstrated its shift away from the previous Government's desire to lead by example in this important area.

[i] After significant opposition from the business community, the carbon tax was abandoned (Buhrs & Christoff, 2006). In December 2007 Clark's government introduced the Climate Change (Emissions Trading and Renewable Preference) Bill, which expressed government's intention to establish an economy-wide emissions trading scheme (e.g. Ministry for the Environment, 2007)

[ii] The core public sector/service represents the 34 departments (government agencies) that were mandated to participate in the CNPS program, but does not, however, include the broader state sector (e.g. Crown entities, schools, district health boards) (NZ Govt., 2007).

[iii] See New Zealand Government (2007a) for a list of the 34 core departments.

[iv] The six lead-core departments include the Department for Conservation, Inland Review Department, Ministry for Economic Development, Ministry for the Environment, Ministry of Health, and the Treasury. These ministries were chosen to lead the program because information already existed regarding their energy and transport use and the fact they were a representative cross-section of the 34 core government agencies (New Zealand Government, 2007a).

[v] It was expected that following an assessment of the experience of the 34 core departments, the broader state sector would also embark on a path to achieve carbon neutrality (New Zealand Government, 2007a).

[vi] The $NZ10.4 million did not include the expected savings generated from energy efficiencies. It was expected that the investment in emission reduction measures would be repaid over time via reduced energy bills and a reduced need for offsets (New Zealand Government, 2007a).

[vii] Compliant to International Standards Organization 14064-1 (International Standards Organization, 2006). The Greenhouse Gas Protocol is an international emissions accounting framework, used by both public and private sector organizations.

[viii] Scope 1 - Direct Emissions: Emissions associated with on-site production or combustion of fossil fuels, including purchased fuel for vehicle fleet; Scope 2 - Indirect Emissions: Emissions associated with purchased electricity, i.e. emissions created through the consumption of electricity to light and power buildings; Scope 3 - Optional: Typically includes emissions associated with business travel (inc. air travel, taxis), outsourced services, and employee commuting, for example (e.g. International Standards Organization, 2006).

[ix] Websites did not have page numbers, as a result no reference to page number will be provided

[x] The Ministry for the Environment provided departments with a guideline for these measures, but this document is not publicly available.

[xi] The Ministry for the Environment was charged with developing a "cost-effective threshold" to assist departments in determining the most appropriate emission reduction measure (New Zealand Government, 2007a). The government recognized that "not all potential reduction measures [would] save money..." and while "emissions reduction [was] the main focus of the initiative... there is point at which reduction ceases to be the best option and offsetting becomes preferable" (New Zealand Government, 2007a).

[xii] It is important to note that the CNPS initiative was developed from a sustainability perspective, rather than a policy tool for achieving NZ's commitment under the Kyoto Protocol. With that said, offsets associated with the program were intended to be Kyoto compliant: "We expect that Kyoto-compliant options will be preferred in the first instance because they help New Zealand meet its emission targets for the First Commitment Period under the Kyoto Protocol, and are more likely to align with broader climate change policy. One major criticism of non-Kyoto options is that they do not lessen our Kyoto liability, and therefore the government effectively pays twice to offset the emissions" (New Zealand Government, 2007b).

[xiii] A year into the CNPS initiative, the Government continued to advocate the program's status as an international leader on public sector carbon neutrality (New Zealand Government, 2008).

[xiv] As Prime Minister Clark was in position of influence. An interesting avenue for future research relates to the degree to which Clark's ambition for carbon neutrality was supported by her Government. In other words, like Jean Chretien's decision for Canada to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which faced significant opposition from business, provincial governments and from within his own cabinet (Harrison & McIntosh-Sundstrom, 2010), as champion, did Clark force the launch of the CNPS program?

[xv] The Birchall et al. (2013) study included semi-structured interviews with managers involved in the delivery of the CNPS program within the lead-core ministries, and a semi-structured interview with the champion of the program, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark. Because of the nature of semi-structured interviews, it is important to note the potential for subjective opinion and be aware of the interviewees context relative to their narrative.

[xvi] See Ministry of Economic Development (2007). Labour's 2007 energy strategy was preceded by the 2001 National Energy Efficiency and Conservation Strategy, which developed following the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act 2000. This strategy focused on three key policy efforts: energy efficiency, energy conservation, and development of renewable energy (e.g. Kelly, 2007).

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