

Transcript of 'Sustainability in Scotland'

Season 1, Episode 19, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business, here at Lancaster University Management School.

I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

Jan: Now, Jan, the last episode we got talking to Dr Lucy Wishart from the University of St Andrews, all about issues such as waste, discard theory, circular economy. And we didn't have time to talk to her all about her work with government and with policy makers.

Jan: Well that's a, gives us a really good chance in this wee bonus episode then to ask some questions about the Scottish policy context, and what's, perhaps, special about it. And how the Scottish government is thinking about these kind of areas.

[Theme music]

Paul: Yes, welcome again Lucy. Maybe we can start, we've talked on the podcast before with, uh, Dr Jekaterina Rindt here at Lancaster University about the importance of policy being devised with the priorities of the people being affected and the importance of that being built into it, how this all fits down to a more local level.

Now Scotland's a bit less local than Lancaster, Morecambe and Lancashire, but what are the differences that there are up there in the Scottish context and how, both in the approach to sustainability and in the attitudes to it?

Lucy: So I'm always a little bit reluctant to suggest that Scotland is in any way exceptional to anywhere else. And I don't know if that is an exceptionally Scottish thing to do, [Jan and Lucy laugh] or whether actually there's method in that.

But what I think is really important, from a waste perspective, particularly, and a circular economy perspective, is although previously I spoke about waste being very sociocultural, it's also hugely material.

And so the, the infrastructure needed to deal with waste in a sustainable way, and even waste in, in a sort of more traditional way, is very place-based. And it's place based in Scotland,, and it's place based in England and it's place based in Wales, and it's place based in other countries as well. So the approach is very different on a country basis, when it comes to waste.

The other thing that's very different is it's even, even different on a regional basis. So the, each local authority in Scotland will have a different way of dealing with its waste and its recycling. And we're moving towards having more coherency across that, but there, there's been a tradition of waste being dealt with at a local level.

That partly comes from the materiality of it. So, so of course people in Shetland are going to with their waste differently than people in Glasgow, because geographically it's very different. And also the sorts of waste generated is very different.

But there's also probably an element of nobody really cares that much about waste, so we'll give it to local authorities to deal with [laughs]. Those are not interesting to the big political players. We're not having, I once said to my husband, I would love to see one of the national debates for the, the elections be on waste, as opposed to the economy or, or other thing, or energy, or anything. And it's just not, or at least then I thought it wasn't going to happen, but maybe, maybe it will do.

So is the Scotland level different than the local? I think there, Scotland is, is a, we might say a more of a meso level than a, well it's,, it's difficult in the UK because there isn't a national waste policy. It is very much within the, the devolved nations.

But equally Scot, Scotland does echo what's happening in England and elsewhere because it is also local authority based. So there are similarities and differences.

The main thing that I see in Scotland that is different are the people involved in the policy making. And the reason that I see a difference is that it's actually quite a small group of people that have been involved in, in moving this issue

forward in Scotland for the past, well, when did I start researching? So I've been researching it for 12 years, and even before that, so maybe the last 15 years, the people involved in this discussion have been very similar.

There's a continuity of approach, people know each other. And sometimes knowing each other isn't always the most helpful [laughs] dynamic you know? It's, it's not that it's smooth sailing. The personalities and the people involved are really important in a Scottish context. And also the histories of those people involved.

So some of them have worked for government, for, for, um commercial organisations, for local authorities, for SEPA, which is our Environmental Protection Agency, some of them have switched between the roles.

So they've got a really nice knowledge about the different organisations and the, the intentions and the, the workings of those organisations too.

Jan: What I like about that place based idea, as well, and I, I'm really interested to hear your view on this, how economic and how energy sensible is it to shift waste over longer distances?

And accepting that there might be specialist reprocessors or recyclers, but is it best to keep waste at home and nearby? In which case a Scottish based policy for Scottish based waste is a smart idea.

Lucy: I, I think for some things, um particularly around energy, and the energy it takes to move anything, it's more sensible to have stuff local to home.

So if we think about sustainable food policies as being food that's grown locally, then it's going to have much lower carbon footprint, in general,, than food that's been flown thousands of miles. And the same should really apply for for materials.

But that said, we have to be conscious about the dispersion of materials and, and that's where the economics come in. Because there, there has to be a certain level of reprocessing for particular things, I think.

Jan: To me that really speaks of, um, very different approaches to different types of materials as well. And so actually the, the idea bury the lot, or burn the lot, or whatever is not very smart, because it doesn't deal with the particular nature of things.

Paul: You talked, Lucy, about the importance of the people who are involved. Have you noticed the type of people who are involved in this changing over the period of time that you've been involved in working with policy makers?

Lucy: I think there's more people involved now. I think initially when I was working with Jan on this if we told people that that we were interested in zero waste, or the circular economy, we'd spend a lot of time explaining what the circular economy was.

So thankfully I spend a lot less time explaining what the circular economy is, or what zero waste means. Um, and I also spend a lot less time answering questions about whether people can recycle their envelopes with those little windows in them, [laughing] or have to take them out. People have realised that conversations have moved beyond them.

And, there's probably more businesses involved now than were in the past. I think it's, as we expand the number of stakeholders involved in this conversation and, and I see myself as not a central stakeholder, but absolutely somebody who's on the periphery watching and learning from those involved in the, the policy debates. And almost observing and making observations rather than contributing directly. Although I do sometimes contribute directly where, where the opportunity arises.

But there there's a balance to be made with the input of new legislation and new initiatives to ensure that the people who have been involved in this sector and I say sector, thinking about the waste management sector, but actually it's much broader than that, we could also include the charity sector - continue to be supported to do, be doing the really good work that they have been doing for a really long time.

And they need to be part of the discussion about major policy changes and new legislation, so that they can continue to do the work that they're doing. And the reason I say that, is that the work that they're doing, the social value that is added locally, coming back to the, the first question is,, is really immeasurable, but also not measured.

So, kind of, not [laughs] you know, taken for granted if that that makes sense. Um, but should not be taken for granted.

Jan: And dear listeners, as you probably can tell from my accent that I'm Scottish. I, I view myself as Scottish after a fashion having lived there for, for

many, many years and being very fond of, of Scotland, and being very involved in the policy scene when I was there.

Are there things, Lucy, that you observe in Scotland that you think is particularly interesting with regard to sustainability and where some of our listeners from around the, the UK and beyond might find, you know, really quite interesting and quite quirky?

Lucy: It's hard to know what other people find quirky [Jan laughs] that you see as your daily, um, experience isn't it? I think one of the things that is complicated about Scotland is that we, for a long time Scotland's sustainability policy has been driven about doing things better and differently from our local neighbours.

And we, that one of the drivers is that we want to be seen as doing something different, particularly under the current government that we have. And that's been really beneficial from a sustainability perspective. Also really beneficial from a social justice perspective.

Now those policies would not come about if, if people did not also believe in the concerns of the environment and other people. So of course there's an element of that, but I don't think people, let's say in England, are any less socially responsible, it's just that it's manifested in different forms of government. And the way that Scotland has moved forward is to, to set ourselves aside from what's happening in Westminster.

And one of the tricky things, going back to what we were talking about in the previous episode, is that that's really brought the politics to the fore, most recently. So in the past we might have been able to, to do a lot of things around the environment that probably Westminster wasn't that bothered about.

The early iterations, let's say, of the circular economy policy were really allowed to pass without any interest coming from Westminster. Whereas now we've reached the stage where the changes to our society are much bigger and much more developed, although I'm not sure I would call a deposit return scheme as particularly controversial, [laughs] but it turns out it can be!

Maybe they saw that as like the, the writing on the wall for what was coming next. So the bigger changes that need to come to ensure that Scotland has a more circular economy will require bigger changes in other areas of, of how we

govern Scotland, and that is raising issues at Westminster. And that is where we're seeing the politics coming to the fore. Similarly with energy, I think.

Paul: My question would be, then, looking to the future do you see signs for optimism about what you can see in Scotland, in, in Westminster I guess, as well, because like you say there is so much of an overlap there when it comes to jurisdiction and authority.

Lucy: So it, it's two sides isn't it? On the one hand it's really frustrating. It's really frustrating that there are big ambitions to do things in Scotland differently, and from my perspective they're not even that big ambition. [laughs] They are the next step in, in terms of, of certain things.

And it's frustrating to see actions being taken at Westminster that stop those things happening. So, for example, the, the drilling licenses for new oil fields would be a really great example of that. It seems completely against what we would necessarily want to have in Scotland.

But. That said, I do not want to see Scotland move ahead and become a much more sustainable society, leaving Westminster and England behind. We cannot be a sustainable country alone, Scotland. It's, it's not a Scottish ambition. And so at some point it needs to be that Scotland is, Scotland cannot be better than everyone else, Scotland has to be part of a pack.

And what I want is everyone to come up to being more sustainable and us all moving towards more sustainability together, as a global society, not just as a Scottish society.

So to the extent that these political and constitutional issues come up, and that puts sustainability on the agenda for political discussion, and in the media, and talking about different ways about how we can organise and govern, then that is not necessarily a bad thing. Even though in relation to individual policies it is beyond frustrating when certain things don't go through.

Jan: I think that we know that Lucy had politics in her first degree. [Paul laughs] Very well, very well put, I thought.

[Theme music begins to fade in]

Paul: That that's wonderful, Lucy. I think we're just about at the end there, but I do have a really important question to, to finish with, if that's okay, Jan?

Jan: I dread to think.

Paul: Can you put those envelopes with the plastic windows [Jan laughs] straight into the recycling or do you need to take them out?

Lucy: I thought you were going to ask. Well, it depends. My expertise really lies on whether you have to wash out your yogurt pot [laughs] before you put it in there, which is the other question that gets like. But, as I say with everything it depends on your local authority, because waste is a local issue. So how you recycle in your household requires you to engage with your local government.

Paul: Well, on that depressing note what, what I, what I will say is though I encourage anyone and everyone to rinse out their butter tubs and their yogurt pot because when they get blown out of the recycling bin and onto my lawn it's far nicer to pick them up if they've been cleaned rather than if they're still containing vast amounts of sticky oily fatty residue on the inside.

Lucy: Can I, can I add something? Speaking on behalf of Scottish Water, if you could use a paper towel to clean out your, your butter pots and not wash it down the drain [laughs] so the, the butter, we don't end up with all this butter down the drain, that would be much appreciated.

Paul: Well, on that public service note, thank you very much Lucy Wishart.

Um so that's the end of this episode. We'll be back soon with another episode when we'll be welcoming Dr Celine Germond-Duret to talk to us all about the blue economy. Until then, I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]