Turf Wars in Environmentalism:
Competing Discourses in Hydroelectric and Nuclear Power Campaigns in New Zealand

John Francis Hamilton Wilson

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of environmental movement organisations in New Zealand during the early years of the 1970s. The study takes a comparative case study approach that examines the way competing discourses were used by these organisations to oppose construction of two hydroelectric power schemes and a nuclear power proposal. Based in frame analysis, the aim of the study is to examine the mobilisation of discourse as an indicator of the ability of environmental concern to politicise the energy policy domain. Research is performed in three areas: identification of the interpretive packages and discursive frames that delineate environmental discourse up to 1976, measurement of these discourses mobilised by environmental movement organisations, and an assessment of the influence this mobilisation had on the politicisation of the energy policy agenda.

The study uses both qualitative and empirical methods. Qualitative research is performed to identify the discursive interpretive packages and frames through a hermeneutic analysis of the literature on the history of the environmental movement. This analysis shows that three historically distinct environmental movements can be identified up to the mid-1970s. These are the conservation, preservation, and political ecology movements whose discourses can be analysed in terms of three culturally resonant frames. The study finds that these interpretive frames – the rational, the moral and the aesthetic – offer similar but competing understandings of the environment. The empirical research is based on three data sets – the submission records presented to three commissions of inquiry held between 1970 and 1976. These samples are used to estimate and compare the mobilisation of positions taken by a diverse range of environmental movement organisations. The results of this analysis suggest that, to varying degrees, these competing discourses help to politicise the energy policy domain. Conservationism was found to be the least mobilised environmental discourse by environmental organisations. Nevertheless, it provided institutional energy policy actors with a rhetorical strategy in an interpretive arena in which resource development claims could be presented and defended.

Environmental organisations were found to be important political actors not just because of their ability to mobilise organisational resources, or take advantage of political opportunities, but as engaged in discursive attempts to set the frames in which public discussion about energy policy issues took place. The study concludes that this political role may ensure the environmental movement remains an effective and non-transitory new political actor able to compete politically with, rather than for, party attention. It is the discursive ability of environmental movement organisations that allows them to compete in an increasingly politicised discursive sphere.

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For Claire

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Abbreviations

AJPR	Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives
CfE	Commission for the Environment
COG	Coalition for Open Government
DSIR	Department of Scientific and Industrial Research
EAO	Ecology Action Otago
EIA	Environment Impact Assessment
EDS	Environmental Defence Society
EMO	Environmental Movement Organisation
FOE	Friends of the Earth
HOWL	Hands Off Wanaka Lake
FFGNP	Fact Finding Group on Nuclear Power
MOW	Ministry of Works and Development
MP	Member of Parliament
MRC	Ministerial Review Committee
NWASCA	National Water and Soil Conservation Authority
NCC	Nature Conservation Council
NZED	New Zealand Electricity Department
NZPD	New Zealand Parliamentary Debates
POS	Political Opportunity Structure
PSA	Public Service Association
RCI	Royal Commission of Inquiry
RMT	Resource Mobilisation Theory
SMO	Social Movement Organisation

INTRODUCTION

1. Politicising the Environment – the Role of the Environmental Movement

Prior to the 1960s, a nation's use of its environment had not been a central political problem. The development of its natural resources – energy, forests, and minerals – evoked little public comment. Limited disputes had arisen over the method of development and over the distribution of gains from development, but, in general, resource use *per se* attracted little political attention. The developmental goals of society enjoyed widespread political consensus and public support. Within the space of just ten years, questions concerning the environment erupted on the political stage. Environmental issues began to shape public opinion, mobilised mass political protest and attracted media attention. In the two years between 1970 and 1972, environmental agencies were instituted in fourteen industrial nations, the United Nations Environment Programme was established, and a new type of political party – environmental parties – emerged on an electoral landscape that had remained almost unchanged for over 100 years (Cairncross 1995). Environmental issues were now political problems – they required national co-ordination and international co-operation.

This study is about the way in which energy issues in New Zealand became defined as political problems during the 1970s. Central to the account is the role of movement organisations in the early environmental and antinuclear power movements in New Zealand. The thesis takes a comparative case study approach to the way that environmental ideas were used by social movement organisations in opposing construction of two hydroelectric power schemes and a nuclear power proposal. The study adopts the frame analysis model of social movements to analyse the mobilisation of ideas by movement organisations, and their contribution to changing New Zealand's energy policy agenda. Three general problems help to locate the study.

Firstly, it is not entirely clear the ways in which the modern environmental movement differs from its historical predecessors. Clearly, environmental concern emerged well before its most recent expression in the 1960s and 1970s. Such concern can be located within the environmental organisations of the conservation movement and the international environmental treaties of the

nineteenth century.[1] If the modern age of environmentalism is now taken to originate somewhere between Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Earth Day 1970, some account of the political quiescence of environmental concern for over fifty years must be made. This political dormancy suggests there may be something qualitatively different about the way that environmental issues are now mobilised and presented (or framed) by new political actors.

Secondly, the level of mobilisation in the present environmental era needs explaining. It is not at all clear how or why modern environmentalism – as a movement or as an orientation – managed to mobilise vast and diverse numbers of people in Western democracies to participate in conflictual protest action, or how it has reshaped political understanding of the environment. After all, relative to other established political actors, social movements have minimal organisational resources, limited expertise and receive limited access to, and limited legitimacy from, the political system.

Thirdly, the variability in environmental issues, *as problems*, needs explaining. Within the possible universe of environmental issues, it is apparent that not all actually emerge as problems, or to the same extent. The condition of the environment, or its deterioration, does not always generate collective action. Complicating this process is that even the same environmental issues do not always appear in similar types of nations at the same time. Even where environmental issues do emerge under similar circumstances, the same issue can generate different levels of mobilisation. The French peace movement of the 1980s, for example, was relatively weak in comparison with French opposition to nuclear power. It was also weaker in comparison with the UK peace movement, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. On the other hand, the antinuclear power movement in Britain at this time was much weaker than its French counterpart. Yet there is little reason to suppose that nuclear weapons in France were less dangerous than those in the UK, or that nuclear power in France was more dangerous than in the UK (Chafer 1985). Further, even where the

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[1] Some examples of these early environmental organisations and treaties are given in Chapter Two. See also Bramwell (1989) and McCormick (1989).

same issue emerges at the same time *and* mobilises the same level of concern, the political response can vary enormously. Clearly, the same environmental issues are not always the same environmental problems. The variable politicisation that environmental issues exhibit, in terms of emergence, mobilisation and impact, requires explanation.

Most commonly, responses to these questions assume that there is something unique about the seriousness of problems facing humanity in the twentieth century. Either the levels of environmental deterioration – the 'objective' condition of the environment – or the character of environmental problems – its global pervasiveness – are cited to explain why environmental issues are important issues. Thus, relative levels of politicisation are attributed to the relative levels of pollution, or to the relative levels of risk posed by the relative levels of technological development.

These explanations, however, only partially explain why environmental issues become important *political* issues. The relative levels of environmental quality, risk, or resource development cannot always explain the relative levels of politicisation and political response. After all, environmental problems do not spontaneously emerge. It is social actors who interpret environmental issues as problems, and who must then attempt to engage political attention. In turn, institutional political actors must justify to their constituents their political responses to these issues. The perception, significance, and responsiveness to environmental issues are therefore shaped – constructed – by domestic and international political processes. In short, environmental issues can become political problems through interpretive processes – the attribution of meaning by individuals, organisations, social movements, and nation states.

This study seeks to understand the way that environmental issues became defined as political problems by New Zealand environmental movement organisations. It seeks answers in the mobilisation of ideas in three environmental campaigns, and the extent to which these ideas sought and received political attention from institutionalised energy policy actors. The study seeks to illustrate that the willingness to recognise issues and take action at the political level rests, in part, on the claims-making activities of social movement actors in particular protest campaigns.

The political role of social movements has previously been constructed in terms of their ability to mobilise particular types of supporters, to mobilise organisational resources, and to the external political context that give movement entrepreneurs opportunities to exploit conditions for protest. Yet the re-emergence of the environmental movement in the 1960s, and contemporary concern with environmental problems, suggests a further political role for environmental movements. It may be that movement organisations politicise environmental issues through a reinterpretation of the cultural frames in which public understanding of the environment is located. Not only do environmental organisations help to get new ideas articulated, disseminated and acted upon, but there is also increasing support for the view that they are enduring influences in the political arena. In short, social movements can act as agents of cognitive change (Jamison 1996).

2. The Research Gap

Clearly, the environmental movement, as a social movement, is an important political actor. It has been instrumental in politicising environmental issues, and has been a formative influence on the legislative, institutional and political landscapes at both the national and international level. Robert Nisbet writes that, 'It is entirely possible that when the history of the twentieth century is finally written, the single most important social movement of the period will be judged to be environmentalism' (Nisbet 1982, p.101).

Historically, social movement research has tended to be directed at an analysis of the organisational, motivational, and structural influences on mobilisation. In turn, these social movement models have shaped the understanding of social movement outcomes (Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, and Giugni 1995). While there is a vast literature on social movements, it is only recently that attention has returned to the investigation of interpretive issues in movement mobilisation and their influence on movement outcomes.

Secondly, while considerable attention has been paid to the impacts of a social movement, research has tended to focus on factors exogenous to the movement itself.[2] Where factors internal to social movements *have* been allowed to play a role, the focus on ideational, cognitive, or interpretive issues has, until recently, been neglected as a research area. If it is accepted that the environmental movement has helped reshape individual, societal, institutional and political priorities – in short, effected a 'new cognitive configuration' – then an examination of the cognitive dimensions of environmentalism would seem justified (Caldwell 1990, p.76).

It is a major contention of this study that attention must be paid to factors internal to the environmental movement. This attention takes the form of a discursive approach that assumes that social movement organisations articulate distinct positions within environmentalist discourse. By examining the mobilisation of these different positions, an understanding of how issues are addressed and their contribution to campaign outcomes can be developed (Brulle 1996). Consequently, this study is an examination of the mobilisation of environmental discourse by environmental organisations in New Zealand during the first half of the 1970s. Constituting the environmental movement, these organisations are seen as engaged in an internal interpretive struggle in which variations in the mobilisation of environmental positions can be discerned. It is the frame analysis model of social movements that allows an appraisal of the variable mobilisation of the elements of environmentalist discourse articulated by movement organisations. It is the internal interpretive struggle between movement organisations that contributes to the variable politicisation of energy policy issues which in turn helps to account for changes to the energy policy agenda.

This study assumes that movement organisations are involved in an interpretive struggle over the definition and interpretation of environmental problems, but makes no prior claims to the seriousness or otherwise of such issues. This study suggests that the 'seriousness' of environmental problems cannot simply be discerned by an examination of environmental conditions. This is

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[2] Determining the 'site' of social movement success is a choice between factors internal to the movement and those that emphasise external factors beyond the control of social movements themselves, such as the electoral, media, and public arenas. These issues are discussed further in Chapter One.

because the level of shared understanding of environmental problems held by social movement and policy actors is limited.

This study also does not see environmental conflict simply as a struggle in which the state must consider the competing interests of actors, as well as the considerations of the national interest, for political survival. This realist approach fails to see environmental politics as an interpretive struggle over the definition and significance of environmental problems in which the state must legitimate its actions by engaging in a social debate, rather than as the preferred outcome of the dominant political bloc (Hajer 1996).

Instead the study conceives environmental problems, conflict and politics as socially and cognitively constructed. The role of social movements, as actors in this process, forms a central focus of the study. This demands that the aim of this study is itself not misconstrued. It should not be misinterpreted as an attempt to discredit environmental claims, or to deny the existence of environmental problems, or even that the seriousness of the ecological dilemma is misplaced. After all, environmental events – from vanishing species to ozone depletion – are real, and not, as such, socially constructed by the environmental movement. The point is, rather, how these events emerge as problems – how sense is made of them. Events require them to be interpreted as problems – their significance is shaped by the understandings of social actors. Environmental claims are mediated – by current knowledge, by competing actors, and by current practices and preferences. This study is therefore interested in understanding how environmental claims are defined, contested and legitimated by environmental movement organisations.

Secondly, rather than undermining the legitimacy of environmental claims, the social constructionist approach actively encourages attention to *all* claims-makers and all positions adopted in environmental debate. For example, sustainable development, green consumerism, or the role of industry-funded think-tanks and 'environmental' front groups – the subject of *Global Spin* (Beder 1997) – suggest an increasing number of claimants engaged in presenting interpretations of environmental issues. Thus, the developmental goals of anti-environmentalists can *also* be seen as

socially constructed, and not just as a response to the objective, pragmatic and developmental needs of the nation state.

In this light, environmental concern should not be seen as conflict between competing actors who take positions on pre-defined environmental problems. Rather, environmental conflict involves actors in a complex and evolving 'interpretive struggle' over the definition, meaning, and significance of specific environmental problems. Both levels of concern are inherent in the term environmentalism – social concern over the meaning of environmental change and struggle over the organisation, values and orientation of society as a whole (Hajer 1995, p.13). Environmentalism, then, is a site of discursive struggle. This is not simply in the sense of opposition to developmental projects (whether to build dams, develop or conserve resources), but in the sense of competing discourses involving arguments between political priorities and value systems (Coupland and Coupland 1997).

3. Outline of the Thesis

This study uses three case studies to examine the politicisation of energy policy in New Zealand during the first half of the 1970s. Prior to 1970, this policy domain was seen as bipartisan and consensual. The study seeks to analyse the cognitive role of environmental and antinuclear organisations in this politicisation, and their impact in terms of the government's energy policy agenda. It proposes that the influence of these organisations can be partly explained in terms of the discourse of environmentalism. In comparing these three campaigns, it is hoped that the role of specific elements within this discourse – collective action 'frames' – is made apparent.

The thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter One examines the theoretical literature on social movements. Social movement approaches provide the most theoretically developed models with which to examine environmentalism. The aim of this chapter is to review previous social movement research, and to justify the frame analysis model as appropriate to the examination of environmental discourse. This approach suggests that language has an important role in political life. Language cannot now be seen as neutral – as a non-partisan description of the world. Instead

language and description, in the hands of political actors, are seen as necessarily selective and therefore active in shaping the world (Fischer and Forester 1993). Discourse analysis, therefore, is a method that can be used to analyse the cognitive basis through which environmental and social problems are constructed (Hajer 1996, Johnston and Klandermans 1995). It assumes that discourse is not simply discussion but that it is structured, containing specific sets of ideas, concepts, categorisations, and ways of talking (idioms or frames). This chapter outlines the frame analysis model of social movements that will be used to examine the politicisation of the energy policy domain that occurred in New Zealand in the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter Two conducts a brief review of the literature on the historical expressions of environmental concern. Politicised concern with the environment – hereafter 'environmentalism' – seemed to emerge in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Political sociologists often describe environmentalism in terms of new 'postmaterial' values that have emerged now in post-scarcity societies (Inglehart 1977). However, the emergence of environmental concern as a political problem has had a much longer history and genesis.[3] This historical review identifies three environmental movements that came to prominence in the twentieth century. It aims to describe the discourse of these movements in terms of the dimensions, or frames, of environmentalism, and to test the plausibility of the framing model outlined in Chapter One. The chapter suggests that three types of claims can be discerned in environmental discourse. The three dimensions that comprise the cognitive content of environmentalism are analytical constructs derived from the literatures on frame processes, new social movements and the history of environmental thought. Chapter Two develops a typology of environmental discourse that will be used to analyse the variable mobilisation of these discourses in the case study chapters. The chapter concludes with the research questions that guide the discussion of the case studies.

Chapter Three outlines the research design, which is based on a comparative case study approach, and provides the political and energy contexts that locate the three case studies. Tackling

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3 See Chapter Two and, for example, Pepper (1984) and Bramwell (1989).

three case studies rather than one or two, should ensure a more representative sampling of the conflict between new and old politics, and should reduce the bias that the special features of only one case study might introduce. The study uses both empirical and qualitative approaches. The empirical research is based on three data sets – the submission records presented to three commissions of inquiry held between 1970 and 1976. These samples are used to estimate and compare the mobilisation of positions taken by a diverse range of environmental movement organisations.

Chapters Four to Six are the substantive case study chapters that focus on energy resource conflicts in New Zealand. These environmental campaigns emerged at much the same time; they mobilised similar levels of protest, and they were over by the mid-1970s. These resource conflicts were the longest and the largest protest campaigns in the history of New Zealand environmental politics. They should therefore exhibit most of the range and intensity of debate put forward by environmental organisations. Although the three protest campaigns at the centre of this analysis were the largest ever seen in New Zealand political history, previous accounts have not explicitly adopted social movement approaches.[4]

These case studies also offer an opportunity for an empirical assessment of the types of concern mobilised in hydroelectric and antinuclear power campaigns. Some authors see the antinuclear debate as distinct from the wider environmental movement and one that has emerged out of the different conditions pertinent to Western Europe, as opposed to those responsible for the environmental movements in Australasia (Hay and Haward 1988, Rainbow 1992). This reflects the different approaches taken in the literature between those who explain impacts in terms of the

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[4] Some technical accounts are by Jones (1979) and McKellar (1973), while for journalistic accounts see Powell (1978), Wilson (1982) and Peat (1994). Early social science comment was by Cleveland (1972), Slee (1974), and Erickson (1978). More recently, informed accounts include Kellow (1996), Martin (1991) and Rainbow (1992). This is not to suggest, of course, that studies in environmental politics in New Zealand are lacking. Excellent institutional analyses of administrative agencies and New Zealand environmental parties have been made. See, for example, Buhrs (1991) and Rainbow (1992).

external political context and those who focus on characteristics internal to the movements themselves.

The aim of the case study chapters is to examine the mobilisation of environmental concern and to account for the politicisation of energy policy issues as expressed in the three case studies. It is proposed that the cognitive content of environmental ideas can help to account for the politicisation of energy issues found in the three case studies at the centre of this analysis, which are themselves early examples of environmentalism.

Chapter Seven is an analysis of the results of the case study comparisons. This discussion examines the implications of these results in terms of the research questions outlined in Chapter Two. The case studies will suggest that the types of ideas held by the environmental movement organisations are contributing influences, not only to the politicisation of energy issues – which includes influencing the level of mobilisation and public opinion – but also to effecting change on the energy policy agenda. The analysis aims to show that it is the *combination* of all three types of claims, or frames, that helps to explain the politicisation of environmental concern – represented here by the attention that social movement actors command in particular environmental protest campaigns.

Chapter Eight widens the discussion to include the general political role of environmental movement organisations implied by the findings of the study. The study concludes that this political role may ensure that the environmental movement remains an effective and non-transitory new political actor, able to compete politically with, rather than for, party attention. It is the discursive ability of environmental movement organisations that allows them to compete in an increasingly politicised discursive sphere. The study now turns to a discussion of social movement research.