

Urban Development and the Politics of Dissonance

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Abstract

A major reason for the peripheral treatment of political conflict in established theories of urban development derives from the tendency to underplay questions of territory and spatial governance. In this paper we examine the implications of territorial discrepancy amongst governance arrangements and introduce the notion of 'urban political dissonance' in order to engage sustained patterns of conflict or incongruity. This focus implies examination of strategic action on the part of competing urban interests which may result in policy incoherence, institutional manoeuvring in pursuit of divergent objectives, and difficulties in finding workable compromise, with potentially significant implications for economic development outcomes. An illustrative case study is presented of growth politics in Oxford, U.K., where a central and unresolved dilemma over the physical expansion of the city has effectively defined the nature of development politics for a generation, leading to ongoing political conflict and policy incongruity.

1. Introduction

In contemporary urban theory the status of political conflict is under debate from varied disciplinary perspectives (see GUALINI, 2015). In this paper we seek to illuminate the particular importance of territory in the reality of urban political contest and conflict, and to contribute to associated theoretical debates. There is scope, we argue, for theories of urban politics to engage much more directly with political conflict on the ground and questions of territoriality, governmental structure and boundaries which underpin the day-to-day conduct of political strategy and manoeuvring, the mobilization of political and institutional interests, the dynamics of local political relations and the potential incompatibility of policy positions – in many instances the very ‘stuff’ of urban politics and planning. This focus implies attention to the strategic activity of urban actors and recognises explicitly the potential for dissonance between competing political agendas and interests. Also, as we seek to demonstrate, it reopens questions of the significance of government within governance (IMRIE and RACO, 1999) and provides an additional inflection on debates regarding the ontological value of territorial as compared to non-territorial perspectives and metaphors (ALLEN, 2011; ALLEN AND COCHRANE, 2007; ELDEN, 2011; JONAS, 2006, MARSTON et al. 2005).

The discussion and analysis is presented in 5 further sections: Section 2 briefly examines influential theories of urban and regional governance, politics and planning and establishes their respective limits in dealing with issues of political conflict. This derives, it is argued, from a tendency to underplay enduring questions of territoriality and spatial governance in the respective formulations. We then go on in the following section to consider the nature of strategic action and its effects on urban politics and planning, which may result in particular

conditions of ‘urban political dissonance’. Section 4 outlines some of the methodological implications of researching dissonance in urban development in general and lays out the specifics of our case study analysis in particular, before Section 5 analyses in detail the emergence and impact of dissonant politics in Oxfordshire, U.K.. Finally, in the concluding Section 6 we offer some necessarily brief reflections on the implications of urban political dissonance for the planning and delivery of economic growth and development, as well as directions for future research.

2. Territory, Urban Theory and the Question of Dissonance

Established theories of urban development and politics have generally been preoccupied with how particular agendas emerge and become dominant, rather than engaging directly with the ongoing discord that is characteristic of many urban political contexts. In the U.S. case, for example, growth machine theories (GMT) have emphasised a central unifying interest in urban growth reflecting primarily the local dependence of an urban land-based elite, including landowners, developers, legal, financial and other interests (see MOLOTCH, 1976, 1988; LOGAN and MOLOTCH, 1987). Here ‘growth’ emerges as an ‘over-riding commonality’ (MOLOTCH, 1976: 310) which effectively trumps other areas of political tension and contest.

Regime Coalition Theory (RCT), by way of contrast, explicitly engages the diversity of interests and political agendas in urban politics, which form the context for significant conflict over local development policy (ELKIN, 1985, 1987; SANDERS and STONE, 1987; for reviews see: DAVIES, 2002; IRAZÁBAL, 2009; LAURIA, 1997; MOSSBERGER and STOKER, 2001). Here the political task of coalition-building and conflict management in

support of policy is central, and is achieved by the establishment of a coalition of interest groups held together by shared or overlapping objectives and strategic ‘side payments’ (SANDERS and STONE, 1987, 168). From this vantage point ‘the focus in regime analysis is on the internal dynamics of coalition building’ (Stone 1989: 5) or informal modes of coordination across institutional boundaries (MOSSBERGER and STOKER, 2001: 812) and the enduring patterns of cooperation and coordination which result.

Alongside these distinctive analytical approaches to urban politics, normative formulations have emerged around the notion of ‘collaborative planning’ (CP), emphasising the desirability of communicative action to drive broad-based consensus-building (e.g. FORESTER, 1989, 1993; 1999; HEALEY, 1997, 1998; INNES and BOOHER, 2010). These models cast the planner as facilitator in communicative processes which seek consensus in something approaching Habermas’s ideal speech situation; a situation free of other forms of action (dramaturgical, normatively regulated and strategic). The possibilities for consensus borne out of such collaborative action are a matter of ensuring the integrity of the planning process, regardless of the *realpolitik* of political relations and budgetary cycles, for example.

We should be clear, of course, that the respective emphases in these readings on the dominance of urban growth agendas, on patterns of political coalescence and on collaborative collective action do not deny the position of politics and political disagreement. Indeed the frameworks explicitly allow for competition and conflict: In GMT the development and use of land provides the focus of interest formation, competition, conflict and coalescence, while control over government, as the site of public resources and decision-

making processes, represents an arena of struggle between land-based interests; in RCT, as MOSSBERGER and STOKER note (2001: 813), ‘cooperation does not imply consensus over values and beliefs but participation to realize “small opportunities”’ (STONE 1993, 11). Similarly, where CP emphasises potential political conflict it registers the requirement for genuinely collaborative processes to recognise and, as far as possible, ameliorate extant power-relationships among stakeholders (e.g. HEALEY, 1997: 288).

Our point is that these acknowledgements to political competition and conflict are limited and somewhat peripheral to the respective frameworks. GMT reduces urban politics to modest forms of ‘growth manoeuvring’ (MOLOTCH, 1988: 40), for example, while RCT emphasises the establishment of coalitions held together by selective or purposive incentives (STONE, 1993) and the tendency, over time, for regimes to ‘subdue differences and reshape the outlook of participants’ (MOSSBERGER and STOKER, 2001: 813). The persistence of conflict in CP theories, meanwhile, is taken as evidence of poorly designed or illegitimate planning process, which would dissolve in the face of genuinely collaborative processes. In each of these influential frameworks, therefore, the question of sustained and debilitating political conflict is largely sidelined.

A major reason for the peripheral treatment of political conflict here derives, we contend, from the tendency to underplay questions of territory and spatial governance which are at the heart of urban politics. Here we might point to Kevin Cox’s (1989, 2013) theorisation of the ‘politics of turf’ in the context of capitalist social relations focused on questions of collective consumption, inequality, status and use values, within which the state is critically implicated. As Cox has argued (1989: 70), a politics of location is inevitable, though its

specific forms are contingent upon the variable scale dependencies of actors and interests (COX, 1989, 1995, 2013; COX and JONAS, 1993; COX and MAIR, 1989, 1991; JONAS, 2006). However, two distinct types of politics of location emerge: a class politics of location, which expresses the changing balance of power between capital and labour, and a territorial politics of location comprising relations and competition between politically organised spatial entities. In some contexts, business assumes an important role in aggregating different interests into a political consensus. As historic changes in class-based politics have ‘left a potentially alienating void in self-understanding and in related concepts of community’ (COX and MAIR, 1989: 317) the gap may be filled by local business coalitions offering their own version of community. Such ‘pseudo-community’ is partial and unstable, however, contributing as it does to ‘weak’ forms of place making and inter-locality competition (COX, 1995). In other contexts, ‘while local dependence is revealed to be one root of the antagonisms, at the same time it provides a basis for the suspension of conflict in favor of a solidarity within each locality’ (COX and MAIR, 1989: 307). Here, government and civil society play more active roles in ‘strong’ forms of place making and inter-locality competition associated with a discourse of territory ‘orchestrated by the growth coalition, and facilitated by the spatial structure of the state’ (Cox, 1989: 81). Consequently,

As a result of transformations such as these popular politics in the city is, more often than not, experienced as a multiplicity of battles between territorial coalitions, and at different scales (Cox, 1989: 82)

From this critical perspective the potential for turf conflict is extended across formal territorial boundaries, given the relative autonomy, fragmentation, and differentiation of

governmental forms. Dear and Wolch (1989: 13), for example, draw attention to the relative autonomy of the local state, and the scope this provides for the identification of particularistic interests and consequent conflict. Further, they describe how the specificity and uniqueness of territorial organisation in each locale makes it possible to speak of a *crisis of the locale*, reflecting the broader regulatory challenges consequent upon particular combinations of economic, political or social conditions, such as severe deindustrialisation (or, we might add, severe growth pressures). This may be exacerbated if, for example, subsequent governance adjustment to secure social reproduction is impractical, or if separate locales undertake unilateral action at the expense of others (*op cit*: 11). Elsewhere, Storper (2014), references the diversity of objectives and mechanisms derived from fragmented metropolitan governance, and consequent limitations on the development of local governance forms:

Metropolitan governance is shaped by the strong interdependencies within urban areas, combined with the fragmented geography and roles of the agencies that govern them. Fragmentation is not an accident; it responds to underlying differences in the preferences of constituencies, the scale of efficient provision of public goods and regulation, and the bundling of attributes of the city into jurisdictions. This is why governance moves forward in a haphazard way, through tinkering (Storper, 2014: 115)

These various readings of territorial politics and spatial governance collectively emphasise the potential for ‘territorial discrepancy’¹ amongst governance arrangements, highlighting *inter alia* the lack of compatibility of ideological commitments, political constituencies, policy perspectives, representational forms, resources, programmes and mechanisms across

territorial boundaries. As such they stand in marked contrast to the ‘flat ontologies’ of recent network or assemblage readings of governance concerned with the congealing of power within networks and the processes by which actors and interests are enrolled within new governance arrangements (e.g. ALLEN AND COCHRANE, 2007). These alternative perspectives are open to the strengths and weaknesses of non-scalar ontologies revealed in recent debates in human geography (ALLEN, 2011; ELDEN, 2011; JONAS, 2006, MARSTON et al. 2005), but arguably divert attention away from territorial discrepancies that continue to manifest in urban and regional politics. For our purposes the particular implications of territorial arrangements are central. Yet beyond a broad acknowledgement of the potential for conflict arising from territorial discrepancy, there has to date been very limited examination of the distinctive political processes and outcomes consequent upon divergent territorial arrangements.

How, then, might we approach the status of discord, disharmony and inaction within urban political theory, and the political scleroses and policy stases which emerge as a consequence? To what extent are we able to engage theoretically with sustained patterns of conflict or incongruity in urban politics and development that go beyond growth manoeuvring, which disrupt or effectively disable coalescence around shared objectives, and which frustrate aspirations for collaboration? In responding to these questions we turn to the notion of *political dissonance*, broadly denoting ‘...a fractious, institutionally rigid, and quite unresponsive political system’ (KRIEGER, 2002: 335), but more particularly concerned with the institutionalisation of contradictory visions or agendas and the degree to which ‘core components of institutionalized politics combine’ (KRIEGER, 2002: 337). To date the question of political dissonance has predominantly been investigated in dysfunctional, often

post-colonial global-regional or nation-state contexts riven by sharp socio-economic and cultural discontinuities and competing political and religious doctrines². Here,

Dissonant politics pivots around the institutional and ideological space that distances contending societal organizations both from the state and from one another. The competition by the leaders of these organizations for popular support hinders the efforts of any one group to impose ideological hegemony, while relative autonomy and elite competition facilitate both the state's manipulation of competing elites and the latter's efforts to manipulate the state. Still, it is usually the state that prevails. By encouraging contending elites to constantly negotiate particular policy questions or to debate this or that symbolic issue, the state enhances its room for manoeuvre and thus benefits from the spectre of institutionalized conflict. Divide and rule and elite accommodation are thus two sides of the same coin (BRUMBERG, 2001: 384)

Clearly there is considerable distance to negotiate in adapting this very particular formulation to the realm of urban political theory. Yet some sense of the potential value here emerges in Brumberg's description of 'dissonant institutionalization' which

... obtains when the state has abetted the institutionalization of contradictory visions of authority in organizations, parties, or groups that maintain a degree of autonomy or at the least some capacity to define preferences independently of the state (BRUMBERG, 2001: 384)

This resonates with long-established theoretical concerns regarding the structure and relative autonomy of the local state (COCKBURN, 1977; DUNCAN and GOODWIN, 1988), as well as ongoing changes to the ‘representational regime’ in the sphere of local and regional economic development since the 1980s (JESSOP, 1990; JONES, 1999; PECK, 1995;). It also appeals to ongoing questions of urban governance including territoriality, relational autonomy and institutional dynamics. Indeed, the various attempts in the U.K. and elsewhere over the past 30 years to engage private sector interests in urban and regional governance and the ongoing rescaling of local and regional economic development, latterly through the 2010-2015 Coalition and current Conservative Government’s turn to ‘localism’, have provided fertile institutional ground for contrasting ‘visions of authority’. This, in turn, throws the spotlight onto the nature of such visions and the strategic actions through which they are pursued, which we take up in more detail in the next section.

3. Urban Political Dissonance and Strategic Action

The key features of *urban political dissonance* are briefly summarised in Table 1 and compared with GMT, RCT and CP. Most important here, and in contrast to the varying political motives animating GMT, RCT and CP, a concern for political dissonance requires examination of *strategic action*. As we have discussed elsewhere (*ref removed*), such a focus derives from strands of social theory which emphasise not the inter-subjective communicative action that can promote political consonance, but distinctly different forms of action at the level of the individual. In particular, ‘teleological’ or ‘strategic’ action occurs when one actor seeks an end or brings about a desired state in relation to one or more other actors by choosing a strategic model through which to interpret a given situation, and where

a calculation is made of the success of achieving the desired end from the reactions of other actors. It also implies a concern for framing, or ‘the ways in which social actors use competing or convergent frames to (re)construct a specific cultural orientation which favours and justifies their own policy positions’ (TRIANDAFYLLIDOU and FOTIOU, 1998: paragraph 2.11). As TRIANDAFYLLIDOU and FOTIOU suggest, a focus on framing may contribute in understanding policy-making processes by illustrating how actors emphasise specific policy matters and offer a particular interpretation of events, and ‘how competing interpretations and perspectives may lead to dramatically different policy designs’ (TRIANDAFYLLIDOU and FOTIOU, 1998, *op cit*). Such strategic action might be contrasted with ‘normatively regulated action’, where members of a social group conform in their actions to a set of predefined common values and each individual complies with the group's norms, and ‘dramaturgical action’ which describes the presentation of the self to an audience by constituting a particular behaviour or image (PHELPS and TEWDWR-JONES, 2000: 116-117).

Strategic action implies that actors calculate and implement their strategies based on their perceptions of their own interests, the shifting and uneven playing field of opportunities and constraints that confront them, their monitoring of the reactions of other actors, and the anticipated and unanticipated outcomes which result. They may then revise and adapt their strategies (and perhaps their identities) accordingly³. Individual interests act strategically in pursuit of their respective ideas, continually calculating the prospects of success or failure for particular actions in a dynamic context, the likely responses of other actors and the appropriate ‘tactics’ to deploy in developing circumstances; these might include all sorts of political and institutional manoeuvring which might contribute to urban political dissonance:

Disagreement, delay, division, disruption and diversion are obvious potential elements of urban politics, for example, as much as coalition-building, growth manoeuvring and instrumental control.

Strategic action may, therefore, result in urban political dissonance. This represents more than occasional disagreement over particular issues as they emerge, however, comprising sustained, institutionalised conflict marked by contradictory visions and policy incongruity. With regard to the political process, urban political dissonance may reflect fundamental differences of ideology, objectives, strategy or policy, or – more likely, in the context of territorial governance – a combination of some or all of these levels. Urban political dissonance may emerge, for example, over multiple and cross-cutting issues including, *inter alia*: Diverse conceptions of the nature of the problems faced; the appropriate roles to be played by particular governance actors; the policy objectives to be set; patterns of political leadership and engagement; the scope and overall direction of strategic response; associated social and spatial implications; the deployment of resources; and the content, conduct and implementation of spatial policy. These differences lead to significant difficulty or indeed inability to achieve effective compromise or to find some form of workable resolution to policy dilemmas, such that tension is likely to be ongoing and at times wholly debilitating. They are also likely to find expression in contradictory and/or incoherent policy responses amongst diverse actors. Section 5 moves on below to describe an empirical example of these dissonant forms and to illustrate patterns of strategic action from which they emerge. Prior to this, however, we briefly consider some of the broad methodological implications of undertaking research in dissonant contexts, and detail the research undertaken for the current paper.

Table 1: Key characteristics of Growth Machine Theory, Regime Coalition Theory, Collaborative Planning and Urban Political Dissonance

	Growth Machine Theory	Regime Theory (developed from Mossberger & Stoker 2001: 829)	Collaborative planning	Urban Political Dissonance
Underlying theories	Structuralist political economy	Pluralist theories of local state	Theory of communicative action	Frame theory and strategic action
Motivations	Unifying interest in 'growth' (variously defined)	Shared Incentives	The possibilities for intersubjective understanding and compromise from communicative action	The possibilities of domination through strategic action
Form of political leadership	Dominant land-based elite	Partnership or coalescence based on informal networks as well as formal relationships	Political and planning elites as enablers	Institutional manoeuvring in pursuit of differentiated agendas
Characteristic political process	Elite agenda-setting. Instrumental control of local government.	Collaboration based distribution of small opportunities	Absence of politics or technocratic agenda-setting	Established and sustained pattern of conflict/tension. Evidence of strategic action to delay, disrupt and reduce prospects for agreement, or diversion to manage conflict/contradiction.
Policy form/direction	Growth as 'over-riding commonality'	Identifiable policy agenda and purpose, drawn from regime membership	Reflects status quo interests	Identifiable evidence of contradictory or incoherent policy agendas or programmes.
Policy outcomes	Dominant growth agenda; potential competition amongst land-based interests; 'growth manoeuvring'	Longstanding pattern of cooperation	Possibility of outcomes deferred indefinitely	Difficulty/inability to compromise or find workable resolution

4. Methodological Note

In common with analyses of growth machines and urban regimes, research on urban political dissonance is naturally oriented towards case study methodology, given the focus on internal and conflictual political dynamics. Criticism has emerged, though, in the urban governance literature on the conduct of case study research noting, for example, a multiplicity of competing concepts, a lack of methodological guidelines in the dominant frameworks, a tendency to interview only the ‘usual suspects’, and the costs and time associated with such detailed qualitative investigation (GISSENDANNER, 2003: 664-666). The result is a lack of comparability across cases resulting from ‘correctable problems in research designs: an overdominance of deductive approaches; the lack of explicit methodological guidelines, and the less than rigorous application of what has become a multitude of overlapping theoretical concepts’ (GISSENDANNER, 2003: 664). However, Gissendanner also notes that the initial studies of urban regimes were inductive, deriving general rules based on detailed findings from individual cases (see STONE, 1989; SANDERS and STONE, 1987) and we adopt a similar standpoint here as a starting point for analyses of urban political dissonance. Clearly the broader usefulness of the approach in terms of stimulating comparative analysis is contingent on (i) some level of consistency in conceptualisation and (ii) the identification of ‘general structural characteristics’ (GISSENDANNER, 2003: 670) or classification of ‘intergovernmental arrangements or economic categories’ (MOSSBERGER and STOKER, 2001: 816) which may impact on a range of dependent variables. The simple point being that urban political dissonance *may* be more likely where there are different patterns of political control across neighbouring local authorities, where economic growth threatens existing administrative and urban/rural boundaries, where there are diverse economic contexts, and where more than one tier of

government is implicated. These characteristics might then inform the development and testing of hypotheses and the construction of comparative analyses.

As an initial contribution to research on urban political dissonance the case study reported here draws on wide-ranging methods over an extended time-period. Well over 70 research interviews have been conducted throughout the past 4 years across a range of projects and topic areas, both as part of funded research projects and through personal unfunded research. One of the authors (name) undertook participant observation through involvement in consultancy work for Oxford City Council's 'Economic Development and Growth Strategy' (OSP, 2013) and as Project Manager for the Oxford/Oxfordshire 'City-Deal Evidence Base' October-December 2012 which underpinned the successful City-Deal bid submitted to Government in January 2013. Additionally research incorporated extensive non-participant observation of local authority committee meetings (both live or webcast) across the Oxfordshire district councils throughout 2011-2015, substantial documentary review and a daily review of the local press. Overall, the authors have developed an extensive personal archive of materials and experience drawing on a variety of perspectives from interviewees and on multiple research projects over a relatively lengthy period of research activity.

As suggested, some further brief comment is also worthwhile here on the general issue of research conduct in dissonant contexts. Given the primary focus on regions of significant political tension (or even active violence), research on political dissonance has had to confront settings where traditional ethical codes for research conduct are called into question. Empirical investigation in these cases may, for example, require a degree of

closeness and trust between researcher and subject which elsewhere might be seen to jeopardise the independence of the researcher and the research process. In certain circumstances researchers may be under very close scrutiny and forensic examination of their identity and motives, requiring them to demonstrate that their presence is ‘orthogonal’ to the issue at hand and also to deploy honesty, friendship and humour in the research process (see MARCHAIS, 2013). Within the realm of urban politics the researcher is obviously less likely, in most circumstances, to face challenges to their personal security or such heightened sensitivity to their particular motivations. There may be parallel concerns, however, regarding the establishment of trust in the research process, the maintenance of academic independence, the generation of rigorous empirical evidence, the negotiation of informed consent and the potential influence of the researcher in the field. Questions of appropriate dissemination activity and increasing pressures to extend the impact of social scientific research may also take on additional salience in dissonant political contexts, where respondents may be concerned about the exposure of particular viewpoints or actions. In light of these issues the authors have sought to be open with respondents regarding their research objectives, their emerging interpretation of events and their own particular views on policy outcomes. They have built relationships with numerous individuals over an extended period and thereby established some level of trust, which has undoubtedly been important in opening up issues and controversies which otherwise might easily remain undisturbed. A sense of integrity, combined with a level of understanding and humour, is clearly helpful in conducting such research.

5. Political Dissonance in Oxford and Oxfordshire

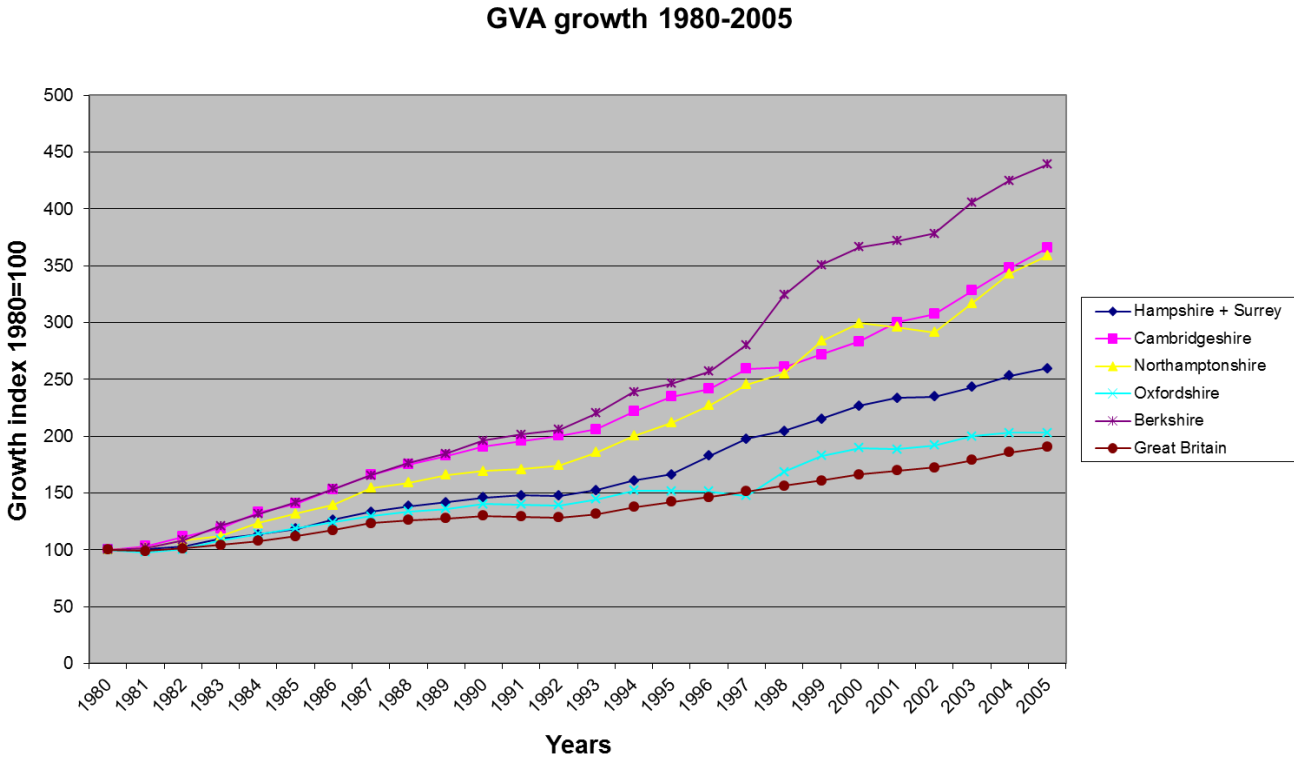
(i) The growth context in Oxford and Oxfordshire

The city of Oxford is an international brand, as a global seat of education, learning and research and an iconic tourist destination. Situated about 60 miles to the north-west of London, Oxford is a northern outpost of the South-East region of England and a dynamic hub of the U.K. knowledge-based economy (KBE). With a population of around 152,000 the city is a strong sub-regional centre which contributes £4.7bn annually to the UK economy (OXFORD STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP, 2013: 3) and has the highest levels of business growth in the county of Oxfordshire. Together with the wider county, the area is a centre of engineering and scientific excellence, with one of the most substantial, distinctive and important collections of research-based, high-value business activities in Europe (SQW 2013). It is at the heart of the science and high-tech economy that the U.K. Government identifies as the centrepiece of national economic recovery. The leading clusters in the Oxfordshire KBE include high-growth sectors such as biosciences and medical research, space and satellite technologies, cryogenics, and advanced automotive engineering. There are additional strengths in digital information management, cyber-security, publishing, green construction, professional and business services, and culture/creative industries. In many respects the area has rich potential for growth, with world-leading research institutions backed by significant public-sector investment, dynamic and varied KBE clusters, strong spin-out activities, and good links to both London and Heathrow Airport.

Looking back over recent decades, however, Oxfordshire as a whole has grown rather less than might be anticipated in comparison with other high-tech areas in the UK. Between 1980 and 2005, for example, Oxfordshire's GVA per capita grew in line with the national

average, while Cambridgeshire’s figure grew at 2½ times the national rate (see WHILE et al, 2004 for useful background here). Comparisons with some other areas in the South-East region over this period are even more notable, as Figure 1 illustrates.

Figure 1: Gross Value Added (GVA) Estimates for NUTS 3 Areas (million euros, 2000 prices)



Source: Cambridge Econometrics estimates

The reasons for this are complex: While high-tech spin-out activity in Oxfordshire compares very well against other leading areas (LAWTON SMITH and HO, 2006), subsequent consolidation into medium-sized and particularly larger-scale enterprises has been less apparent. There is some concern here that despite the proximity of London, venture capital funding has been conservative and short-term, with insufficient institutional backing (SQW, 2013). Foreign Direct Investment into Oxfordshire has also been comparatively low, with only 3% of South East region FDI jobs locating in Oxfordshire between 1999 and 2010.

This compares with 13% in Berkshire, 16% in Surrey, 13% in Hampshire and 15% in Buckinghamshire (figures provided by South East England Development Agency, 2012). In terms of the leading global standards, the Oxfordshire high-tech cluster remains relatively small scale and rather disparate, with concomitant implications for the profile and performance of the constituent sectors. Additionally, there are structural constraints: For historical reasons (e.g. location on former military bases and UK Atomic Energy Authority sites) key elements of the Oxfordshire KBE are scattered across the county in a largely semi-rural context, resulting in demonstrable infrastructural shortfall and a lack of integrated planning (see *refs removed*). The growth prospects of the Oxfordshire KBE therefore face significant challenges in terms of infrastructure provision, and there are also major issues of housing availability and affordability, the variety and location of property for employment use, and skills shortages.

Housing availability and affordability in Oxford, in particular, is a key structural challenge. The city of Oxford is the least affordable housing location nationally outside of London based on the ratio of average incomes to house prices, a factor almost universally highlighted by employers and stakeholders during the development of Oxford City Council's current Economic Growth Strategy (OXFORD STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP, 2013). The rate of house-building in the County fell year-on-year after 2006 so that in 2010/11 a total of 1,600 houses were built in Oxfordshire, the lowest annual level of house building since 1971 (from when records are available). Based on extant local plans in 2012, household growth at Oxford city (2011-31) was projected at 9% (5200 households), while planned household growth in smaller towns about 15 miles outside of the city was much higher, with Bicester to the north of the county projected at 52% (6600) and Science Vale/Didcot to the south at

63% (13,000). This proposed pattern of housing delivery would be unlikely to have any material impact on problems of availability and affordability in the city. In addition, housing supply is seen as a very significant barrier to the operation of the labour market, with associated implications for travel-to-work patterns and infrastructure pressures, especially given that over half of Oxford's workforce is drawn from outside of the city mainly from the adjacent districts and the rest of the county beyond the greenbelt. Thus we encounter the conditions for a pattern of territorial discrepancy which has been emerging for several decades.

(ii) The roots of political dissonance

The argument we set out here is that planning for growth in Oxfordshire has been marked by characteristic features of urban political dissonance: Sustained patterns of conflict and tension; strategic action to delay, disrupt and reduce prospects for agreement; contradictory and incoherent policy agendas or programmes; and difficulty or inability to find compromise or workable policy resolution. In particular, for the past 35 years or so development planning in Oxfordshire has been marked by an evolving policy dilemma regarding the growth and physical expansion of Oxford city, which has had critical implications for planning policy in the county and for the growth prospects of the city and the sub-region. The roots of this dilemma are historical, reaching back at least to Greenbelt designation around the city in 1955 and particularly to the conservationist stance of Oxfordshire County Council (OXON CC) planning policy in the 'Structure Plan' era from the late-1970s (see further below). But it is also, as we demonstrate below, deeply territorial given the sharp urban-rural contrast which characterises the County, the fragmented and strongly differentiated context of local government structures after boundary reorganisation in 1974 (and indeed the preceding

highly fragmented local government context), and the emerging territorial discrepancy consequent upon economic and population growth set against the background of stubborn local government boundaries.

A key starting point here is the structure and local plan system introduced in the early 1970s, with a formal requirement for district-wide local plans from 1991. In ‘shire’ (non-metropolitan) counties the development plan consisted of the county structure plan together with district-wide local plans. In Oxfordshire, eight versions of the Structure Plan were produced, starting with the original adopted in 1979, with the last alteration being adopted in 2005.

Figure 2: Oxfordshire County and Districts



Source: Oxfordshire County Council, <http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/public-site/direct-access-equipment-map>

The framing of County spatial and growth policy may be judged from the Oxfordshire Structure Plan in 1996 where the emphasis on restraint was quite explicit:

Policy G1 (General): The general strategy is to protect the environment, character and agricultural resources of the County by restraining the overall level of development. The country towns of Banbury, Bicester, Didcot and Witney will be the preferred locations for new development. Elsewhere in the County, development, and consequent expansion of population, will be limited (OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, 1996)

This was allied with specific policies on employment locations and housing which reinforced the focus on the country towns and the policy of general restraint elsewhere, including in Oxford city. Indeed, despite a gradual acknowledgement of the city's primary function in the sub-region, the final version of the Structure Plan in 2005 clearly reflects the legacy of the established country-towns strategy:

2.7 The Plan reflects Oxford's central role in the life of the County. The County Council wants to see Oxford thrive as a first class vibrant city, modern in outlook with a diverse economy. The Plan promotes Oxford's role as a sub-regional centre for shopping, leisure and cultural activities. Oxford will continue to build on its strengths – education, health and related research and development activities...

2.8 This does not mean that Oxford should grow unchecked, so as to damage its heritage and landscape setting and increase pressure on transport and other services. Because of the substantial imbalance between jobs and workforce in Oxford, the

overall growth of employment in the city will continue to be limited. Land is available within the city to support the development of employment sectors that need to be located there. Other activities will be encouraged to continue to locate outside Oxford. Support is given for small-scale development which helps to maintain the diversity of the Oxford economy (OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL, 2005)

However, Oxford City Council had long opposed the country-towns strategy, framing an alternative 'central Oxfordshire' focus directed towards the planned expansion of the city. The Planning Services Business Manager noted in a report to the City Council's Executive Board in 2004, for example:

Members will recall that Oxford City Council has supported a Central Oxfordshire approach to development for over 20 years. It had been argued that it is more logical to put development in and around Oxford, which forms the hub of the County and would reduce the need to travel. The City Council has never formally supported the structure plan's 'country towns strategy', which says most development should be located in Banbury, Bicester, Didcot and Witney (OXFORD CITY COUNCIL, 2004)

This central dilemma over the growth of the city has by now marked planning policy in Oxfordshire for at least three decades. It has also been sharpened by the fragmented local government landscape in the County, the very tight boundary at the edge of the city reinforced by Greenbelt designation, and major political differences across the 5 county districts - Oxford City Council (OCC), South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC), Vale of the White Horse District Council (VOWH), West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC)

and Cherwell District Council (CDC) - as well as with Oxfordshire County Council (OxonCC) (see Figure 2). During this period OCC has been predominantly Labour-led, while SODC, WODC, VOWH, CDC and OxonCC have been largely majority or minority Conservative-controlled, albeit with some periods which have diverted from this overall pattern in particular districts⁴. The dilemma has persisted despite the fact that the Labour Government's Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 brought to an end the structure plan era, to be replaced by regional planning and an emerging regional spatial strategy – the South East Plan (SEP) – developed by the South East England Regional Assembly, which was subsequently adopted in 2009 (SEERA, 2009). This adopted a central Oxfordshire focus and called for sustainable urban extensions to a number of county urban areas including Oxford, as well as a selective review of the Oxford Green Belt. It was absolutely explicit in setting a new policy direction, stating in Paragraph 22.5 that:

The settlement pattern of the sub-region will change over the Plan period. Oxford itself will be allowed to grow physically and economically in order to accommodate its own needs, contribute to those in the wider region and help maintain its world-class status (SEERA, 2009)

Despite this re-scaling of the response and the implicit acknowledgment of territorial discrepancy, in the event the SEP was almost immediately removed with the revocation of regional spatial strategies under the Coalition Government from 2010, to be replaced by district-level Local Plans under the rubric of 'localism'. The nascent settlement over the city expansion that might have followed the adoption of the SEP was effectively undermined.

(iii) Urban Political Dissonance I: Planning for housing at the urban edge

Perhaps the clearest expression of territorial discrepancy and consequent political dissonance concerns the question of housing development at the edge of Oxford city. In particular we examine the area south of Grenoble Road on the south-east fringe of the city (see Figure 3). Owned by the City Council and Magdalen College (one of the constituent colleges of the University of Oxford) the site has been identified by OCC for many years as a potential urban extension to meet the city's pressing requirement for housing and employment land, accommodating possibly in excess of 4,000 homes. Development here has been framed explicitly by OCC in terms of a response to the city's housing crisis arguing in favour of Grenoble Road as the so-called 'South of Oxford Special Development Area' (SOSDA):

The City Council has consistently argued the sustainability benefits of locating housing close to Oxford and the very significant contribution that this could make to meeting the pressing housing needs of Oxford and the wider sub-region. Oxford is an inherently sustainable location for housing, because of its well established public transport and cycle networks, its employment opportunities and its social infrastructure made up of extensive retail, health, leisure, cultural and community provision. The City Council has therefore supported SOSDA and the potential contribution that a further 4,000 new homes could make in the longer-term to the pressing housing need in Oxford, which cannot be accommodated within its tight administrative boundaries. (OCC submission to SODC Core Strategy Examination, 12.5.2011)

Figure 3: Grenoble Road area



Source: South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031 Refined options Stage 2, February 2015, p.43 (SODC, 2015)

However, issues of territory are foremost here. The site is located within the SODC administrative boundary and SODC has consistently opposed the principle of development at the site, which is designated green belt. The question of urban extension has thus been framed in wholly contrasting terms by OCC and SODC as respectively a response to structural housing crisis or as protection of the greenbelt. Moreover, some sense of the institutional manoeuvring consequent upon these competing agendas can be gleaned from the councils' responses to the SEP as it evolved from 2006 to 2009. In March 2006 SEERA published the draft SEP, which incorporated two alternatives for housing growth in central Oxfordshire, namely: (i) growth at Didcot, Wantage/Grove, Bicester and within the built up area of Oxford; or (ii) an urban extension to Oxford with a review of the Green Belt. The draft plan proposed keeping the Oxford Green Belt unchanged and rejected the urban extension option. However, the associated Examination in Public (EiP) for the SEP did

include consideration of an urban extension to Oxford, which SODC opposed on the grounds of incursion into the Oxford greenbelt, a point reflected in its subsequent 'South of Oxford Urban Extension' public consultation document in July 2008: 'we oppose this proposal for an urban extension into the greenbelt and will continue to oppose it if the modifications to the South East Plan retain the proposal'. In 2007 the EiP Panel's report was published, recommending that both options were pursued and including a Strategic Development Area (SDA) with a notional allowance of 4000 dwellings to the south of Oxford. The Panel recommended that the additional 4000 homes be split between OCC and SODC based on more detailed work. It also recommended that the implications of the urban extension should be tested through a Sustainability Appraisal and an Environmental Impact Assessment, though in the event these were not undertaken by SODC. Nonetheless, the SEP, published in May 2009, included multiple references to SOSDA and was subsequently legally challenged by SODC, where the council cabinet member for Planning, argued:

We're totally opposed to development on this green belt land in South Oxfordshire. Oxford City Council, backed by the Government, wants to expand the city into South Oxfordshire without justification. The city should use underdeveloped land within its own boundaries to build housing, instead of trying to commandeer a large area of greenbelt that provides the unique setting for Oxford and contains some beautiful South Oxfordshire villages (OXFORD MAIL, 15 June 2009)

The challenge resulted in the withdrawal of the SDA from the SEP (though the additional 4000 houses remained as part of the overall housing target for the South-East region).

However, the issue became moot following the revocation of regional spatial strategies into 2010. Meanwhile, SODC did not include the SDA in the preparation of the SODC Core Strategy between 2008-11, or make provision for any of the proposed 4000 homes. The issue has continued to cause controversy, however. The OCC Economic Growth Strategy (OSP, 2012) and the ‘Oxfordshire Innovation Engine’ report (SQW, 2013) both identified Grenoble Road as a location to meet the city’s chronic need for housing and employment growth. Most recently the publication of a new Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (‘SHMA’, GL HEARN, 2014) identified a need for some 30,000 new homes for the city in the period to 2031, while the existing capacity within the city boundary was assessed at around 7-8,000 homes. In light of this the SODC Local Plan is subject to review to reflect this latest assessment of housing need. The City Council continues to promote the Grenoble Road site for development and to argue in favour of overall green belt review in light of the strategic planning context. Additionally, in Summer 2014, OCC sought a potential partnership with adjoining landowners at Grenoble Road who confirmed in principle that they wish to progress an urban extension in the area, and suggested that they may submit a planning application to SODC for the development of the site. OCC also submitted a consultation response in 2014 to SODC’s renewed Local Plan consultation process setting out their case for building at least 4,000 new homes close to Oxford (OXFORD MAIL, 2014b).

The experience at Grenoble Road is redolent with the notion of urban political dissonance. The conflict between OCC and SODC over the future of this site reflects clearly contradictory policy agendas and a straightforward inability to find compromise or workable resolution over a sustained period of time. The respective authorities have acted strategically

in support of their competing agendas, adopting a variety of techniques and manoeuvres to sustain their positions. Indeed, there is a sense in which the opposition has become implacable; it is noteworthy, for example, that even when the SEP had been effectively revoked and the Government's Treasury Solicitor indicated that there was nothing for legal challenges to quash or remit, SODC did not withdraw its legal challenge to the SDA, so that the issue remains unresolved. The proposed Sustainability Appraisal and Environmental Impact Assessment have also not been carried out. OCC, on the other hand, have been persistent keeping the issue alive through various means. Altogether, the experience in this case is highly suggestive of strategic action on the part of SODC to delay, disrupt and reduce prospects for agreement, whether or not the case for development at this site is seen as appropriate. The result, perhaps unsurprisingly, is a sense of tension and political strain played out regularly in the local press regarding the potential expansion of the city, and little sense of any serious and convincing engagement with the housing affordability crisis that is clearly evident.

(iv) Urban Political Dissonance II: The Oxford-Oxfordshire City-Deal

In 2011-12 a programme of 'City-Deals' was introduced by the then U.K. Coalition Government to extend decentralisation to the eight largest English cities outside of London, with the aim to foster long-term economic prosperity and growth (see CORE CITIES, 2011). Bespoke City-Deals were agreed between central government (Cabinet Office and DCLG) and the respective cities and their wider economic areas in 2012, incorporating a variety of enhanced powers, resources, financial instruments and organisational forms, including in some cases new combined authorities (for further details see CABINET OFFICE, 2012). This first wave of City-Deals was finalised in September 2012 and was

followed in October by a government invitation to a further 20 cities and their wider areas to negotiate for a second wave. Oxford-Oxfordshire was the 11th area in Wave 2 to agree a City-Deal, finally signed by the Deputy Prime Minister on January 30th 2014.

From the outset it was apparent that the central focus of the Oxford-Oxfordshire City-Deal bid would be on enhancing the performance of the KBE in Oxfordshire, and especially responding to the need for improved connectivity across the county. This was particularly the case given the perceived importance of proximity and networking in innovation and commercialisation processes, and the geographical dispersion of the hi-tech clusters, with publishing concentrated predominantly in Oxford; motorsport/advanced engineering across north- and west-Oxfordshire and into Northamptonshire; biosciences in and around Oxford and in southern Oxfordshire; and space science and cryogenics focused mainly around Harwell and Culham in the ‘Science Vale’ area (see *reference removed* for details of the development of Science Vale). There was also increasing recognition of the potential for cross-cluster working as the basis for ongoing dynamism and innovation. Hence, transportation and digital infrastructure improvements were seen as critical, particularly in the light of existing capacity issues and areas of network stress in the road transportation system. The central theme of the City-Deal bid became a ‘knowledge-spine’ connecting Harwell and Culham in the south, Oxford in the centre and Begbroke Science Park and Bicester to the north, via a package of transportation improvements and four new innovation hubs. Additionally, the Deal incorporated ambitious claims of nearly 19,000 new high-value jobs, a further 31,400 in construction, the delivery of over 500 new apprenticeships along with increased funding for skills training, and the ‘accelerated construction’ of houses. Here, the City-Deal document states that a more strategic and

ambitious approach towards housing growth is ‘essential to the future of the knowledge economy in the County’. It therefore included a commitment to accelerate the delivery of 7,500 homes through a combined Oxfordshire Housing Programme by 2018. This represented, it was claimed, a 72% increase in the number of homes delivered by 2018 against the previous forecast, with 36% of this housing planned to be affordable (OXFORD STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP, 2014). The Deal also incorporated an explicit commitment to deliver the necessary sites to meet the housing needs that would be outlined in the emerging SHMA. However, despite the general acknowledgement of the importance of housing provision to future growth the City-Deal patently did not set out to address the scale of the housing crisis in Oxfordshire or to face the intractable problems of housing allocations. The ‘accelerated delivery’ incorporated no previously unallocated sites or housing numbers, and the scale of delivery under consideration here was very limited in the face of structural housing shortage.

The focus on improved connectivity as the foundation for hi-tech expansion clearly reflected moves to foreground the twin themes of innovation and economic growth in framing the future development of the county. Key County Council officers leading the City-Deal bid process were explicit in framing discussions in these terms, rather than introducing housing questions directly into a discussion about ‘economic’ growth. Some sense of the approach here may be gleaned from the summary of a senior County Council officer in November 2013, who argued:

The overarching objective is around economic growth and innovation... Once this overall direction is in place, then housing, transport and skills become enablers rather

than significant in themselves. The significance of that is that if I come to you and say ‘do you want 500 houses built next to you?’ the answer will be ‘no, why would I?’ But if you say ‘do you want your kids in the next generation to have a future here and have somewhere to live because it’s so unaffordable right now?’, then that’s a different conversation. So the innovation-economic growth is the vision of what you want to do, and the housing, which is where all the arguments are between the various districts and the county, becomes the support. It’s like being back to World War I trenches if you jump straight into Grenoble Road and you slug it out saying ‘yes’ or ‘no way’ and all that – but you have no context for the discussion. It’s just: ‘We don’t want houses. Go away.’ Whereas if it’s about the future, how are we going to build houses and how are you going to be able to afford to live there and your kids get a job there, then having the vision is really, really important. It’s a huge breakthrough, to focus on innovation and growth. (Senior Officer, OxonCC, 5 Nov 13)

However, the corollary of this is that the structural challenge of housing was effectively sidelined. Indeed, interview evidence revealed the differentiated territorial agendas at play: OCC viewed the City-Deal process as a vehicle through which to promote its overall growth agenda, and thereby to force a comprehensive response to the city's housing crisis as a whole, while the surrounding districts, on the other hand, saw potential benefits for their own respective territories from a successful City-Deal bid, but would not countenance significant debate over existing housing allocations. The outcome, influenced considerably it would appear by officers at OxonCC, was a tactical move to divert away from the question of housing *per se*, effectively redefining the housing issue into one of economic growth, and resulting in a lack of coherence between the overall ambition of the City-Deal proposals and

the existing scale of housing allocations. A senior County Council officer summarised the position in interview, as follows:

I can't give you a housing number - housing is still tentative. Because it's been moving so fast we haven't been able to get clearance on this from the politicians. The City will say they're getting towards an agreement for more housing, then the districts will say something different. What happens is that you have to get it so far down the line, and then the pressure builds, [central] Government says 'we'll do this and this for you', and it starts to develop a credibility which means that the surrounding districts will then find it difficult to say no. Again, it's partly because it derives from that overall vision – I mean, who doesn't want a prosperous economy? (5 Nov 2013)

Alongside the tendency to divert away from the housing issue, signs of political tension were evident more generally throughout the policy process. Though the City-Deal bid was eventually successful, not least, it would appear, because of the perception on the part of central government of the potential for knowledge-based growth in the county, several respondents were perfectly candid regarding underlying difficulties in working relationships between the various authorities. A senior district council officer remarked, for example:

The City-Deal was a debacle. The Government representatives – one from BIS, one from Cabinet Office – well, I've never known Government reps be as honest as they were. After a few meetings where they just listened to us and watched the dynamics and the way we made decisions, they finally came out and said: "You've got to come up with your draft soon. We're telling you now, don't waste time on the draft that

you've got here, because Government believes that Oxfordshire doesn't work together. All six of you authorities don't get on. None of you are volunteering any money, any resources. You've been told that the only rule about City-Deals is that you can't simply ask Government for more money, and all you are doing is asking for money. What part of this don't you understand?!" I was saying 'yes, you're absolutely right' and I was getting kicked under the table, but basically the County and the districts don't all get on. Even when the Government arrives and says "we can really make Oxfordshire fly, we're here to help you, because if Oxfordshire flies then the whole country flies. Ask us for something exciting". But we couldn't because we didn't get on. That was the only reason. There were visionaries in the room, but they were thinking of their own organisation first, and not the whole region (13 March 2014)

Lastly here, it is noteworthy that the governance arrangements which have emerged to take forward the City-Deal programme effectively further embed the existing governmental framework in Oxfordshire, rather than providing a mechanism to transcend the established policy impasse. City-Deals were introduced with the explicit intent to strengthen governance across functional economic areas, to facilitate effective leadership and to remove existing blockages. In some cases they have generated or extended significant governance change with new combined authorities taking responsibility for economic development, regeneration and transportation policies. However, Oxfordshire proposed a Joint Committee of the City-Deal partners to act as a 'City-Deal Board'. The Local Authorities would invest powers in the City-Deal Board by virtue of representative membership, the Board comprising six local authority and six private sector representatives drawn from the wider Local Enterprise Partnership Board membership including the LEP chair, the University of

Oxford, research institutions and business interests. The Board would be chaired on a rotational basis by a local authority leader and was constituted explicitly to ‘ensure that decisions relating to the implementation of this proposal are binding on all parties, thereby bringing confidence to Government and the business community more widely that its ambitions will be delivered.’ However, some sense of the limits of joint working here may be gauged from OCC’s response to Cherwell District Council’s (CDC) Local Plan submission on 31st January 2014, which criticised CDC’s housing allocations made shortly prior to the SHMA recommendations which emerged in March:

In failing to address the delivery of the objectively assessed [housing] need identified by the Oxfordshire SHMA, the Local Plan fails in its agreement with Government to meet the objectively assessed need set out in the Oxfordshire SHMA. This in turn fails to acknowledge the national interests and local requirements for economic growth as given in the City Deal, approved in January 2014 by CDC and all the Oxfordshire authorities, the LEP and Government Ministers

In summary, then, the experience of the City-Deal in Oxford-Oxfordshire reflected strategic action on the part of key actors to manage contradictory policy agendas amongst the local authorities. The territorial foundations for this are clearly apparent. In the face of intractable opposition amongst the districts to the physical expansion of the city, OxonCC officers sought to find a way forward. The City-Deal bid was therefore framed explicitly around questions of innovation and economic growth in order to avoid the immediate conflict which would accompany any direct engagement with housing allocations. Political dissonance thus circumscribed the nature of the strategic response, ensuring that the key

issue of housing was effectively avoided, but resulting in an associated lack of specificity in the City-Deal proposal and ongoing conflict over the wider spatial strategy for the County. It was also the source of palpable tension in the policy process and in the limited scope of associated changes in governance forms.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we have characterised urban political dissonance as a form of sustained, institutionalised conflict marked by contradictory visions and policy incongruity. Through a detailed case study in Oxford, U.K. we have sought to demonstrate how a distinctive pattern of territorial discrepancy has underpinned sustained patterns of conflict and tension, strategic action to delay, disrupt and reduce prospects for agreement, incoherent policy agendas, and an inability to find workable policy resolution. In setting out the overall lineaments of urban political dissonance we recognise, however, that the paper is necessarily limited both theoretically and empirically and would point to a number of areas for further development. From a conceptual standpoint, for example, there would seem to be significant potential for multi-layered analyses which seek connections between this distinctive urban political form and the wider dynamics of capital accumulation, as well as important interactions with regional and central state levels. Here there are clear parallels with earlier structuralist critiques of urban political theories, and with wider calls for a relational and multi-scalar reading of urban politics. More concretely, with regard to research design, the focus on framing here suggests much closer attention to questions of institutional perceptions, personality, and political manoeuvring and in turn points towards a deeper interrogation of strategic activity through more formal discourse-analytic techniques and

institutional ethnographies. Additionally as we have recognised above, there is a need for comparative analyses based on consistent conceptual foundations and rigorous methods in order to extend explanatory outcomes.

One important implication of our analysis concerns the wider impact of such dissonant urban political forms on delivering economic development. Politics matters in urban development, even in post-political times. While the scope of political debate may indeed be narrowed, struggle over spatial strategy, policy emphases and associated delivery mechanisms is played out on a daily basis in many local political contexts. This may be reinforced by distinctively territorial dynamics as entrenched institutional positions, party political differences and individual personalities feed into established policy scleroses. The impacts may be real and highly significant; in January 2015, for example, *The Economist* reported that between 2008-9 and 2013-14 Cambridge added many more workers, highly educated residents and well-paid jobs than Oxford, and that Cambridge built 1,020 homes in 2014, while Oxford built 60 (Economist 2015). The implication, it was argued, is clear: ‘What the city, and the county, now need is someone to provide a strategic overview and then to bang heads together to push it through. None of the districts in Oxfordshire is big or powerful enough to do so’ (op cit, 2015).

The focus on governance restructuring introduced here reflects an evolving emphasis in central government thinking, though we would also sound a note of caution regarding the limits of purely territorial restructuring. Over an extended period planning *per se* has been portrayed as a major barrier to economic growth in the U.K. and an extensive programme of reform and liberalisation has sought to streamline the planning system and redirect it in

favour of economic growth. Alongside this, however, important governance initiatives have recently been introduced designed to decentralise influence over economic growth, such as multi-area agreements in the later years of New Labour government and combined metropolitan authorities under the 2010-2015 Coalition and the current Conservative administration. However, as our analysis here clearly demonstrates the sources of delay may be as much political as administrative and bureaucratic. In the absence of commitment to clear *policy* change, therefore, ongoing streamlining and even governance restructuring may not necessarily engender policy reform, and hence might have little impact on an established impasse. Indeed, despite the focus on combined authorities in some of the larger metropolitan areas of England, the broad turn to localism under the Coalition Government from 2010 and the Conservative Government from 2015 may well have acted in other cases to license local political constraints and reinforce dissonant political forms. In this context the prospect for effectively ‘dealing with dissonance’ remains seemingly faraway.

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Endnotes:

¹ Thanks for this specific wording are due to an anonymous referee

² For example, BRUMBERG (2001) examines dissonant politics in two contrasting Islamic contexts: Firstly, in Iran where efforts to liberalise the political system after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 were effectively stymied by a competing institutional-ideological path controlled by Khomeini's heir Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamanei and his allies in powerful state institutions; and secondly in Indonesia where political liberalisation and power sharing reflect Indonesia's plural nature, but also a legacy of division between traditionalist and modernist Muslims manifest in 'a politics of confrontation, brinkmanship, and negotiation among forces that have long advocated contending visions of community' (BRUMBERG, 2001: 408). Elsewhere, GLADE (2005) assesses developments within Mubarak's Egypt which for three decades from 1981 fluctuated between democratic reform and hegemonic totalitarianism as the Egyptian government sought to maintain its monopoly on legitimate social and political interpretation. Lastly here, MUEHLBACHER (2008) discusses Lebanon as a dissonant nation embodying both 'irreconcilable loyalties' and 'inter-communal coexistence', such that it has been unable to construct a clearly definable identity.

³ This perspective derives from the so-called 'strategic-relational approach' (SRA) introduced by Bob Jessop and Colin Hay (HAY 2002; HAY and JESSOP 1995; JESSOP 1990, 1997, 2001) specifically in the sphere of state theory to explain that the state, as a social relation, is a historically contingent strategic terrain which is more responsive to some strategies than others. In theorising the actions of societal interests such a state-theoretical account emphasises the interaction of a dynamic context which privileges certain forms of interests

and activities over alternative courses of action (or is ‘strategically selective’), and strategic actors who continually examine the options open to them in pursuing their various interests. Focus is directed, therefore, towards the dynamic interplay between the changing political-economic and institutional context within which particular actors operate, and the perceptions, strategic calculations and action of those actors.

⁴ Since the early 1970s OCC has been predominantly Labour-led, with majority control throughout from 1980-2000 and a mix of majority and minority leadership throughout most of the remaining years. In recent years there have been no elected Conservatives on the City Council at all, although two Liberal Democrat councillors briefly sat as Conservatives during 2007–8. SODC, WODC, VOWH and CDC, have been predominantly Conservative-controlled since their initial elections in 1973, though VOWH was controlled by the Liberal-Democratic party for a significant period from 1995-2011 and CDC was briefly controlled by Labour, between 1996-98. OxonCC also has been largely Conservative-led, albeit under no overall control from 1985-2005.