Conservation and Society 16(3): 257-267, 2018

Article

Austerity Politics and the Post-Politicisation of Conservation Governance in Canada

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Abstract

Several notable controversies around private sector interests in national parks throughout Canada have erupted within the last five years. These controversies are arising within the context of budget cuts to Parks Canada and related imperatives to increase visitor numbers and 'visitor experience' to recoup costs and strengthen public support for Canadian parks. While the majority of the literature on the neoliberalisation of conservation focuses on its socio-environmental implications, this research highlights some important political implications of the increasing role of private interests in conservation practice due to state level austerity politics. This article outlines the post-politics of public consultation in Jasper National Park through a study of two public contestations around private tourism development in the park. I argue that austerity politics create the conditions for a re-articulation of the politics of conservation governance as the interests of parks departments and private sector interests are brought into alignment. Austerity-related restructuring of conservation practice elevates the importance of public-private partnerships for sustaining the viability of the park system, contributing to the construction of a post-political 'there is no alternative' discourse where neoliberal ideology in conservation is elevated beyond critique. To facilitate development, managers employ various strategies to reduce democratic oversight of public provisioning, removing opportunities for political debate and dissensus and orchestrating the appearance of consensual decision-making.

Keywords: austerity, post-politics, neoliberal conservation, public consultation, tourism

INTRODUCTION

There is now extensive literature on the ways in which neoliberalisation has been shaping or transforming conservation policies, programmes, and practices the world over (Buscher et al. 2014; Fletcher 2012; Roth and Dressler 2012; Sullivan 2013; Youdelis 2013). Broadly speaking, the neoliberalisation of conservation often involves a mix of introducing market mechanisms or market-like models of decision-making, privatisation and commodification of conservation goods or services, monetisation and valuation, and a re-orientation to private sector financing (Holmes and Cavanagh 2015). An emerging theme in the literature concerns the ways in which neoliberalisation re-articulates the politics of conservation (Buscher 2010; Fletcher 2014; Youdelis 2016). Some have argued that "conservation discourse is becoming increasingly 'post-political'" (Fletcher 2014: 330), orchestrating the appearance of consent around the validity of neoliberal logic and governing based on "technocratic questions of efficiency and cost-benefit ratios from which political considerations and debates are largely effaced" (Fletcher 2014: 330; see also Swyngedouw 2010, 2011).

This article explores the post-politicisation of conservation governance through a case study of two very controversial private tourism development proposals in Jasper National Park, Canada: Brewster Travel's Glacier Skywalk and Maligne Tours' hotel proposal. Enacting politics of austerity after the 2008 economic crisis, the Conservative government under former Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015)

Access this article online	
Quick Response Code:	Website: www.conservationandsociety.org
	DOI: 10.4103/cs.cs_16_149

made significant budget cuts to Parks Canada beginning in 2012. The government cut $6 million dollars in 2012-2013, about $20 million in 2013-2014, and about $29 million for both the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 seasons, totalling approximately $84 million (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2016). These cuts occurred within the context of this government dismantling environmental protections and the environmental assessment process through Omnibus budget bills (Kirchoff and Tsuji 2014), muzzling scientists in the media (Turner 2013), and very conspicuously attempting to expedite energy projects such as those relating to the Alberta tar sands (Peyton and Franks 2015). During this time several proposals for private tourism development arose across the Canadian park system, and each was opposed by networks of public and Indigenous actors.

The Glacier Skywalk controversy in Banff-Jasper national park was the most widely publicised with a staggering volume of public[1] response, which was predominantly negative. Parks Canada's approval of this project despite the voices of so many Canadians left residents concerned with the efficacy of public consultation and the extent to which national parks are public spaces. Drawing on these controversies, I argue that austerity politics create the conditions for a re-articulation of the politics of conservation governance as the interests of parks departments and private sector interests are brought into alignment. Specifically, the politics of austerity can render single-issue controversies post-political. Austerity-related restructuring of conservation practice elevates the importance of public-private (P3) partnerships for sustaining the viability of the park system into the future, contributing to the construction of a post-political 'there is no alternative' discourse where neoliberal ideology in conservation is elevated beyond critique. To facilitate development, managers employ various strategies to reduce democratic oversight of public provisioning, removing opportunities for political debate and dissensus and orchestrating the appearance of consensual decision-making.

Although there is an abundance of critical work on the socio-environmental implications of the neoliberalisation of conservation (Holmes and Cavanagh 2015), less attention has been paid to the political implications of these trends in terms of how austerity politics might shape who exerts power in decision-making. The field of post-politicisation is also largely theoretical with very few empirically grounded studies (Beveridge 2016), and thus research such as this is vital for analysing the real-world implications of post-politics for conservation governance. Whereas the majority of work on the impacts of neoliberalisation focus on cases in the Global South, this research builds on and departs from current literature by providing a grounded study of the role of austerity politics in the post-politicisation of conservation governance in the Global North.

Post-political literature draws connections between neoliberalisation and "the contested emergence of a post-political… socio-spatial configuration" (Swyngedouw 2011: 370), where the political dissensus and debate requisite for the practice of democracy is evacuated from the sphere of policy negotiation, and governance is reduced to 'policing' consensual politics and technocratic policy-making (Mouffe 2005; Ranciere 1998; Swyngedouw 2010, 2011; Zizek 1999). Post-politics builds on French political philosophers' distinction between 'the political' (le politique) and 'the polic(e)y/politics' (la politique). 'The political' signifies the "antagonistic differences that cut through the social" (Swyngedouw 2011: 373), or the non-existence of society as a cohesive political community. 'The police/politics represents the institutionally choreographed field of policy-making that attempts to structure or grant cohesion to the otherwise absent social order (Marchart 2007; Nancy 1992; Swyngedouw 2011). In a post-political order, 'the political' as the space for the practice of democratic politics (ie. the open expression of dissensus, debate, and the antagonistic struggle for recognition) is sutured by 'the police' (ie. consensual techno-managerial policy-making and administration).

Post-political governance normalises and invisibilises several 'taken-for-granted' discourses such as 'there is no alternative' thinking around neoliberal capitalism as the basic socio-economic order (Fletcher 2014; Swyngedouw 2011). Neoliberalism's rhetorical celebration of decentralisation and public participation can serve to enroll a wider network of people into the decision-making process, but on increasingly narrow and circumscribed terms, keeping important political economic issues beyond public debate or critique. Consent around the validity of neoliberal logic is not 'manufactured' (Herman and Chomsky 1988) in the sense that it is actually achieved, but the 'appearance' of consent is 'orchestrated' (Fletcher 2014) "as one of the tactics through which spaces of conflict and antagonism are smoothed over and displaced" (Swyngedouw 2010: 226).

Many critics have also argued that a neoliberal political economy, rather than being inherently democratising as it is made out to be in 'End of History' type discussions, tends towards authoritarianism, oligarchy and/or overt attacks on democracy and civil liberties (Brown 2003; Chomsky 1999; Harvey 2005). This is because a heavy hand is needed to make the populace swallow the hard pill of painful but 'necessary' austerity-induced reforms (Zizek 2008). Indeed, many fear that austerity politics will erode institutions of political democracy as "the freedom of the masses [is]. restricted in favour of the freedoms of the few" (Harvey 2005: 70) and one's political purchase is bound to one's ability to generate capital (Ong 2006), which may have grave implications for the management of public goods. In this paper, I therefore unite the lines of thinking around political economy, conservation governance and post-politics to demonstrate the implications of austerity politics for the politics of conservation governance.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected over a period of six months (May-October) in 2014 while I was living in the town of Jasper, Alberta (inside Jasper National Park). The bulk of the data was collected

through in-depth semi-structured interviews, supplemented by document analysis and observation. I had been following the Glacier Skywalk controversy in the news since 2012. I made note of the key actors and organisations quoted in the media and contacted as many as possible. I did a few weeks of preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2013 to make contact with some key informants from local environmental organisations and park staff, and to probe who were the major players in town and in surrounding areas (Banff, Canmore, Edmonton, Calgary). The town of Jasper is very small, under 5,000 people, so during my extended stay I got to know people quite easily and soon some were actually contacting me to share their views and experiences with consultation in the park.

To get a cross-section of perspectives, I sought out current and former park staff, the private business proponents, local environmental groups and NGOs, academics (who were quoted in the media), local journalists, politicians, Tourism Jasper (the official marketing organisation for Jasper), the chamber of commerce, local business owners and citizens living in Jasper, for a total of 42 interviews.

To interview current park staff (current at the time of research), I had to fill out a detailed application and provide all of my research questions in advance. During this time, federal scientists and employees were being "muzzled" in the media, unable to speak with anyone without first approving their responses in Ottawa (Turner 2013). I was approved to speak with four managers (the Visitor Experience manager, the Aboriginal Liaison, a Senior Land Use Manager, and the Superintendent of the park), but on arrival, the Superintendent wanted to limit me to only one point of contact, the Senior Land Use Manager whom I had already briefly spoken with during my preliminary research. After a great deal of persistence, the Superintendent agreed to speak with me, and I was also able to speak with the (now former) CEO of Parks Canada, however the difficulty in obtaining these interviews I think reflects the immense pressure that public servants were under at the time and the level of controversy around the topic of discussion.

These interviews were supplemented with document analysis of relevant materials such as the environmental assessment report, promotional material from the companies involved, park management planning documents, etc. I also engaged in observational activities at different events and protests held by environmental groups and at the two tourism attractions. I then coded and analysed data using Dedoose software. In the rest of this section I provide a description of both controversies including a timeline of events.

The Glacier Skywalk

The Glacier Skywalk was proposed in 2011 by Brewster Travel Ltd, which is owned by the American multinational Viad Corporation based in Phoenix, Arizona. It includes a 400 metre walkway, meant to be an educational trail, and a glass-floored 'skywalk' extending 30 metres over the Sunwapta Valley (Figures 1 and 2) on the road between Jasper and Banff national parks (Wittmeier 2012).

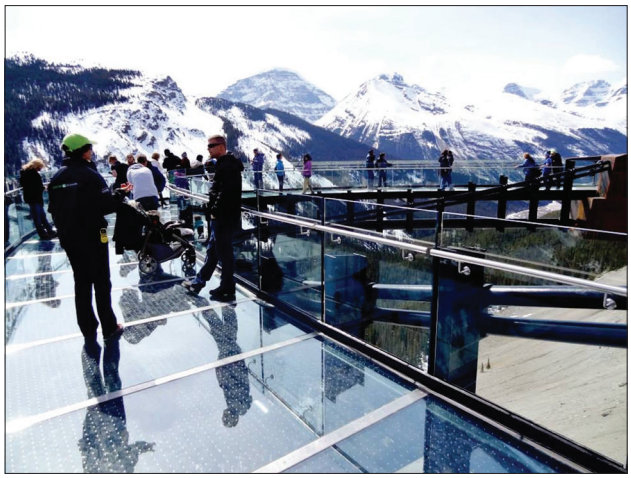

Figure 1
Completed product taken during site visits

Until construction, visitors to the area could take in the views over the Sunwapta Valley for free. Visitors will now be charged $32 before tax to visit the attraction, and they are no longer allowed to stop at the viewpoint but must drive another 6 km down the road to the Columbia Icefields centre where Brewster operates a commercial stage coach attraction, taking tourists out onto the Athabasca Glacier. A black tarp has been placed over the fence that surrounds the Glacier Skywalk so that visitors driving by can no longer take in the views without paying Brewster, which many find highly egregious.

This proposal elicited a significant countermovement as soon as it was proposed, with citizens, environmental groups, journalists, academics, politicians and foreign tourists expressing disapproval of the project. Public concerns included: corporate-government partnerships seeking profits over conservation principles, the ability for all Canadians to access park services, public resources becoming privatised, a commitment to democratic participation, and respecting the role of parks as understood to protect 'wilderness' or our national heritage. The campaign began with Jasper residents sending letters to Parks Canada and voicing their concerns at public meetings (CBC News 2012). Jasper residents organised a Monty Python style 'silly walk' in May 2011 to protest the development. Opponents then turned to Avaaz.org, an on-line activist organization, to publicise and broaden the campaign by initiating an on-line petition titled "Save Jasper National Park". They collected over 180,000 signatures by asking Canadians to save our 'natural wonders' from American development. Additionally, thousands of letters were sent to former Minister of the Environment Peter Kent and over 5000 postcards were sent directly to former Prime Minister Stephen Harper in hopes of halting construction (Wittmeier 2012).

The environmental assessment was conducted from early June to October 1, 2011, and was completed in late November. Public meetings were held on four consecutive days in December 2011, one each in Jasper, Banff, Edmonton and Calgary. Despite public outcry, Parks Canada framed opposition to the project as a matter of 'personal values' and not

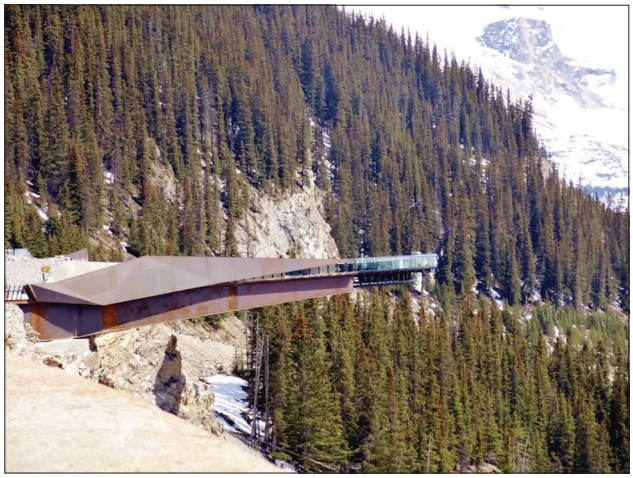

Figure 2
Glacier Skywalk, May 2014

a legitimate reason to turn down the proposal. Then Minister of the Environment Peter Kent stepped in to approve the project in February 2012 despite Parks Canada having assured stakeholders that the decision was made at the park level by former superintendent Greg Fenton. Opposition continued after that time and opponents organised another protest at the Icefields Centre in September 2012. Several stakeholders believe the decision to approve was made in Ottawa prior to public consultation, pointing to the fact that Brewster was openly lobbying the government (OCL-C 2013). The experience left citizens and environmental groups concerned with the ways that decisions are being made and the extent to which national parks are public spaces. The Skywalk opened to the public in May, 2014, which is when my fieldwork began.

Maligne Tours' Conceptual Proposal

In the summer of 2013, Maligne Tours proposed a 66-suite hotel along with 15 tent cabins, horseback riding trails and other attractions like a wildlife-themed maze at Maligne Lake in Jasper National Park (Global News 2013). The lake is home to the iconic Spirit Island, where Maligne Tours currently operates a boat service that brings tourists to visit the island and back. There are only 7 boats allowed on the lake, and none can go beyond Spirit Island as the rest of the lake ecosystem and surrounding area is considered ecologically sensitive. The hotel would be built on the mainland where several threatened and sensitive species reside (caribou, grizzly bears, harlequin ducks). One reason opponents protested the hotel is that animals feed in the area before and after the boat service hours of operation when human traffic is absent.

Maligne Tours put forward a detailed conceptual proposal in November, 2013 and representatives from Maligne Tours and the park held an open house meeting on November 27, 2013. Parks Canada then sought written input from the public on this conceptual proposal for much of 2014, while I was in town. Again, citizen and environmental groups, journalists, academics, and tourists came together to protest this development. They sent letters to Parks Canada, the Ministry of the Environment and former PM Stephen Harper opposing the project, and another Avaaz.org petition gathered over 2,700 signatures.

In a letter to Superintendent Greg Fenton, the Jasper Environmental Association (JEA) and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) partnered with Ecojustice, an environmental law charity, and jointly argued that the proposed development at Maligne Lake should not be approved, as it is contrary to the 2010 Management Plan for Jasper National Park, contrary to the Parks Canada Guiding Principles and Operational Policies and the 2007 Outlying Commercial Accommodation Guidelines, and contrary to the conditions set on the 2003 renewal of the lease and licenses of occupation for Maligne Lake developments. They argued that the proposed development would jeopardise the survival and recovery of caribou herds, an endangered species in the area, and would interfere with other sensitive species. The JEA organised a protest along the road, leading to Maligne Lake in June, 2014 (which I attended for observational purposes), and partnered with CPAWS to organise a written petition against the proposal. CPAWS distributed these petitions in Mountain Equipment Co-op stores across Canada.

In October, 2014, Parks Canada turned down the hotel portion of the proposal, but greenlighted all of the other proposed attractions for further consideration. This includes the 15 overnight tent cabins, which opponents feel would have many of the same impacts as the hotel and which would break the rules set out in the park management plan, so opposition is ongoing.

The JEA, CPAWS and Ecojustice then took Parks Canada to court. They argued that it was unlawful for Parks Canada to agree to consider a project (ie. the tent cabins) that would contravene the management plan at the request of industry. The Judge upheld the superintendent's authority to consider projects that contravene park policy, but ruled that no project that does contravene the management plan could be approved (Veerman 2016).

Interestingly, Brewster Travel acquired Maligne Tours in January of 2016 after it was clear that the hotel would not be going forward. The acquisition means that Viad Corporation now owns two of the biggest money-makers in the mountain parks (Banff, Jasper, Yoho and Kootenay). It is unclear at this point whether they will continue to pursue the greenlighted attractions including the overnight tent cabins.

PARKS CANADA AND AUSTERITY

Jasper and Banff national parks are truly anomalies in the Canadian system in terms of both popularity and private sector influence and activity. Banff sees just under 4 million visitors per year, and Jasper is a close second with just over 2 million (Parks Canada 2014). Banff was the first park established in Canada in 1885. It was built around the discovery of hot springs in the area, which the Canadian government and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) saw as having great

tourism potential for passengers of the CPR. The other early mountain parks were similarly built around tourism— Yoho in 1886, Jasper in 1907, and Kootenay in 1920. First Nations whose land-based lifeways were an impediment to economic growth were evicted to create 'wilderness' as playground for the settler elite (MacLaren 2011; Youdelis 2016).

Because the early mountain parks were built around tourism, many of the private operators and the townsites were grandfathered in. Only 7 out of 188 parks in Canada contain townsites, 5 of which are in the mountain parks, so it is atypical to have so many private businesses operating within a national park. Because both parks also see so much visitation, these are really the money-making parks for Parks Canada at the national level, and thus in times of austerity they are perhaps under greater pressure to draw in more tourism revenue.

The progression of conservation practice in the early mountain parks is commonly compared to a pendulum swinging between ecological integrity and visitor experience (Campbell 2011). In the 1970s and 80s the 'pendulum' swung quite far towards the development side in Banff in particular. When the Yellowhead Highway from Edmonton through B.C. opened in 1968, developers in the park took advantage of the increase in middle class tourists flooding in by car, spurring urbanisation of the townsites, ski developments, hotels, etc. (Bella 1987). This frenzy of development spurred two momentous independent reviews of Parks Canada, the Banff Bow Valley Study (1994-1996) and the Panel on Ecological Integrity (1998-2000). Both studies concluded that Canadian parks were in serious peril; that tourism and infrastructure development increasingly threatened ecological integrity. The studies forced Parks Canada to take action, which was mainly legislative. The National Parks Act of 2000 proclaimed that the maintenance and restoration of ecological integrity shall be the first priority of the Minister when making decisions.

A more targeted action taken as a result of these revelations was to develop the 2007 Outlying Commercial Accommodation (OCA) Guidelines and include limits to development in management plans. Kevin Van Tighem, who was the superintendent of Banff National Park between 2007 and 2011, was the head of the task force charged with negotiating with OCA owners to ensure each operator did not develop the full span of their leaseholds, which he described as "a really painful process". After about five years of work the task force produced the guideline document, which holds each OCA to certain development limits. The 2010 management plans for both Banff and Jasper state that these OCA guidelines are to be respected. The 2010 Jasper Management Plan also states that no new land shall be released for overnight commercial accommodation.

Despite the stronger wording in the Parks Act and the written limits to development in planning documents, many still consider the pendulum to have swung very far to the visitor experience and tourism development side over the past decade. Ben Gadd, a well-known naturalist in the Banff area who was one of the original Parks Canada interpreters in the early 1980s, explained to me in an interview that when he first started, visitor experience was considered maintenance of trails and campgrounds and quality interpretive programming by experienced naturalists. Interpretive guides and other programming were free of charge for park visitors, and most, if not all park staff were trained biologists or ecologists. When the Conservatives came into power in 1984, Gadd saw the naturalist programme he loved completely dismantled. The free guided hikes and nightly programming were cancelled, and people like him with secure positions were let go in favour of seasonal low-skilled workers. "They were trying to get the most work out of the fewest people for the least money. It was very unpleasant, so we all quit," he said. Private tour guides replaced the park-run programmes, for additional fees to visitors, shifting responsibility for 'visitor experience' largely to private outfitters.

While the groundwork was laid in the 1980s, austerity measures really came down in the 1990s under the Liberal government led by Jean Chretien. Between 1993 and 1998, Parks Canada faced budget cuts of $123 million (Kopas 2007). In 1998, the Agency Act changed Parks Canada into a special agency, which opponents of development point to as the beginning of the end. The Agency Act legislated that Parks Canada would continue to receive a yearly budget from the federal government, but that revenues generated at each park could also be retained. Shrinking public purses then effectively started to put pressure on parks to make up the difference. Kevin Van Tighem, former superintendent of Banff, said:

> "What [the Agency Act] did was it basically hardwired a potential for serious mandate drift, because it means that now we are completely in the same bed as the tourism industry in the sense that we live or breathe on revenues. So, there's a real revenue imperative now. That revenue imperative becomes even more powerful… It gets magnified with every bit of budget cut you get."

With such high visitation, Banff and Jasper are also anomalies in the system in terms of how much they rely on revenues versus appropriations from the government. Most parks receive a combination of appropriations, which is tax dollars, and revenues, coming from things like camping, gate fees, commercial land rents and percentage of gross from commercial operators. In Banff and Jasper, the great volumes of people coming to the park and the higher number of private operators means that 80-90% of funds are related to revenues with only about 10-20% from appropriations. The mountain parks have a revenue target to reach each year, some of which is shared with other parks across Canada that don't earn as much in revenues, and anything earned over and above that target is kept by the park. Even though the mountain parks are making much more than other parks in tourism revenues, this does not mean that they have more money available for conservation programmes. Policy dictates that money collected from visitor offerings should be reinvested in visitor experience. There have not been any significant inputs of funding into conservation programmes since these were significantly depleted in 2012.

The Visitor Experience and External Relations branch of Parks Canada came into being in 2005, which Jasper's Visitor Experience Manager called a "major organisational shift". Each park now has both a conservation branch and visitor experience branch, where visitor experience personnel have degrees in marketing and business. Karsten Heuer, former warden and, at the time of the interview, head of the Yellowstone 2 Yukon[2] initiative, blamed the budget cuts and the organisational push towards visitor experience as the reason he grudgingly left the agency, and he was not alone:

> "When I started with Parks, for instance, we had 12 people covering the full extent of the backcountry. By the time I left there was basically one and a half of us, maybe two. It was just this progression of undermining how we could actually even track how the ecology of the park was doing," he said.

Other former wardens told me they left for the same reason; that suddenly they found they could not support the agency they once loved as its emphasis, funding and capacity shifted towards visitor experience, and there simply was not enough money on the conservation side for them to carry out their jobs effectively any longer.

The perceived pendulum swing towards visitor experience and tourism development in Jasper and Banff of the past decade can be attributed to several related factors. As I mentioned, austerity and restructuring in the 90s paved the way for increasing pressure on Parks Canada to recoup costs. Federal budget cuts between 2012-2015 further exaggerated the importance of gate fees and revenues in Banff-Jasper, including land rents and percentage of gross from private tourism operators within the park. To increase revenues and stay 'relevant' to changing demographics in Canada, Parks Canada's new target is to increase visitation by 2% per year. All of this coupled with a conservative government between 2006-2015 that was pro-development and anti-environment (Peyton and Franks 2015) created a situation where the interests of Parks Canada and private operators in Banff-Jasper began to align.

Political Economies of Conservation

At the core of both controversies are diverging beliefs about whether social services or public goods should be managed publicly or privately. Opponents took serious issue with the neoliberal ideology they saw driving these changes, calling this the 'race to the bottom' of conservation:

> "The net effect of the cut in funding is that more funding has to come from the private sector, which then produces another cut in funding. We're chasing the system to the bottom of the barrel. The basic right-wing philosophy is if you don't pay for services, they won't happen unless the private sector does it. Rich people can always afford those services, and they don't care about the poor."
>
> - Ben Gadd, former Parks Canada interpreter

> "That's ideologically driven. You know? You cut the budgets, and then you say, well we need these P3 partnerships or whatever they call them. We need to build these structures or else we don't have any money. Well, that's ideologically-driven. That's a political decision to not invest in the national parks!"
>
> - Monika Schaefer, former park warden

Opponents feel that all of the PR around visitor experience and connecting people to nature is just a dog and pony show to detract from the underlying politics of austerity driving these changes.

Because of this, opponents of these development projects feel that business interests are driving the management process, not the other way around. Former CEO of Parks Canada, Alan Latourelle, denied that budget cuts significantly challenged Parks Canada's ecological capacity. However former Jasper Superintendent, Greg Fenton, said that at the field level:

> "It is extremely difficult to get increases in appropriations. If you look at the governments, irrespective, if [of whether] its Conservative or Liberal or anybody else, there are always deficits to manage. When you're in a deficit situation there isn't money to go out to departments and agencies. That's why it becomes so important for us to increase visitation and revenues."

It is clear that austerity-driven restructuring of conservation in Canada has increased the pressure felt by park managers in Banff-Jasper to partner with private interests and increase tourism and visitation. The following sections will examine the public consultation processes to reveal the ways in which this austerity-driven pressure has contributed to the post-politicisation of conservation governance.

POST-POLITICAL PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Consultation for the Skywalk was structured through the Environmental Assessment (EA) process, conducted in 2011 by Golder Associates, a private consulting company hired by Brewster[3]. While it may have followed the letter of the law, the assessment was critiqued on methodological and ethical grounds. Opponents have largely critiqued the merit of the report, arguing that the 4-month assessment based largely on camera studies was not thorough enough to adequately assess impacts on mountain goats. Several stakeholders also felt that public consultation was not meaningfully sought, as there were only 4 open houses held in Jasper, Banff, Calgary and Edmonton, which respondents likened to information sessions rather than forums for open debate. These were held on consecutive days just a few weeks after the 169-page environmental assessment was made available in Jasper. In a letter to the Superintendent, Dr. Ian Urquhart of the University of Alberta critiqued Brewster Travel for using a marketing survey to demonstrate the potential strength of the Glacier Walkway as an attraction, polling only people who had previously supplied their e-mail addresses to Brewster for leisure purposes.

What was worrying to most local residents was that much of the Environmental Assessment (EA) read like a commercial

for Brewster and the Skywalk itself. They got the feeling that the attraction had already been approved, and that Golder was promoting the attraction instead of conducting an objective assessment of its potential impacts. Here is but one example from the EA:

> "Guests will be brought into the experience through the interpretive story telling combined with the spectacular vantage points stimulating their senses. Design will integrate the built infrastructure seamlessly, harmoniously, and with stunning effect into the rugged environment sculpted by glaciers, providing a sense of harmony mixed with awe. The experience will be emotive, with impressions of the landscape forever burned into memory, making this unique experience one that guests will speak about for years afterwards." (Golder 2011: 15)

Opponents questioned why an objective third party hired to assess the project's environmental implications would use such flowery language promising visitor satisfaction.

In contrast to the Skywalk proposal, consultation for the Maligne developments was sought during the conceptual proposal phase, before the EA phase. Maligne Tours released a 106-page Conceptual Proposal in 2013, which was opened for public comment, however there was much initial outrage over the fact that Parks Canada had instructed people to send comments directly to Maligne Tours, which residents felt was a grave conflict of interest. Park staff then clarified that comments should be sent to both Parks Canada and Maligne Tours.

Notably, the company repeatedly highlighted the role it could play in filling the gaps created by funding cuts. Here are two examples from the Conceptual Proposal:

> "Maligne Tours Limited's (MTL) role has become more and more significant over time as diminishing resources within Parks Canada have impacted the degree to which JNP (Jasper) can fulfill some of its customer aspirations." (p. 28).

> "If MTL is going to continue in its role as Parks Canada's partner and the caretaker of Maligne Lake - together with all of the responsibilities the company has assumed or inherited over the years due to changes in Parks Canada's priorities or budget cutbacks at Parks Canada - then there will need to be incremental sources of revenue by way of more customers purchasing more products or fewer customers spending more for higher quality experiences." (p. 32).

These kinds of statements reify the post-political 'there is no alternative' discourse and not-so-subtly suggest to opponents, as well as to park staff, that an increasing role for private interests and incremental increases in tourism offerings are inevitable (or else!). In the final sections I detail the post-political strategies employed to suture the space for political dissensus and debate in response to these structural pressures imposed by austerity politics.

Post-political Strategies

Proponents and opponents employed several strategies and tools to enroll allies, but I argue that there is an increasingly narrow window of opportunity for public and Indigenous actors (see Youdelis, 2016) who oppose such projects. Parks Canada, under the oversight of a federal government enacting politics of austerity, employed a series of post-political strategies to remove political debate from the public sphere and construct the appearance of consensual decision-making. In post-political fashion, neoliberalisation and austerity politics themselves were elevated beyond critique or open debate and several measures were taken to contain and disavow dissent. I identify five strategies that rendered decision-making post-political— disciplining dissent, predetermining outcomes, black-box decision-making, co-opting dissent, and the 'rule of experts'.

Disciplining Dissent

The first blatant and heavy-handed strategy to render these controversies post-political was the strongly worded dictat sent by the Superintendent to all park staff prohibiting them from speaking out against any development proposal or against any Agency policy or practice[4]. At the time, the Harper government had similarly been silencing federal scientists and civil servants in the media (Turner 2013), and the Parks Canada Agency required all correspondence between park staff and the media, or people like myself asking questions, to be approved in Ottawa.

Terry Winkler, a warden who was laid off in the 2012 cuts, was severely reprimanded for asking about the OCA guidelines at the open house meeting for the Maligne hotel. Because Parks Canada laid him off close to retirement age, he had the option of taking an educational leave for two years to minimise the number of years he would be penalised. According to Parks Canada, although he had been dismissed, while he was on educational leave he was still subject to the employee code of conduct, which meant he could not attend public meetings and ask questions as a member of the public. He grieved the disciplinary letter that was put on his file, which said that if he did not cease and desist immediately further action could be taken including being fired outright. "I was asking a question about a policy that they had on file that is part of their management plan. I wasn't criticising, I wasn't doing anything! I just said 'Do you have this policy?' Yes, you do. 'Okay, how does that affect what we're discussing today?'" he said. "It's not something they should be pretending doesn't exist. It's in a public document."

Residents of Jasper were also shocked and dismayed by the unexpected dismissal without cause of the former senior scientist, John Wilmshurst. John held this position for 15 years and was extremely well-respected within the agency and with the townspeople of Jasper. More than 100 former Parks Canada employees and scientists have come out against his firing, which many feel is another politically motivated dismissal

of an esteemed scientist who would not give the agency his endorsement on various tourism development plans. In an open letter to the leaders of the three opposition parties at the time, these 100+ signatories accused the government of taking such measures to instil fear among those still working for the agency (Pratt 2015). Wilmshurst left Jasper and has not issued a statement regarding his puzzling dismissal, but residents and former park staff feel strongly that this fits firmly with the government's silencing of evidence or information that may impede development plans.

Silencing public servants from bringing forth information that may hamper development is an overt strategy to remove important points of debate from the public sphere and to centralise and control public discourse. This stifles public knowledge and consequently the potency of public critique as information that could be politicised is kept under wraps.

Predetermining Outcomes

The Skywalk proposal had already passed through most of Parks Canada's channels before they brought it to the public for comment, and unbeknownst to the public, Parks had already determined that they had no policy problem with the proposal. They had been working back and forth with Brewster to refine the proposal into something both parties found acceptable before proceeding to the environmental assessment. The EA process would include an opportunity for public and Indigenous engagement, however by the time the assessment was being done, there was a palpable sense that the decision had already been made. Even Loni Klettl, one of the lone supporters of the project, felt that parks had really "screwed up" the consultation process. "Well they screwed it up, a lot of it was done before it actually went to the public. They screwed up so bad on that one, because they just didn't expect the explosive reaction, so their pants were way down," she said.

Likely because of the extreme resentment around the Brewster process, Parks Canada brought the Maligne proposal to the public at the conceptual level. This helped the public to inform parks early on that the proposal would contravene policy, which helped to shelve the hotel portion of the proposal. However, most opponents, including former Parks Canada managers, felt that due to the pressures created by the budget cuts, the political decision to approve overnight accommodation, whether via hotel or the tent cabins, had already been made.

Because of this, opponents and even proponents of development feel that seeking public input is simply a formality. "The public consultation process to me seems strictly proforma. Everything has the indications of getting decided in advance," said Ben Gadd, a former park interpreter. Sensing that the political decisions have been made in advance, many felt that consultation has become a perfunctory ritual completed to meet regulations and create the appearance of including all stakeholders in decision-making, inviting public comment for the sake of participation but not opening political decisions for debate.

Black Box Decision-making

Submission of written comments is the preferred method of consultation over open debate or public hearing, and thus the final decisions on any project are often completely opaque. Opponents' feel as though their letters go into a black void, and there is little effort to address these points or convince the public that they should be discarded:

> "They come back and say okay, here's what we heard, it's a bunch of opposition. And they start going ahead anyway. So, we'll say, 'Wait a second, all these people said, and now you're doing this, how do you reconcile those two opposing things?' And often we don't, or often we get chain letters, frankly. 'Thank you for your feedback, we appreciate that you took the time to communicate your thoughts to us...'. Mostly it's just copy and paste, we get the same letter we got from them five times before with a slightly different intro paragraph." -Sean Nichols, Alberta Wilderness Association.

> "I think it was mostly disappointing. I didn't really... I couldn't see the public comments being taken into account, considering how strong the sentiment that I was gauging was gauging was. I would say that no, I didn't get a sense that Parks Canada was saying 'We thought about what you were saying, and you made some valid points, but these are the reasons that it's going to be wonderful for the national park'. It sort of seemed like 'It's done, let's move on'. It's hard because I don't really have a good sense of why, and I don't think anyone really does." -Bob Covey, editor of The Jasper Local.

When Parks Canada receives volumes of correspondence, they divide comments into categories and summarise these in "What We Heard" reports. However, the number of concerns in any given category is not revealed. There could have been 1,000 comments regarding inappropriateness or commercialisation, 950 comments expressing concern over habitat loss, and 3 comments expressing support for enhancing visitor experience, but the reports will list all of the categories as though they were equally represented. The "What We Heard" reports for the Skywalk and Maligne proposal followed this format. The Brewster report went further and provided official responses that disavowed concerns raised through consultation or provided justification for proceeding anyway (Parks Canada 2012). The report noted: "Although the majority of comments reflected a lack of support for the proposal, numbers for or against were not the only factor that Parks Canada considered when evaluating public response… In the end, the consultation process is not a plebiscite."

Producing such reports is one way in which consensus is staged through official documentation. Concerns are neutralised or disavowed, and information regarding the number of responses in any category is kept from public actors. This contributes to misunderstanding around the nature of public sentiment, as well as how concerns are weighted and addressed and to what extent the final decision reflects public input.

Co-opting Dissent

In addition to feeling frazzled by sending comments into a black hole, opponents are exasperated by the fact that their feedback is often turned into a reason for construction:

> "They had used what people had said negatively and twisted it around to make it into a positive reason why this project should go forward. For instance, people were saying that Maligne Lake is so much more than this like 9-5 destination, it's a place where people go in the evening and they just sit by the lake, and they enjoy the peace and quiet of it because there's nobody there, or there might be 5 other people there, but you don't even see them because they're on the other side of the lake. So they used that as a reason why it should be opened up to people staying there, so they can see it in the evening. It's just crap. And they're really good, too, at taking that opposition and being like 'this is what we heard, but this is the truth'. You know? They counter everything so that it shines brightly on them." -Nicole Veerman, editor of the Fitzhugh.

Many respondents have stopped engaging in park issues for this reason, because they feel that the current channels just co-opt their concerns and they are consequently disenfranchised.

Opponents feel that discursively concepts like 'ecological integrity' and 'visitor experience' have similarly been co-opted by business interests. Both are quite nebulous terms, but leaving them vague with no specific criteria for evaluation leaves room for both to be employed in support of development. If no criteria for evaluation is required, Parks Canada can easily claim to be respecting 'ecological integrity' and increasing understanding, awareness and connection with nature via new private tourism offerings, presenting the appearance that there is consensus around both the importance of these things and how to achieve them. Co-opting dissent thus serves to neutralise and disavow public concerns in final decision-making, orchestrating the appearance of consensual problem resolution.

'Rule of Experts'

In a post-political frame agonistic politics are evacuated from the sphere of policy-making and replaced by expert and techno-managerial administration (Swyngedouw 2011). Parks Canada had already been working with Brewster and had already determined that there was no policy problem with the Skywalk before coming to the public. Consultation was thus structured through the EA process where they were only looking for comments specific to the scientific merit of the EA itself. In short, the project could have only been shelved if opponents had brought forward new scientific evidence regarding ecological integrity. The important political and philosophical points raised by opponents about appropriateness, commercialisation, access, and precedent setting were all but ignored as "personal values." As discussed earlier, dissent from scientists within the organisation was also overtly silenced and only federally approved expert opinions were permitted in official discourse.

Further, the EA itself was done by private contractors hired by Brewster, the majority of which read like promotional material. Opponents were extremely agitated by this conflict of interest, which is common practice in Canada. As I mentioned, opponents had several qualms with the assessment in that it was a 4-month long camera study and otherwise relied on dated secondary data. Kevin Van Tighem (the former Superintendent of Banff) who was quoted in the EA saying that goat habitat would not be severely impacted said that his comments had been extremely "watered down". "I didn't like what their consultants did with my input. I don't personally agree with the mitigations they put in place around mountain goats," he said. Although it is questionable whether goats have been seriously impacted, there was a skillful art in the way the expert interviews and data were presented to the public, once again staging consensus despite the ongoing boundary conflicts around whether this was 'good science'.

Mitigation measures were also employed as means of assuaging and neutralising public concerns in lieu of opening debate around the appropriateness of the project itself. Public comment was sought primarily to gauge which mitigation measures are appropriate, not to give the public opportunity to alter the political decision on development itself. Several 'mitigation measures' promised by Brewster never did come to fruition. The public strongly opposed a public viewpoint becoming private, so Brewster was meant to leave one section free and open to the public, which did not occur. They were also meant to build a trail up from Tangle Ridge so that people could access the site and viewpoint on foot, which also did not transpire.

Structuring consultation for the Skywalk through the depoliticised EA process speaks to the degree to which fiscal pressures made development a foregone conclusion. However, the power of public resistance was demonstrated by the fact that the Maligne process went differently. But once again, Parks Canada was looking for information specific to ecological impacts that would sufficiently challenge Maligne Tours' claims, not opening space for philosophical or political objections to the P3 partnership itself.

In these ways, science and the law are employed by proponents and Parks Canada to stabilise claims around protecting ecological integrity and doing due diligence with public input. Opponents have no legitimate channels through which to express outright disagreement with private development in a public park. All philosophical and political concerns are disregarded or at best 'mitigated', but the political decisions are not open for debate.

CONCLUSION

Due to the palpable sense that Parks Canada needs P3 partnerships to recoup costs from successive rounds of austerity, and due to the frustration felt in the face of post-political maneuvering, public actors involved in these

two cases feel strongly that the public has little to do role in decision-making in this political economic climate. As the interests of Parks Canada and profitable private leaseholders in the park are aligning in terms of increasing visitation and the revenue imperative, public actors feel increasingly disenfranchised. I argue that this is no coincidence. Following scholars who argue the post-politicisation of the public sphere converges with processes of neoliberalisation (Fletcher 2014; Swyngedouw 2010; Zizek 1999), I argue that the politics of austerity create the structural conditions for the post-politicisation of public consultation, reducing democratic oversight of environmental governance more broadly.

Austerity politics contribute to a post-political 'there is no alternative' discourse, where the notion of private development and management of park services is accepted as necessary to fulfil park mandates and is elevated beyond political debate. Strategies such as disciplining and co-opting dissent serve to condition people to this post-political discourse, while strategies to predetermine outcomes, including black-box decision-making and deferring to technocrats, serve to suture space for dissensus and debate and orchestrate the appearance of consensual decision-making. Agonistic politics are thus replaced by "technocratic questions of cost-benefit ratios from which political considerations are largely effaced" (Fletcher 2014: 330). Austerity politics themselves are left unquestioned and, by structural necessity, private sector revenue generation is normalised as the main method to satisfy park mandates.

Although neoliberalisation is in theory concerned with decentralisation and enrolling a wider network of actors into participation, certain actors are enrolled in the process in increasingly depoliticised ways. Public actors are enrolled as contributors but within narrowly prescribed parameters - invited, for instance, to suggest changes that could improve the implementation of a given project rather than to open debate around the appropriateness of the project or of the neoliberalisation of conservation itself. Many Jasper residents no longer wish to engage in the process as they feel disempowered and cynical about the real purpose of consultation. This case thus has implications for our understanding of the role of consultation in neoliberal conservation. Lest we be lured into thinking that neoliberal modes of conservation governance lead to more participatory and effective public engagement, this case demonstrates that engagement within a neoliberal framework can be pernicious as it serves to disenfranchise public actors to lubricate 'painful-but-necessary' private sector development, leading to a level of distrust among public actors that can deter them from future engagement. Should conservationists desire stronger public participation they need to be attentive to the terms of that participation and the results of their engagement strategies.

Further, the post-political acceptance of austerity politics and private development as an integral part of conservation has tremendous implications for park management and ecology going forward, in Canada and abroad. By strategically controlling public participation in certain ways, we are ensuring that certain logics gain prominence over others; that only certain kinds of knowledges are recognised while others are disallowed. In effect we're seeing a recentralisation of whose knowledge counts, with private sector voices becoming indispensable for park functioning and the rule of particular experts becoming reinforced as a means of discounting dissent. I note that it is *particular* expert voices becoming elevated since those who break from or challenge neoliberal restructuring are at best marginalized and at worst terminated from their positions in overt strategies to discipline dissent. These disciplinary tactics forcibly police the boundaries of 'acceptable' logics.

Such strategies make it more likely for business interests to take precedence over ecological ones. The case discussed here lays bare the claim that increasing revenue will lead to better ecological conservation since, as conservation increasingly takes on values associated with the private sector, the ecological gets backgrounded. In this case an increase in revenues from visitor activities will go back into visitor offerings and does not necessarily translate into more money being available for ecological conservation. Managing new mass tourism attractions will also come with unique ecological challenges, made clear by the issues brought up in this case, particularly at Maligne Lake with respect to the effects of changing patterns of human traffic on sensitive species.

As austerity politics are becoming normalised around the globe, it is vital that conservation scholars and practitioners explore these connections empirically and not just theoretically. By revealing the empirical details of how post-politics plays out in this case, it allows concerned citizens or scholar-activists to be alert to the strategies employed to orchestrate consensus and thus to shape their resistance strategies accordingly. While participation in institutionalised consultation processes may not be empowering, drawing attention to the politics of austerity themselves and the suite of practices that stem from them might offer new ways to organise resistance outside of official channels, taking aim at the system driving these changes and not the localised changes themselves. An empirical understanding of the ways in which austerity politics and the post-political orchestration of consensus are intimately linked is thus important analytically, to improve our understanding of how certain logics gain currency and stabilise over others in conservation policy, but also practically and politically in our quest for alternative and emancipatory political economies of conservation.

NOTES

1. By 'public' I am referring to local non-native residents of Jasper and surrounding areas (Edmonton, Banff, Calgary) as well as the broader non-native Canadian public at large who can send in comments or letters regarding any controversial conservation project. By 'Indigenous' I'm referring to the many First Nations that have traditional territories that overlap with park boundaries. In Jasper, First Nations were evicted from the park upon its establishment, and there is a separate process for Indigenous consultation, which I cover in (Youdelis 2016).
2. Yellowstone to Yukon (Y2Y) is a joint Canada-U.S. organisation whose aim is to enhance and secure the ecological health of the

area from Yellowstone National Park to the Yukon.

3. The Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (1992) that held until changes in 2012 states that responsible authorities may delegate the assessment to proponents.
4. Contacts shared the Superintendent's email to all park staff with me. This was not published information but I was able to access it. I also have testimony from former wardens and park staff discussing the gag order.

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Received: October 2016; **Accepted**: November 2017