Abstract - This paper explores the role and influence of recent political changes in the United Kingdom on policies relating to the coast. It is argued that so-called 'Thatcherism' as led to a decline in provision of resources for coastal environmental protection and that the framework within which coastal management can be achieved has become more convoluted and unapproachable. Five politically-motivated and -led impacts may be identified, i) legislative changes that have reduced grant-aid; ii) the increasing amount of involvement by non-governmental organisations (NGOs); iii) privatisation, especially of the water industry and the Hydraulics Research Station; iv) the encouragement of the environmental services industry; and v) the dismemberment of the Nature Conservancy Council. The future appears to rest with the development of sensible coastal management guidelines, perhaps led by European initiatives, although local action is still necessary.

Introduction

This paper examines the issue of coastal protection in the UK from the perspective of recent changes in political emphasis. The 1980's saw a number of coastal issues come to the forefront of UK environmental policy, especially in the light of pronouncements concerning climatic change, sea-level rise, storm frequency and increased precipitation. The likely impact of these processes on a highly developed coastline were obvious. Yet, paradoxically, the same period has seen a marginalisation of coastal projects in terms of funding priorities. Severe storms in the UK in 1987, 1989 and 1990 (Ince, 1990) not only undermined and damaged inadequate sea defences, but also exposed the lack of British Government policy towards the coastal zone, especially relative to other European nations, such as The Netherlands, Denmark and Spain.

This paper argues that the British coast has suffered under the political hegemony of the last ten to fifteen years, added to an increasingly inflexible approach by professional organisations. This period has seen one of the most radical shifts in political emphasis in the last century (Paxman, 1990), with a move away from government polarised by either the 'establishment' or the labour unions, and not dominated by an Oxford- or Cambridge-educated Civil Service. The recent politic is firmly within the middle-class, entrepreneurial sphere. In recent years a number of
national and local bodies have become increasingly vocal and frustrated by the lack of progress into what are viewed as the urgent environmental problems of the UK shoreline.

The political context

International considerations

As a leitmotif to this essay, it is necessary to describe the political framework underlying the current difficulties experienced by coastal managers. Some measure of understanding may be recognition of global political trends since World War II, which have seen the encouragement of multinational capitalism and the ethos of “profitability” and responsibility to shareholders as collective objectives. This movement has led to transnational groupings, both politically and economically, and ultimately the breakdown of socialist-based structures. Whether, as Kennedy (1986) and others have argued, the growth of supra-nationalism will be checked by rising environmental constraints and conflicts is beyond the scope of the present paper, except for the fact that coastal problems in the UK might be viewed as a model (or microcosm) of a much more pervasive trend, in which wilful neglect, leads to irretrievable loss environmental value. What is clear, however, is that continual growth, as defined by politicians in the postwar era, is impossible without imposing hardship upon resources - as people, food or minerals. Technological advancement may well overcome deficiencies in the resource base (q.v. Ausubel and Sladovich, 1989), as it has since the mid-1750s, but whether or not this can be sustained into the next century is debatable. In any case, the application of technology to coastal problems is intrinsically limited. One way forward, which is gaining prominence is through so-called sustainable management (Pearce et al., 1991). Again such ideas may be advantageous to coasts, especially if they herald a shift towards preventive defence strategies rather than current reactive ones.

Thatcherism

In the UK, much of the radical political change of the last 10 to 15 years is termed “Thatcherism” after the former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who led the Government from 1979 to 1990, and who presided over many of the changes outlined in this paper. Actually the origins of Thatcherism may be traced to concepts from the 1950s and 1960s, and indeed owe little to Thatcher herself (Gamble, 1990). Thatcherism is an avowedly free-market doctrine, in which power and influence are linked to the production and consumption of goods and services. Such a doctrine sees little or no need for state subsidy or control, and as such has severe ramifications on class structure, social welfare, accountability and individual freedom. Other negative characteristics of Thatcherism include, greed, egocentricity, cynicism, loss of self-esteem, conspicuous consumption (especially of high value or status goods), lack of trust, denigration of allegedly unproductive professions (teaching, nursing), minority discrimination and selfishness. Many critics believe that such a doctrine is dangerously divisive, creating disadvantaged minorities who react (often violently) against the elite. Moreover, Thatcherism focuses on profitability (Green and Sutcliffe, 1987) and short-term opportunism, so that success is measured in terms of the rapid accumulation of wealth. As Porriss (1984) and others point out, the environment is hardly part of this movement, as environmental concern tends to cost money and reduce profit. Nonetheless, the rise since the 1960s of environmentalism, first acknowledged by Mrs. Thatcher in a speech to the Royal Society in 1987, has become a potential political force. It could be argued that the environment acts as a focus for anti-Thatcherite views, as care of the environment requires community cooperation, self-effacement, generosity and above all, financial support. Mrs. Thatcher’s late-1980s conversion as brought about by the widespread attention given to environmental problems such as acid rain, global warming, the ozone hole and genetic erosion and the success (in terms of votes cast [15%] rather than seats won [0]) of the UK Green Party in the European Elections.
This concern was reflected in peaking of ‘environment’ as an issue among the UK electorate in 1989, although interest has since subsided.

**Political impacts on the UK coast**

How does this affect the British coast? The answer is not straightforward, as although the coast is of considerable value (Gubbay, 1989), it is hard to quantify such value other than by indirect or hedonic (value substitution) methods (Nash and Bowers, 1989; Barde and Pearce, 1991). Planners would describe coastal management as a ‘wicked problem’ as there are no clear-cut policy or planning objectives (Brueton and Nicholson, 1987, p.52 et seq.). Thus a cost-benefit analysis may be undertaken for a coastal project, such as an oil refinery or an hotel, but not for a nature reserve, or aesthetic resources like scenery. Indeed a prevailing notion - at least until recently - was that much of the UK coastlands were valueless (especially marshes, dunes and gravel ridges), and therefore legitimate prey for developers (Fig. 1). The outcome of this notion has has been the widespread development of much of the UK coast, for leisure, tourist, residential, commercial and industrial purposes. Juxtaposition of these activities often leads to conflict.

*A SCHEME is underway to convert part of the salt marsh river bank near Pill into playing fields. Parish councillors heard that an area at least the size of three football pitches together with changing facilities could be provided at no cost to the community. Chairman Cllr Glyn Duck stressed the work would be carried out “to the highest standard” and could run in conjunction with the forthcoming £1 million flood defence scheme by the NRA. The project would involve the tipping of about 90,000 cubic metres of waste materials and negotiations are underway with several specialist companies.*

Fig. 1. This cutting from the Bristol-based daily newspaper epitomises many of the attitudes to coastal land in the UK. The ecological value of the salt marsh is disregarded. The intention is to allow hazardous waste dumping; but the community are being induced to agree by the promise of recreation facilities and a flood protection scheme. Source: Western Daily Press, September 1991.
The 1980s saw several political developments appertaining to coastal issues in the UK. These may be listed as follows: i) changes in legislation, ii) a switch from Government to non-Government participation and financing, iii) privatisation and cost-recovery, iv) the exponential rise of the environmental services sector, and v) the break-up of the Nature Conservancy Council. Taken together these represent a major restructuring of the coastal management framework in the UK.

Taking i) to v) in turn:

i) Legislative changes - Shoreline Protection and Coastal Erosion have been, since the late 1940s, distinctive legal entities (Ricketts, 1986; Carter, 1988), with "coastal erosion" referring to the physical loss of land to the sea by wave attack, while "sea defence" refers to the process of excluding high tides and surges from flooding low-lying land. The responsibility for these rested with different bodies, with Local, County or District authorities in charge of coast erosion and river authorities looking after shoreline protection. Coordination has rested both with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the Department of the Environment (DoE). This division of responsibility was reaffirmed after the 1953 North Sea storm surge, but eventually challenged in 1980 over the provision of grant aid to sea defences at Whitstable in Kent. (Greater funds were available if the project was designated as a sea defence scheme rather than as a coastal erosion one.) Resulting from this the Government issued a consultative paper (Green Paper) in 1983, followed by legislation in 1985 that sought to blur the distinction (at least in financial terms) by reducing the aid available to the lower level. (It is worth pointing out that the level of grant aid varies throughout the United Kingdom, with Scotland receiving the most and Northern Ireland the least.)

The UK coast is also protected - in the sense of nature conservation - through the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, allowing designation and legal protection for sites under the auspices of the Nature Conservancy Council (but see v)). The latter half of the 1980s have seen a great increase in the number of designations, backed by a number of authoritative reviews (eg. The Estuaries Review - Davidson et al., 1991).

ii) Non-Governmental involvement - One objective of Thatcherism has been to reduce direct Government assistance and to encourage self-help. To promote these aims, voluntary bodies are given incentives to take-over management of areas and/or activities in return for injection of cash. Main recipients of this policy have been existing bodies such as the National Trust (NT), the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the various county naturalist trusts, Conservation Volunteers, the Marine Conservation Society and other groups. Some money has been channelled through quasi-Governmental bodies like the Countryside Commissions for England and Wales and Scotland or Local Authorities and used to purchase land, set-up interpretation facilities, develop access provision or to engage labour. It is clear that such initiatives are generally beneficial, especially for rapid development involving local communities. For a period in the 1970s and 1980s funding for practical work on the coast was available through such unemployment-relieving schemes and agencies as the Manpower Services Commission. In some places, like the Lancashire coast, this windfall opportunity resulted in significant improvements in coastal conservation and management. The schemes were, however, phased-out by the Government after the 1987 election.

iii) Privatisation - the policy of privatising Government-owned or controlled institutions has been central to the dogma of Thatcherism. The policy or concept is far from simple, but basically it is perceived as having advantages in cutting direct Government spending, boosting short-term income to offset fiscal deficits, creating a stock-holding electorate, as well as improving service and so-called 'accountability'. It also has the dubious benefit of freeing management from Government control, allowing
them to raise investment on the open-market. The two privatisations that directly affect the coast are 1988 selling-off of the Regional Water Companies and the 1982 to 1987 transformation of the former Hydraulics Research Station into a commercial company, Hydraulics Research.

The historic rôle of the Water authorities in coastal management was to provide coastal flood protection, although the amount of interest in this activity varied enormously in proportion to the amount of vulnerable shoreline. Thus the Anglian Water Authority (now Anglian Water) was heavily involved in sea defence schemes from the Humber to the Thames Estuary, an area that had experienced a number of severe floods over the past century. Other active Authorities included Thames and Southern (Fig. 2) as their areas embraced low-lying, heavily populated coasts.

Figure 2 - Extent of coastal works along Anglian coast line.

The coast of East Anglia is already heavily defended against the sea. In this area the economics of shoreline protection are being questioned, with some favouring either a 'do-nothing' policy (thus leaving coastal landowners to their fate) or a more pragmatic policy of controlled abandonment, which would allow for compensation for those losing land (ie the majority of tax-payers would subsidise the minority).

It is generally felt that the environmental benefits of the water industry privatisation are negative (Rees, 1989), in that emphasis has switched from providing a service of equitable supply, to the need to make a profit. Thus secondary considerations,
like flood defence are ignored as they tend to depress profits. It is very hard to charge consumers for sea defence works, unless the charge is targeted at those who actually benefit from them. If this were the case, then many people would have to abandon at-risk coastal zones, as the charges would be impossible to meet. (This argument provides an interesting test of Thatcherism, as if the doctrine is fully implemented then coastal landowners should become fully liable for sea defences. The fact that they have not suggests that Thatcherism has limits, especially when confronted with influential and vociferous voters.) Recognition that the water companies had unrealisable assets that would depress their performance (in terms of profit) resulted in the formation of a residuary body, the National Rivers Authority (NRA) with whom the coastal protection function is now vested. The NRA have research and executive powers enabling them to protect the coast against flooding. All coastal protection authorities - based on local government boundaries - have a statutory obligation to consult the NRA, but incongruously not the other way around. The NRA is divided into a number of regions, and shore protection works are generally done in consultation or collaboration with the appropriate water company. Both Anglian Water and Southern Water are both undertaking sea defence works assisted by the NRA.

The transformation of the Hydraulics Research Station into Hydraulics Research (HR) has followed a somewhat different path, as the original facility has not been privatised sensu stricto, but has moved from an open research institution to a closed consultancy unit. In so doing it has transferred a major data source from the public to the private sector, and information, even if data or reports are available, they must be purchased at commercial rates. This shifting role means that HR is now reactive to market demands, rather than following fundamental, but perhaps financially unrewarding, enquiries. (The recent (January 1992) announcement that a new national wave basin facility is to be built within the grounds of the Hydraulics Research may help counter the trend towards full commercialisation, although handled differently it could simply reinforce the market domination of HR.) This trend towards market accountability also finds expression in the cost of primary statistical sources - such as meteorological data - only available for research at commercial rates.

iv) Environmental service industries - since the mid-1980s the number of companies offering environmental services has risen from c. 100 to over 2000 (The Guardian, May 1991). This competitive milieu is welcomed by Thatcherite supporters as evidence of choice springing from free-market conditions, although the chance that all such firms will flourish or even survive must be relatively small. Notwithstanding the environmental services industry is, at present, burgeoning. Paradoxically, the recession may well help establish such independent agencies, as large firms are reluctant to employ environmental scientists on a permanent basis, preferring instead to engage consultants. Of related interest is the evolving role of the Professional Institutes, who maintain, often jealously, their traditional role in the environmental services industry. In the coastal context, the Institute of Civil Engineers (ICE), the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) would all declare an interest. The overall position is mildly paradoxical, with both open and closed competition for business; the Professions declare that closed (within the Profession) competition upholds standards (although many Professions are reluctant to indemnify actions of their membership with respect to coastal work), while the open market believes competition is beneficial. As a result two trends emerge. One, in order to reduce costs, many consultancy companies are selling poor quality or second-hand information, often culled from the scientific literature without acknowledgement. This raises the vexed question of intellectual property rights (Pearson and Miller, 1990) especially where work in the public domain is re-cycled as consultancy without payment or even, in some cases, without acknowledgement. Thus expensive Reports are often little more than general literature reviews and site descriptions, which rarely ask 'why?' something is happening (for example coast erosion), but merely propose a menu of remedial actions based either on practice elsewhere, or more worryingly, on the clients ability to pay, rather than environmental probity. One obvious problem is
that clients rarely have any yardstick with which to measure quality of reports, while another is that many off-the-shelf coastal data are hard to assess. Two, Professional bodies are beginning to extend their roles and now offer a broad range of environmental services covering ecological, social, economic as well as the more traditional information.

v Break-up of the Nature Conservancy Council - the political controversy surrounding the break-up of the NCC focused on the Council’s right to designate and protect Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), although the Council had for some time been critical of various Government policies towards the environment. Derek Radcliffe, a former Chief Scientist, wrote in 1990 that the final year of the the NCC was like working “...under attitudes more reminiscent of the Victorian squirearchy”. Ultimately, the crux of the matter was a clash between the NCC and a group of Scottish landowners, leading to the latter persuading the Government to emasculate the NCC, and reform it into a series of regional organisations with Government-nominated steering committees drawn from, among others, local landowners. Nationwide functions would be overseen by a small central organisation overseen by a joint committee. In short, this manoeuvre defused the power of the NCC vested in it by the 1981 Countryside and Wildlife Act. The action of splitting the NCC in 1991 has reduced somewhat the effectiveness of shoreline protection afforded to the UK coast, especially in relation to scientifically-important sites. The process of ‘splitting and lumping’ government agencies is widespread under administrations keen to encourage patronage (by pandering to lobby groups) and reduce effectiveness (which may be politically embarrassing).

Policy summary 1980 to 1990

The operation of coastal management in the UK has changed markedly since 1980, although many of the changes are subtle and as yet their impact on the shoreline itself is not clear. The gains include the heightening of awareness and the increasing involvement of local groups, the losses cover the reduction of funds and the escalation of changes especially from the environmental services sector.

Coastal Zone Management into the 1990s

Over the last decade several opportunities have been lost to revise the UK approach to coastal management; indeed the number of organisations (both government and non-government) involved in day-to-day management of the coast tends to increase, especially at the local scale. Halliday (1987) in a survey of UK local government in coastal management reported that an average 5 or 6 departments in each coastal authority tended to be involved, perhaps guided by as many committees or advisory groups. In many cases such responsibilities overlap. Hansom (1986) highlighted the divisive nature of coastal administration using the example of east Sussex where five different authorities were involved in 17 zones over a 40 km length of coast. Bizarre situations arise, for example at Chewton Bunny in Christchurch Bay where five administrative boundaries coincide with the result that five different management objectives are being pursued within a single coastal cell.

The fragmentation and its inevitable lack of coherency in terms of applied management have attracted attention and there have been several calls to improve the situation, most notably by the UK response to the World Conservation Strategy (1984), CEED (1985) and Gubbay (1990). Locally “umbrella” groups have developed, for example, SCOPAC in southern England which brings together maritime authorities with common interests in coast protection and management, or the Strangford Lough Advisory Committee (SLAC) in Northern Ireland, focusing on the environment and management of a single sea lough threatened by urbanisation and recreation.
In 1985 the UK Government commissioned Hydraulics Research to conduct a survey into the UK coast. The subsequent reports, 6 in number, advocated the management of the coast should be divided into "cells", although the definition of these cells as "stretches of coastlines within which beach changes take place largely independently ..." lacks rigour and fails to acknowledge the contribution of non-beach coasts. The resulting maps (Fig. 3) indicates very long reaches of coast are lumped within one cell, and there remains the anomaly that estuaries and river mouths are defined as cell boundaries. It is important that if cells are to be employed as a fundamental unit of management that they are actually based on measureable physical parameters (Carter, 1992a, 1992b).

Gubbay (1992) has criticised these proposals and developed an alternative segmentation based on environmental factors rather than economic or administrative ones. Gubbay envisages 20 management units, based loosely on cells, although within themselves even these are exceptionally diverse and coherent management may still not be feasible.

An inquiry by the House of Common Select Committee on the Environment into "Coastal Zone Protection and Planning" in the UK was published on 28 April 1992 (HMSO, 1992). In this, for the first time, the Government has publicly acknowledged the problems facing the British coast, and the difficulties in taking effective action while there are so many (it is estimated to be 80) different pieces of legislation. The Committee has recognised the need for a national coastal strategy and recommended the setting-up of a Coastal Unit within the Department of the Environment to oversee coastal issues and policies, while at the same time removing the responsibility for coastal protection and flooding from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. It is also proposed to remove the existing, but somewhat archaic, rights of the Crown Estate Commissioners over the development of the sea bed (below the HWM) and extend planning regulations to the 12 mile (20 km) marine limit. If these radical proposals are adopted by the Government, then they will go a long way to silencing critics of the current arrangements for protecting the UK coastline.
United Kingdom initiatives in the next decade may well be led by European Policy, both that specific to the coast and that more generally involved with the environment. Hayward (1990) in a briefing paper indicates that coastal management will become a major European theme, based on the need to preserve and protect threatened habitats. Certainly there is increasing evidence (Géhu, 1985; Doody, 1991) that coastal habitats are continuing to be lost at an alarming scale. It is likely that the new EEC Environmental Centre will be immediately concerned with coastal management throughout the Community.

The lessons from elsewhere, notably the USA and the Coastal Zone Management Act, suggest that even the best intentioned well-informed initiatives are hard to put into practice. One major stumbling block is the continuing, insatiable appetite for coastal development land especially in more favoured areas near to cities or where the weather is perceived as being “more pleasant”. Available coastal development land tends to far exceed supply, especially of the more sought after “sea view” category. As yet the UK government have placed no special curbs on coastal management although there are a range of ways/techniques available that can control development, including land zoning, access prohibitions, trading rights, bubble policies, development bond issues, insurance values, buy-back or non-transferable property rights, etc. (Carter, 1992a). A combination of such approaches might warrant consideration, especially in conjunction with any improvement in management zoning.

References


