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Where the buck stops: governmental power and authority in democratic ecological governance

Ecological governance and the authority of government

The preceding chapters analysed what Sweden has done, and how far that country has come, in creating structures and processes of governance for the sustainability of the commons and the autonomy of the individual within the limits of democracy. One conclusion is that while the logic of ecological rationality may seem attractive in terms of sustainability and autonomy when laid out as an ideal type, its practical implementation will most certainly involve conflicts and compromises on both accounts. Compared to historic patterns of resource management and behaviour, ecological governance for sustainability implies ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in terms of individual autonomy and freedom of choice different from those we are used to identifying in traditional struggles over social and economic issues of development.

Governments engaging in efforts to bring about sustainable development will thus encounter political opposition and competition among conflicting values and interests. The pursuit of ecological sustainability adds new dimensions to the steering of human behaviour, and brings to the fore crucial issues about the ecology of governance itself. When push comes to shove, the political legitimacy of the ‘sustainable society’ project depends on how government can and does use its political authority towards other crucial actors in society to bring about ecologically rational governance.

Political authority involves power to make decisions that are binding on others and to force these others to act according to the
intentions of those holding power. Those in charge of political government can exercise coercion to bring about the desired reactions among the others. In modern democracies, the scope and wielding of such power is intimately linked to legitimacy. Although the possibility of using force to achieve compliance is always present, liberal democracies ideally strive to have authoritative decisions accepted with maximum consent and minimum coercion (see Raphael 1990:74 ff.; Birch 1993:31). Political authority is best described as a combination of political power and legitimacy, where power is the ability to get things done and legitimacy is the quality of ascribed entitlement to exercise that power. (Birch 1993:32)

This means that although authoritative political action through government may be necessary to achieve certain objectives, such action is subject to limitations set by democratic norms of individual freedom and autonomy. This study of the Swedish experience shows that the quest for ecologically sustainable development – (and, by implication, also its social and economic aspects) – implies that political government should be vested with far-reaching power and authority. At the same time, norms of individual autonomy, i.e., individuals’ right to make their own choices of the ‘good life’ call for restraints on governmental authority. In liberal democracies, the norms of autonomy and freedom of choice place restrictions on the legitimate use of such authority (see, e.g., Jones 1994:124 ff.).

The governance perspective brings out quite succinctly the problems of balancing the authority of democratic government so that such authority is at the same time both enough to provide for development towards desired objectives and limited enough to allow for the individual autonomy necessary to provide legitimacy. But whereas the normative reasoning just presented seems to have broad acceptance, empirical treatises on the actual authority of government in governance show some contradicting patterns.

One line of research on governance treats central government as one among other players in a system of self-organising, steering-resistant networks, increasingly dependent on bargaining skills rather than legal authority in a process of negotiation over
policy content. The core of governance consists of inter-linked networks and communities with both public and private sector participants, mutually interdependent on each other for resources such as money, expertise, and legitimacy. Key figures are those who hold nodal positions in the wider decision network and make judgements about linkages or what to communicate to whom. This would seem to indicate that some actors are more powerful than others in the processes of mutual adjustment among actors and networks striving to control crucial resources. However, networks are first and foremost self-organising and self-governing entities, 'not controlled by any single superordinate actor, not even the government' (Kickert 1993:275). As cited already in Chapter 1, this view holds that because 'integrated networks resist government steering, develop their own policies and mould their environments', governance comes close to 'governing without government' (Rhodes 1996:652, 658).

Against this view of the government as a team player, another school holds that the state indeed retains the role of umpire in the political game. The government has a legitimate hold on such crucial resources as forcing sanctions, enabling it to 'steer' policy objectives and outcomes through conscious use of structural and processual strategies. Governments do 'establish the basic parameters within which markets, and even social groups, function' (Pierre and Peters 2000:25, 39). Indeed, the state continues to function as the 'needle’s eye’ in the nested, multi-level institutionalisation of the logic of ecological rationality. Upward to the international and global levels, the state has the power to enter into binding agreements and assume duties in the common pursuit of global sustainability. Downward to regions and municipalities, the state can delegate responsibilities or issue mandates for implementing these internationally agreed measures. The state is vested with constitutionally legitimised resource-mobilising capacity and coercive competence and authority in its own right. These powers place government in the key position in the processes of governance (Lundqvist 2001a).

Sustainable development presents complications to both the normative delineation of legitimate political authority and the empirical views of government’s role in governance. The magnitude of the problems to be solved and the entangled web of societal relations touched by the challenge of sustainable development
seem to make necessary an expansion of governmental authority. The tradition of the modern welfare state has provided experiences and fostered expectations that government should actively provide opportunities to their citizens to make autonomous choices of the ‘good life’. And unless political government is vested with authority to secure ecologically rational resource management to provide such opportunities, then as a consequence the possibilities for individuals to exercise autonomy are circumscribed.

To this we must add the different dimensions of rational ecological governance discussed in earlier chapters. The temporal dimension would seem to speak in favour of strengthened political authority to make legitimately binding long-term commitments for society as a whole. At the same time, the spatial dimension calls for multi-level governance, involving several governmental levels as well as non-governmental actors (see Hirst 2000:22 ff.). This logically calls for a diffusion of state authority, upward and/or sideways to the international level as well as downward to regional and local governmental levels. The scale of such a problem as climate change necessitates a global approach; ‘ecologism in one country’ is certainly not a sustainable option. The variation in eco-system scales means that management authority has to be vested in several levels below the state, some of which may already enjoy legitimate spheres of power and authority on their own. Ecologically rational governance also involves self-governing by actual resource users. This may be good for autonomy, but implies a dilution of political authority to bring about sustainable development.

The knowledge dimension challenges political authority from a somewhat different angle. Whereas politicians are elected and administrators are appointed to exercise authority, scientists have special knowledge that make them authorities in their own right within their specialties (see Birch 1993:30). What is ‘sustainable’ development is beleaguered with uncertainties that call for scientific research, evaluation, and recommendations. When the issues up for decision are particularly marked by such characteristics, it could mean that political authority becomes somewhat of a hostage to the authority of knowledge. Also the organisational and administrative dimension of ecological governance is crucial. Integration of ecological concerns into sectoral policies and bureaucracies may lead to confusion as to where the buck really
stops, thus detracting from governmental authority to effectively pursue sustainable development. Last but not least, we have seen that the pursuit of sustainability has important implications for the democratic dimension of ecological governance and the legitimisation of governmental authority.

In the rest of this final chapter, I will discuss how the emerging system of ecological governance in Sweden affects the political authority of democratic national government. As the previous chapter indicated, governmental authority plays a crucial role in protecting individual autonomy and providing the means for democratic participation. My analysis of effects on political authority will be made with this in mind. This will pave the way for an assessment in the final chapter as to whether the Swedish government is actually straddling the fence over to sustainable development, and whether this expands or limits citizens’ opportunities to make autonomous choices of the good life. To refer once again to my opening question, I want to find out whether the Swedish example does tell us something about the possibilities to ‘govern ourselves so as to value democracy and individual autonomy and still retain the integrity of the commons’.

Fencing out or fenced in? Governmental authority and the governance of space

The spatial dimension of ecological governance puts governmental authority to the test. As for sustainability, spatially rational ecological governance must adapt to relevant ecological scales. Governmental authority may have to be transferred upward from the national level, downward to regional and local levels, as well as reallocated across those levels, all in order to manage the health and sustainability of ecosystems. As for autonomy, norms of democracy point towards configurations of authority in spatially rational ecological governance that recognise the right of individuals – stakeholders, resource users, or groups valuing certain ecological features – to devise their own allocations of authority for governing a commonly shared resource.

The Swedish response to the ecological challenges to governmental authority has so far been somewhat wavering. There are some conscious moves towards ecosystem-relevant allocation of authority with respect to coastal zone management, and a
A catchment approach to water management will be implemented within the next few years. The major pattern so far, however, is to contain governmental authority within traditional, man-made geographical boundaries (see Chapter 2).

To fully appreciate these tensions among sustainability, autonomy and governmental authority, it seems appropriate to look more closely at the problem of multi-level governance. The reader may by now have thrown her or his hands in the air many times, asking in frustrated terms why there is no treatment of the relations between Sweden and the EU in the different chapters, despite obvious linkages to the European dimension. Membership of the EU changes and irrevocably meshes governance in both the Union and its member states. The principles of regional integration and subsidiarity do indeed have significant implications for governmental authority in ecological governance, not just for the national but also for lower, intra-national levels.

The present Swedish process of implementing the EU Framework Water Directive provides a most vivid illustration of the tensions for governmental authority created by spatial ecological governance. In anticipation of the coming Directive, the Cabinet in 1996 appointed a Special Commission to propose a new system for water administration. The October 1997 report recommended that Sweden be divided into ten Catchment Districts, each with a special Catchment Authority comprising two or three regional administrations and all local governments within the district. This unit should have authority to decide on collectively binding management plans and issue permits under the Environmental Code. Within the District’s major catchments, local governments should consolidate water issues into one decision-making unit per catchment (SOU 1997:99, pp. 49 ff., 69 ff.).

These recommendations resemble Ostrom’s model of ‘nested enterprises’ (Ostrom 1990:90) in that they were knit to the existing allocation of authority among regional administrations and local governments. However, the Commission also recognised the water users’ legitimate right to organise for a common management of the shared resource. Public authority could be delegated from the Catchment Authority to ‘local environmental management co-operatives’, but only if they fulfil certain criteria for joint associations laid down in the Swedish Constitution (SOU 1997:155, p. 81 ff.).
The EU Water Directive became effective in Sweden on 1 July, 2001. In October of that year, the Swedish Government appointed a special commissioner to work out proposals to establish Swedish water catchment districts as required under the EU Directive. His terms of reference clearly indicate the tensions created by the Directive’s demand for special levels and units and proper allocation of authority to bring about ecologically rational water management. The catchment-based Water Districts demanded under the EU Directive should build primarily on the existing 21 Regional Administrations, with some 10 to 12 of these being designated to have authority over entire Catchment Districts, thus even for the geographical areas outside the administrative borders. Special Catchment Delegations set up within those Regional Administrations should be vested with authority to promulgate water action plans, following co-ordination and counsel with local governments in the Water District. To further ‘nest’ the enterprise of new catchment-based water management within existing structures of authority, the Commissioner should also evaluate the need for Cabinet or central agency confirmation of Water District management plans. As for water stakeholders and their right to organise for self-management, the Commissioner was expected to suggest concrete forms for ‘water management co-operation’. In particular, the legal aspects of delegating authority to such co-operative networks, be they voluntary or established through administrative proceedings, should be illuminated (Directives M2001:01).

We thus have a situation where the authority of national government is fenced in by this authoritatively binding, supranational EU decision aimed at securing the sustainability of water resources through an organisation based on nature-given boundaries. In reaction to this, the Swedish Government seems to be busy building this new structure without totally compromising traditional lines of authority. In terms of effective pursuit of sustainability, one could of course say that this is an appropriate strategy. The competence, overview and co-ordination necessary for relatively swift production of management plans and concrete measures are already vested in the Regional Administrations and the local governments.

It would seem that autonomy is less well off than is sustainability in the directives for water governance presently discussed.
What is surprising is that this occurs amidst good examples of ecologically rational management of Swedish water resources. Landowners with water rights are entitled by law to establish their own Fishing Management Areas in collectively owned lakes and streams. From all we know, these FMA associations are quite successful examples of local co-operative management of vital ecosystems (SFS 1981:533; see Olsson and Folke 2001; Lundholm 1999). The competence and local knowledge built up in the Water Management Associations presently doing most of the monitoring of water quality in lakes and streams would also seem to provide a good basis for local ecosystem management units. They could thus be charged with considerable authority to govern common water catchments (see Gustafsson 1995).

In a preparatory report presented in June 2002, the commissioner went to some length in arguing for only four very strong Catchment Districts, while discussing arguments for stakeholder self-governance more superficially (Water Administration Commission 2002). This view of what constitutes an ‘appropriate’ authority distribution indicates that effectiveness in the pursuit of sustainability is a powerful underlying argument for securing strong governmental authority in ecological governance. It implies that the democratic argument of transferring authority to those actually using or sharing ecosystems is still met with political hesitation, as if increasing autonomy might jeopardise the achievement of sustainable development by allowing people too much space for decision-making.

**Going slow by running too fast? Political authority and the governance of time**

We have defined temporally rational ecological governance as governance adapted to ecological cycles. This exposes governmental authority to some formidable cross-pressure. The political authority of democratic governments is linked to election periods. Those in power may feel forced to institute as much of their political ideas as possible into laws, regulations and administrative processes, all in the hope of binding subsequent political majorities to development paths of longer duration. However, this built-in propensity towards short political time horizons becomes quite problematic to temporally rational ecological governance as
it depends on authority that can be sustained over a longer period of time than usual political cycles.

At issue here is how the authority of government can be used to handle this conflict between short-term political conditions and longer-term ecological desirables. We have seen how Sweden’s national government has tried several ways to achieve temporally rational ecological governance. What are the prospects for the longer term with respect to governmental ability to wield political authority over and within governance? Do certain strategies tend to confirm long-term governmental authority, while others tend to squander it in the political eagerness to pursue such governance?

First and foremost, some of the strategies used to ‘save’ time by constraining the choices of present in favour of those in the future rest firmly on governmental authority. Physical planning has been used over the past decades to regulate, and often determine with a high degree of finality, the use of Sweden’s ecosystems and resources. Ratified by Parliament and resting on the Environmental Code, nation-wide planning decisions have imposed authoritative long-term restrictions on land use. The national governmental purse is also used to wield long-term binding authoritative decisions. Funds for securing biodiversity – including buying valuable areas – more than tripled around the millennium shift, representing the fastest increase among budget items for environment after 1998 (Cabinet Bill 2002:100, p. 35). At the local level, the municipalities’ monopoly on physical planning within their geographical territory gives them formidable authority. It should be noted, however, that the last decade has found local governmental planning authority more and more dependent on negotiating with private interests for the realisation of local development objectives.

This would seem to indicate that as we move from rather clear-cut government-dominated situations to governance situations involving efforts to bring other actors ‘on schedule’ through persuasion, negotiation and bargaining, governmental authority might become less affirmative and less identifiable. At first sight, the Swedish NEO strategy seems firmly based on governmental authority. A Cabinet Bill passed by Parliament confirms the political intent of government to move society towards sustainable development ‘within one generation’. However, the implementa-
tion of temporal ecological governance through NEOs presupposes that non-governmental actors perform roles that might otherwise have been within the realm of public bureaucracies. In such a process of reaching *negotiated ecological consensus* with key actors and target groups in society at large, it may well be that authoritatively formulated political objectives and targets become adapted to the options acceptable and the capacities available to the actual NEO implementers.

Two alternatives of temporal ecological governance provide cases in point here. The ‘closing of eco-cycles’ presumes political authority to be essential to initiate and promote such measures to ‘save time’ through infrastructural measures and incentives. However, the success is in no small measure a matter for market-related processes of demand and supply of recycled/recyclable materials and products. If government wants to speed up processes through authoritative decisions, it might find itself going into domains of autonomy and individual choice viewed as essential to democratic government, and experience losses in the legitimacy upon which that authority ultimately depends.

An even more challenging case for governmental authority is the one of eco-efficiency, i.e. of ‘beating time’. This concerns global processes of economic and technological change, large-scale processes of market behaviour and market developments. To put it euphemistically, it seems very problematic that national democratic governments elected on short terms would be able to provide authoritative incentive structures for governance to steer these global, long-term processes.

Temporally rational ecological governance thus presents two particularly formidable challenges to governmental authority. One is time itself. The cross-generational horizon necessitated when taking sustainable development seriously means that the much shorter politically relevant time periods make problems for *continuous* affirmation of governmental authority. Governments trying to institutionalise as much of their strategy as they can within the mandate period, in the hope of setting the course firmly for sustainable development, expose themselves to political risks. Too much output from government in too short a time may lead to implementation deficits (see O’Toole, Jr. 2002). This would lead to questioning of the legitimacy of the strategy and thus a loss of political authority for government.
Another is the circle of actors in ecological governance; the wider that circle of actors, and the more dependent the government becomes on their long-term co-operation, the more problematic becomes a consistently upheld strategy based primarily on governmental authority. The NEOs, and the eco-cycle and eco-efficiency strategies embedded in Sweden’s drive towards ecological governance, all rest heavily on the will among firms and business organisations, stakeholder groups and the general public to take on designated roles in ecological governance. A strong flexing of governmental authority would – as the literature on conditions for successful implementation clearly illustrates – have negative repercussions on that will. Therefore, governments may find themselves forced to accommodate the views of those groups, either from the outset with a view to at least get off to a relatively quick start, or gradually as the intricacies and problems of strategy implementation unfold. Either way, there is reason for recycling Hamlet’s words: ‘[E]nterprises of great pith and moment, with this regard their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action’.

The Swedish case is of interest on both accounts. The epitome of Sweden’s flirt with ecological modernisation – the LIP programme – is a prime example of how government used its political authority to speed up the country’s turn onto the path to a sustainable society. But what comes across from the account of the case is first and foremost that you can go slow by running too fast. The desires for swift implementation of the programme led to strong exercise of central governmental authority. This may have seemed quite logical for strategic political reasons, but the results in terms of sustainable development have not been overly successful.

The other example is the ongoing process of implementing National Environmental Objectives. Intended to run for the next 20 to 25 years, and involving all strands in society, this programme confronts government with the problem of keeping the processes and structures of temporal ecological governance active as well as consistently working towards the agreed objectives. To make all these possibly conflicting interests and actors go along, however, government may have to adapt both the intensity and the pace of the long march towards sustainability. And in retrospect, at the perceived end of that march, it may turn out
that governmental authority could have been more consistently affirmed. To quote a conclusion by the Dutch government after three successive rounds of National Environmental Plans with heavy use of negotiated ecological agreements with target groups:

Those agreements ‘did – in fact – result in increased efficiency, but in retrospect, the impression is that the stakes could have been set higher’ (NEPP 4 2001:9; italics mine). Negotiations aimed at agreements tolerable to target groups may be good from an autonomy point of view. However, they run the risk of watering down objectives and requirements, and thus dimming the prospects of achieving sustainable development within the time frames originally established.

On tap or on top? Political vs. scientific authority in ecological governance

Democratic political authority involves the ability to legitimately use (the threat of) coercion by those who are elected to be in authority, or those appointed to exercise authority through some form of delegation of political authority from elected representatives. When we move from politics to science, we are dealing with another type of authority. Scientists have special knowledge that makes them personal authorities within their fields (see Birch 1993:30). The scientifically grounded views from frontline researchers on what constitutes the most effective ‘solutions’ to ‘problems’ of ecologically rational governance are authoritative in this sense.

Issues of sustainable development are particularly marked by uncertainties that call for scientific research, evaluation, and recommendations. At the same time, ‘political authority in the modern state is wielded by identifiable and fallible human beings’ (Birch 1993:30). Elected politicians in power most often do not possess special knowledge or qualities that lend them personal authority in the sense just outlined. To wield political authority in a system of ecological governance involving experts, technicians as well as target groups thus forces political representatives to come out from behind their veils of ignorance to make sure their decisions are accurate enough to make them legitimate in the eyes of the citizens. One should not forget, however, that they have an asset not available to others, i.e. the legitimate right to exercise
authority backed by democratic legitimacy. As Birch puts it, having such right ‘is four fifths of the battle’ (Birch 1993:30).

Using this advantage to force political decisions could mean losses in legitimacy, particularly if the knowledge base of those decisions becomes so thin as to make the outcomes non-transparent to affected interests and the public. Good governance presupposes adequate policy theories. There is thus a need to strike the balance between the two bases of authority. On normative grounds, the balance should be in favour of governmental authority. Scientific and expert knowledge is necessary on issues of ecological governance, but it ‘should not be used to authoritatively determine, as opposed to inform, either the “problem” or the “solution”’. Once these major issues have been democratically decided, then technical considerations may be appropriate. Experts ought ‘to be “on tap, not on top”, as it were’. (Barry 1999:200)

What is, then, the evidence from the Swedish case? Has that country been able to craft a system of governance that is ecologically rational in the sense that scientific knowledge and expertise is brought in to support political judgement on how best to use and manage natural resources to achieve sustainable development?

The pattern found seems to support Birch’s view of the upper hand of political authority. By using the traditional Swedish process of establishing investigatory commissions with specified terms of reference, the government brings qualified scientific advice and counsel into the policy process, but reserves the last word for political judgement. For a small country like Sweden, this could mean that political authority sometimes has to rely on a very thin base of relevant knowledge. To resolve this, the Swedish government has acted much in accordance with the old Roman device ‘Divide et impera’. Gone is the dominance of research directed through programmes written by environmental bureaucrats, and funded by boards closely knit to the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. Those wielding the ultimate governmental authority nowadays have on tap a wider and more pluralistic community of research and expertise for the decisions on how to organise governance for sustainable development.

This should not be taken to mean that even if it is on top, governmental authority is always inclined to tap all available
science and expertise to strike an ecologically rational balance with the authority of knowledge. We have seen from chapter 4 that considerations of political gain (the LIP process) and/or of economic gain (the Hallandsås Tunnel) have led government to shove aside and even ignore well-founded scientific or expert advice that – if heeded – might have been more beneficial to local environments and longer-term sustainable development. It should be noted, though, that the early Swedish process on climate change reveals a very intimate, and quite fruitful interaction between the two types of knowledge. On the other hand, the later stages in the process of ironing out the Swedish position on climate change indicate a move from on top to on tap. Using Birch’s metaphor, one could say that political authority in the guise of top-level Ministry officers began to cover ‘four fifths of the battle’.

What these findings reflect is that the balance between the authority of knowledge and the authority of political government is always precarious, because of the different sources and characteristics of these two types of authority. What this implies for ecologically rational governance is that the balance may have to be somewhat indeterminate, and also changing with the issues at hand. It is clear, however, that both are necessary, given the long-term perspectives and the wide latitude of uncertainty linked to issues of sustainable development. What is equally clear is that longer-term legitimacy of governmental authority in rational ecological governance is dependent on its wise use in two aspects. First, government must secure a dynamic climate for developing scientific knowledge on all aspects of sustainable development. Second, government must ascertain that this knowledge base is wisely tapped into ecological politics. If not, the legitimacy necessary for upholding a continued authoritative position in ecological governance, i.e., for democracy to stay on top without the threat or actual use of coercion may dwindle, according as there is evidence that the integrity of the commons is compromised.

Whose table? Political authority and the integration of ecological concern

Integration of ecological concerns into the structures and processes of governmental agencies is promoted in order to make
the governmental role in ecological governance as effective as possible in the pursuit of sustainable development. At the same time, this integration puts new and quite strenuous burdens on the agencies, dedicated as they are towards promoting other sectoral objectives on the basis of quite special, and over a longer term achieved knowledge and expertise. We also know that policy implementation is replete with accounts of great expectations becoming ruins of hope in the mazes of bureaucracy.

The fate of governmental authority in ecological governance is closely linked to that of integration. Enabled to legitimately use (the threat of) coercion through some form of delegation of political authority from elected representatives, agencies and bureaucrats may gain or lose legitimacy – and thus the foundation of authority – depending on how the quality, consistency and transparency of their decisions and actions are conceived by those affected and by the general public. After all, people may reject governmental authority because of ‘objections to specific policies pursued by the government’ (Birch 1993:36). There is all the more reason to assume that such situations could occur with regard to policies for sustainable development, since these policies will most probably include measures and outcomes that are re-distributive in relation to the present relationship between governmental policies and different societal interests.

This problem of authority makes itself felt in at least two ways. One is internal. Will the environmental concerns be integrated in such a way as to actually have an impact on the decisions of different sectoral agencies? That is, will a specific agency’s decisions reflect an apprehension of these concerns that render them legitimate in the eyes of the affected interests and the general public? The other is external. It concerns how conflicting perspectives on policy ‘privilege’ are reconciled to allow for both individual agencies and the governmental apparatus at large to appear to speak with one voice on matters of ecologically sustainable development. At issue is the prevention of situations where governmental authority dwindles because agencies discredit the legitimacy of government’s drive for sustainable development through actions revealing a ‘not my table’-attitude towards environmental concerns.

Furthermore, governmental authority may become diffused as an effect of target group participation in policy implementation.
Many measures presuppose that non-governmental actors – business, producers in industry and agriculture – perform roles that might otherwise have been within the realm of public bureaucracies. As evidenced in so many other cases, it is perfectly possible that ecological governance may also give rise to issue networks, policy communities that are able to adapt policy measures to the options acceptable and the capacities available to them as actual implementers of public policy (see Daugbjerg 1998). This may cause losses of legitimacy for those measures, and thus ultimately losses in governmental authority in ecological governance.

How has governmental authority fared in the Swedish efforts to integrate ecological concern into sectoral policies and agencies? The account in Chapter 5 indicates that sectoral policies are nowadays always integrating the ‘common cause’ of sustainable development. This sectoral integration means that ‘economic and other considerations are interwoven with ecological concern in planning and decision-making’. Agencies with specific sectoral responsibilities thus have to ‘integrate ecological concerns and resource management in their actions and promote work towards ecological sustainability within their whole sector’ (Cabinet Bill 2001/02:172, p. 106). The continuous Greening of Agencies Programme involves ‘common yardsticks’ of green performance, and ‘common purses’ in the form of green procurement and green tender programmes.

The annual reports of the agencies reveal a preparedness to observe and implement the new ecological responsibilities bestowed upon them by government. However, the duty to mix ecological with economic and other considerations might lead to difficulties. Ultimately, conflicts of interest may occur both within the agency and among sectoral actors. Does government succeed in avoiding situations where agencies with green sectoral responsibilities tend to ‘pass the buck’ from their tables, i.e., is government effective in authoritatively asserting ‘where the buck stops’?

My tentative answer to this question is yes. The Swedish national government has at its disposal an institutionalised capacity to make sure not only that agencies take their ecological responsibilities seriously, but also that there is a balancing of ecological and other concerns compatible with centrally determined priorities. The historically developed mix of legal,
economic and other incentives and checks is also actually used to make the infusion of ecological concern effective and durable. The Letters of Regulation attached to budget allocations to the agencies have a key role here, in particular since the administrative culture is traditionally very much geared towards abiding by these detailed instructions from government.

Still, integration may cause problems for governmental authority in ecological governance on two accounts. One concerns the relationship between central and local government. Since Sweden’s municipal governments enjoy far-reaching self-determination in taxation and – particularly crucial here – physical planning, questions may arise about which governmental table the buck should stop at. If demands for locally determined ecological management are not adequately dealt with, or if local ecological activities seem to count for little (as experienced in the clash of principles of the LIP and LA 21 programmes), losses of legitimacy may occur, thus affecting governmental authority across levels of governance. The other problem concerns the legitimacy of central government in the governance for sustainable development. The prestige put into the long-term programme for ‘Sustainable Sweden’ makes it extremely important that the processes and measures infused by government into ecological governance prove successful. If they do not, the blame will particularly fall on national government, which may lead to losses in the legitimacy of that programme.

No trespassing? Political authority and individual autonomy in ecological governance

The question of how we should govern ourselves so as to value democracy and individual autonomy and still retain the integrity of the commons directs our attention to three things. First, ‘to govern ourselves’ refers to ‘governing’ and ‘governance’. The concept of governance traditionally connotes the ‘act or process of governing’, but has nowadays come to comprise all the mechanisms and instruments that can be used to direct social development in directions reflecting the authoritative will of the community (see Lafferty 2002). Second, such an authoritative will here concerns the quest for changing society towards ecologically sustainable development. Governance should be ecologically
rational in its use of mechanisms and instruments to retain the integrity of the commons. Third, the ‘how’ directs our attention to how governmental authority could be exercised in such ecological governance. To gain legitimacy, government must act within limits set by the values of democracy and individual autonomy.

But is it possible to lay down precise limits for the ‘enclosure’ around individual autonomy necessary to secure a democratically legitimate exercise of governmental authority? This is particularly relevant for ecological governance in the pursuit of sustainable development, literally concerned as it is with the survival of the commons, without which any such enclosures would be impossible as well as void of meaning.

Arguably, the limits to governmental authority cannot be laid out in some purely ‘physical’ fashion. What governmental authority can be used to achieve is – as we have repeatedly pointed out – dependent on what those subjected to that authority judge as legitimate, even in the face of formal democratic rights and duties. Governments in liberal democracies use their authority to promote certain objectives, most often by way of providing opportunities for citizens to choose and enjoy the good life. But while this may become the case for some, one must not forget that inherent in that exercise is the potential restriction on others’ freedom of action and/or expression. These are central aspects of democratically legitimate governance. If government goes far in promoting ecologically rational governance, it may restrict one part of the good life at the expense of another (see Raphael 1990:74 ff.).

In line with this, we early on argued that in democratic ecological governance, government should steer with ‘minimum coercion and maximum consent’. But this balance is extremely precarious. Valuing democracy and individual autonomy very highly might compromise the integrity of the commons, and the opposite may lead to losses of democratic legitimacy. As I have argued elsewhere, the ecological state should appear as ‘a green fist in a velvet glove’ (Lundqvist 2001b).

What, then, are the conclusions from the Swedish experience to date? The traditionally generous formal ‘enclosures’ around individual autonomy and individual rights have actually been widened. The rights of access and information make Swedish citizens privileged in comparison to those of many other countries.
Legal standing in environmentally related decision-making is provided to wider circles and in more cases. On this score, it would thus seem as if the national government has used its authority to promote individual rights and freedoms of action and expression within the policies for sustainable development.

When we turn to the exercise of those freedoms, i.e., actual public participation in the emerging structure of ecological governance, the picture becomes more shaded. True enough, the broad public participation in the Local Agenda 21 process has rightfully earned Sweden a favourable record in comparison with many other countries. It is also true that by way of participating in NGOs or other interest organisations, Swedish citizens have access to the process of policy-making, e.g., in the commissions and during the remiss process. They may thus be able to influence how governmental authority should be used to achieve sustainable development. And it is furthermore true that in the ‘New Environmental Work’ envisaged by national government, public participation is foreseen as a vehicle for successful implementation of strategies for sustainability.

There are, however, also tendencies for public participation to become an icon, or a symbol, in the actual pursuit of ecological governance. When central government pushed its LIP programme, municipal governments do not seem to have consciously used the potential for participation developed in the LA 21 process. In the central policy documents outlining in detail the strategies for ecological governance over the next two decades, ‘New Environmental Work’ takes on a different meaning. Government will use – and share – its authority to promote sustainable development in co-operation with such organised interests as business and producers in industry and agriculture. We find that members of the public are more frequently addressed as customers and consumers in the market place than in their capacity as citizens in a polity.

We thus see two patterns here. There is a generous formal enclosure protecting citizen freedom of action and expression. But there is also a tendency not to fully use this potential for democratic input from the citizens into the actual future protection of the integrity of the commons. To reuse the metaphor on the role of scientists in ecological governance, citizens are not ‘on tap’, as it were. This peculiar Swedish mix of governmental authority and
individual autonomy has deep roots in the development of both democracy and the welfare state. There is a long-standing consensual political culture in which highly organised interests play a central role in public policy-making as ‘caretakers’ of different aspects of the good life. This has made it possible to proceed with maximum consent and minimum coercion without lively individual citizen participation.

But should not citizens as autonomous individuals be ‘on top’ in democratic ecological governance? In the representative democratic sense they of course are. But the deliberative recipe of ‘simply increasing the participation of citizens in democratic decision-making is no guarantee that they will act responsibly, motivated by concern for the common ecological good’. What that good is, and what does or does not lead to ecologically sustainable development, is too surrounded by extreme uncertainty to easily lend itself to definition through popular majority vote. What is important in terms of participation is first and foremost ‘the possibility of transforming unecological preferences in the light of debate’ (Barry 1999:232). It is above all for such reasons that the balance between authority and autonomy in Swedish ecological governance may have to be reconsidered as the cross-generational striving for sustainable development proceeds in the years to come.