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Decent Work in Scotland, an Agenda-Setting Analysis

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Abstract

This article uses John Kingdon's multiple streams framework as an analytical tool to consider how the policy issue of 'job quality', in the guises of 'decent work' and 'fair work', developed a 'career' in Scotland between 2013 and 2017. The aim is to understand why, despite the efforts of a variety of policy entrepreneurs and the openness of the Scottish Government to this policy problem, job quality did not arrive on the Scottish Government's decision agenda. The article finds that the crucial 'policy window' did not open due to the 2016 'Brexit' decision dramatically changing the political landscape.

The article demonstrates the applicability of Kingdon's framework for agenda-setting analysis in a parliamentary environment and constitutes a rare application of the framework to a 'live' policy issue.

The authors were involved in a research and advocacy project on 'decent work' that was undertaken in Scotland during 2015 and 2016 and therefore were amongst the policy entrepreneurs seeking to place job quality on the Scottish Government's agenda.

Keywords: job quality; decent work; fair work; agenda-setting; multiple streams framework; Scotland; Brexit

Introduction

Ideas matter in public policy-making, so much is clear after the 'ideational turn' (Blyth, 1997) and its rejection of purely rationalistic or materialistic approaches to explaining policy change and continuity (Béland, 2015). The term 'idea' can be defined in many ways. Following Cairney's take on ideas as relating to a 'wide spectrum of concepts, including very broad world views on one end to very specific policy proposals on the other' (Cairney, 2012, 242), the definition of 'idea-as-policy-concept' is adopted for the agenda-setting analysis presented

in this article. The analysis revolves around the policy issue of job quality and the policy concept of 'decent work'. Relevantly, a plethora of terms is found in the job quality literature in which, for example, terms such as 'quality of employment', 'decent work', 'fair work', 'meaningful work' and 'good work' are often used interchangeably (Warhurst et al., 2017). Acknowledging terminological problems, job quality can be broadly defined as the extent to which a set of job attributes contributes to, or detracts from, workers' well-being (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011). Differing from the more generic concept of job quality, the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) concept of 'decent work' is defined as where 'all women and men should work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity' (ILO, 1999). The concept of decent work tends to be used in connection with minimum legislative standards and poverty reduction, particularly in developing countries. More recently, and of particular relevance to the analysis presented here, decent work has been picked up by civic organisations in developing countries as a lever in campaigns to tackle in-work poverty (Warhurst et al., 2017). Problems associated with different terms being used in this analysis of an agenda-setting process are discussed later. Before proceeding to the analysis itself, it is necessary to set out details about the research and advocacy project that served as a starting point for this analysis.

The authors of this article were, in 2015/16, involved in a project which sought to stimulate debate on job quality in Scotland with the aim of moving this issue further up the policy agenda. The project was conducted under the umbrella of the formal partnership between the University of the West of Scotland and Oxfam Scotland (the UWS-Oxfam Partnership), with additional input from the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (hereafter referred to as 'the collaborative project').

The three core objectives of the collaborative project were: to conduct research to establish better knowledge about the realities of low-paid work in Scotland; to stimulate public debate about job quality; and to influence policy-making to help towards the creation of a labour market where more work could justifiably be characterised as 'decent'. The latter objective was to be achieved by developing policy proposals aimed primarily at the Scottish Government. The proposals were relatively limited in scope given that the Scottish Parliament, under the 1998 British devolution settlement, does not have powers over the core areas of relevance to job quality – including employment law, labour market policy, and minimum wage-setting. The research underpinning the project was planned for a period of time when job quality was already an emergent policy issue in Scotland, and the promotion of policy recommendations was scheduled to coincide with the run-up to the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2016. Crucially, the project was conceived prior to the onset of the tumultuous era of 'Brexit' politics which followed the decision of the British electorate to leave the European Union. The temporal frame of the

project is discussed in more detail throughout the article, as it is fundamental to the agenda-setting analysis presented.

With the collaborative project concluded, the article takes the project as a starting point to present a case study of agenda-setting with a focus on the issue of job quality in the Scottish political context between 2013 and 2017. Importantly, the project is not the main object of this study of success or failure of putting job quality onto the agenda. Rather, it is discussed as one initiative among a number of relevance to the agenda-setting process analysed. There is no claim made that it was this project which had any solely decisive influence on the discussion on job quality in Scotland. However, the authors' experiences as participants in the policy process give the article an additional degree of insight into the process studied.

To analytically guide this case study, John Kingdon's 'multiple streams framework' (MSF) (Kingdon, 1984) is used. The framework is discussed in more depth in the next section of the article, along with details about the case study itself.

While this article is of relevance to those interested in Scottish politics and policies, it also adds to the wider body of knowledge on agenda-setting and the role of ideas in this process. It is, furthermore, a response to calls for more empirical applications of Kingdon's framework, and to those who have criticised previous applications of the framework as 'superficial' or as not acknowledging the literature that has built on Kingdon's original work (Sabatier, 1999; Zahariadis, 2007; Cairney and Jones, 2016; Cairney, 2018). The article follows Bache's example where the framework is applied to a current 'live' topic rather than to provide an 'ex post analysis of a policy decision' (Bache, 2013, 22). This is rare, certainly in the current multiple streams literature, which increasingly collapses agenda-setting and decision-making into one analysis, somewhat contrary to Kingdon's original intentions (Zohlnhöfer et al., 2016). Lastly, the authors' first-hand experience of research on, and advocacy for, decent work may provide helpful insights for others wishing to influence governments' decision agendas.

Consistent with the view that the MSF requires a net to be 'cast widely' (Piggin and Hart, 2017, 710), the article makes use of a wide range of qualitative data. Public documents such as policy reports, commission findings, law and regulatory documents, news reporting, and the participant knowledge of the authors, have all informed the analysis.

The article proceeds as follows. First, the MSF is introduced. The subsequent section presents the case and the agenda-setting analysis. The article concludes with a discussion of what policy entrepreneurs espousing the policy idea of decent work could do to promote change in future policy.

Decent work – the 'career' of a concept

Before discussing the case 'proper', a few words on Kingdon's framework will demonstrate its suitability for this case study.

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The MSF is an agenda-setting analysis framework, and while 'it has become a well-established practice to extend the MSF to decision-making' (Zohlnhöfer et al., 2016, 244), in this article it will be used in its original sense. The framework was first developed to address the question, in a US-American context, of 'why some subjects become prominent on the policy agenda and others do not, and why some alternatives for choice are seriously considered while others are neglected' (Kingdon, 1984, 3). In exploring these questions, ideas began to assume a core role for Kingdon. In that sense, he could be seen as a 'pioneer of ideational analysis' (Béland, 2015, 229), whereby his framework is useful for policy studies which take ideas seriously in the explanation of policy change and continuity.

However, the framework also emphasises that certain conditions need to be met before an idea arrives on the governmental 'decision agenda' (Kingdon, 1984, 4). Ideas, in other words, are not independent forces. In this context, the difference between a 'governmental agenda' and a 'decision agenda' is important – the former concerns issues receiving government attention; the latter is concerned with issues 'lined up for a decision' by government (Bache, 2013, 22). Ideas arrive on governmental agendas when developments in what Kingdon identified as three conceptually separate – but usually parallel – 'streams' of 'problems', 'policies' and 'politics' – occur. Furthermore, these three streams must be 'coupled' in order for a policy idea to have an impact on the decision agenda. This coupling, stimulated by 'policy entrepreneurs', occurs during fleeting moments of opportunity, called 'policy windows' (Kingdon, 1984, 21). These policy windows, sometimes called 'windows of opportunity', require certain events which can make 'some things possible that were impossible before' and which 'create a receptivity to some ideas but not to others' (Kingdon, 1984, 152).

This outline demonstrates that the MSF is suitable for an agenda-setting case study around the policy issue of job quality and the policy concept of decent work. Moreover, the framework lends itself to this case study because it is premised on the idea that policy-making is dynamic, irrational and unpredictable (Nutley et al., 2007), and the environment ambiguous and complex (Pollitt, 2008). Arguably, the wider policy field around the issue of job quality aptly fits this description.

However, the MSF may require some adaptation when applied to different political environments than the US-American arena of federal policy-making for which Kingdon developed it. For example, Zohlnhöfer et al. argue (2016) that the framework has a blind spot when it comes to formal institutions in parliamentary systems and their role specifically in decision-making. However, Herweg et al. (2015) hold that the MSF is suitable also for agenda-setting analysis in parliamentary systems as long as party leaders and party 'in-house' experts are considered as central policy entrepreneurs in the politics

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and policy streams. Also, interest groups should be considered central, as they can occupy institutionalised positions, in particular in the politics stream (Béland, 2005).

The problem stream – transforming conditions into problems

The problem stream refers to 'conditions' which transform into 'problems' when relevant policy actors start seeing them as such. Once this has happened, they require government attention, as problems in search for 'policy solutions'. This stream has both ideational and agency components. Regarding the former, problems only become apparent due to the 'mismatch between the observed conditions and one's conception of the ideal state' (Kingdon, 1984, 110). In other words, 'values and assumptions about what the world should be are a key ideational component of problem definition' (Béland, 2015, 232). For example, if those in power fail to see inequality and poverty as a problem, they are unlikely to seek a solution (Sager and Thomann, 2016). Regarding the construction of such perceptions, it is important to acknowledge that raising 'an issue to the top of the policy agenda, and getting people to see new problems [. . .] is a major accomplishment' (Cairney, 2012, 234). Such an accomplishment requires the agency of 'problem brokers' who mobilise knowledge, values and emotions as resources to shape perceptions and to 'frame' the condition-to-become-a-problem through persistent strategic organisation, softening up the political system to their problem frame (Knaggard, 2015, 11).

How can the first stream of Kingdon's framework be applied in the case study?

A discussion of how job quality – or rather, its absence for many workers – came to be recognised as a problem in Scotland requires going back to the origins of the concept of decent work and to concerns about job quality more generally. The ILO's decent work agenda, which emerged in the late 1990s, was among the early attempts to create a measure of job quality and to campaign for the recognition of the importance of decent work for individuals as well as for efficient and productive economies. There was good reason why the ILO, as a problem broker, made decent work a top institutional priority in 1999. In the mid-1990s, workers' representatives were becoming concerned about developments in employment conditions after nearly two decades of global neo-liberalisation. For this reason, decent work was to be at the core of the ILO's global counter-strategy aimed at putting the issue of job quality onto the agenda of developing and developed nations and supranational bodies.

Initially, the ILO wanted the concept of decent work to be operationalised in order to measure a broad range of employment indicators which would allow cross-country comparisons as well as analyses of individual labour markets (ILO, 1999). However, when in 2003 and 2004 the ILO published its first

attempts to operationalise the concept, these efforts were heavily criticised (Sehnbruch et al., 2015). This was, in part, due to the tripartite nature of the ILO where employers and some governments rejected the proposal that countries should be ranked and thereby named and shamed.

Despite technical and methodological setbacks (IOE, 2002; Burchell et al., 2014), the ILO has continued to use the decent work concept (for example, see ILO, 2008, 2012; 2015 and 2018). However, uptake of the term beyond the ILO itself has remained limited. Outside the ILO's own projects and policy documents, one example is where the International Trade Union Congress instigated the World Day for Decent Work (ITUC, 2016). Importantly, reference to decent work was incorporated into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (UN, 2015). Here, Goal 8 promotes 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work' (ILO, 2018, 2).

Salient for this article is how in Scotland the issue of job quality has become relevant under two overlapping banners of 'decent work' and 'fair work'. During the run-up to the September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence from the United Kingdom (UK), the Scottish Government, led by the separatist Scottish National Party (SNP), committed to establishing a 'Fair Work Convention' (FWC) and then also subscribed to the SDGs in 2015/16 – and thereby to 'decent work'. Again highlighting how multiple terms have been used to refer to the policy issue of job quality, the FWC adopted the term of 'fair work', defining it as 'work that offers effective voice, respect, security, opportunity and fulfilment; it balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and workers, and can generate benefits for individuals, organisations and society' (Fair Work Convention, 2016, 6).

Using Kingdon's language, these commitments can be seen as marking the transformation of a condition into a problem. But this transformation took considerable time and occurred against the backdrop of a Scottish labour market characterised by persistently high unemployment – for example, between 8 and 9 per cent in 2010 and 2012 (Scottish Government, 2018) – and by further problematic longer-term trends including endemic in-work poverty (Scottish Government, 2015d), the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' (Scottish Government, 2016a; Thompson, 2015), and large numbers of (particularly female) workers 'trapped' in low-paid work (Hurrell, 2013). Further issues and how they were variously discussed in the UK and Scotland contributed to this transformation – such as national minimum and living wages, skills shortages, the productivity gap, precarity and zero-hour-contracts, and the 'gig economy' (see e.g. STUC, 2015; Lepanjuuri et al., 2018).

The transformation of condition into problem should also be considered in the context of what some have referred to as a specific 'Scottish policy style' (Keating, 2005). This Scottish policy style, as it developed with the first

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Scottish governments after devolution, is ostensibly characterised by a more consultative and cooperative partnership approach to policy-making and implementation between government and civil society actors when compared to the style of policy-making at Westminster. While it is important not to overstate this distinctiveness (Cairney et al., 2016) or to generalise to all policy areas and actors, the 2002 Memorandum of Understanding (Scottish Executive, 2002) between the then Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition Scottish Government and the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) is evidence for this kind of cooperative relationship between trade unions and government. The memorandum 'provided for regular and early engagement and was a huge culture change for both civil servants and union officials after the Thatcher years' (Watson, 2014), and it has allowed the STUC 'far greater access to policy-makers than it enjoyed' before devolution. It has also been seen to have strengthened the 'ideological connection between Scottishness and progressive social policy' (Béland and Lecours, 2008, 133). Arguably, a relationship such as this created a policy-making environment that facilitated the transformation of job quality into a policy problem, perceived as such by the Scottish Government.

When, in 2007, the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition lost power in the Scottish Parliament to a minority SNP administration, the Scottish policy style continued to underpin policy-making and implementation (e.g. Cairney, 2014). With its neo-corporatist appearance, it was well-aligned to the broadly social-democratic outlook which the SNP had increasingly been embracing in the preceding years (e.g. Rosie and Bond, 2007). It also allowed the SNP to position itself as the 'go-to party' for trade unions and workers and thus help win over both to the cause of Scottish independence. After all, among the many who switched their vote from Labour to SNP in the 2015 UK general elections, a significant number did so because they shared the SNP's strong preference for a more equal society (Curtice, 2015). Nonetheless, it would take another six years until the SNP-led Scottish Government was 'softened up' to the point that it added job quality to its government agenda when, in 2013 and as part of its campaign for Scottish independence, it pledged the creation of the aforementioned FWC.

In the following section, the policy stream aspect of the process is scrutinised to see how Scotland-specific policy solutions started to develop around the problem of job quality; and secondly, whether decent work as a policy concept mattered.

The policy stream – fishing for solutions

In the policy stream, policy alternatives are generated by the policy community. This stream is 'filled with the output of experts and analysts who examine problems and propose solutions' (Béland and Howlett, 2016, 222). Kingdon emphasised that in the problem stream issues can quickly rise to the attention of policy-makers, but that it may take a long time for a policy

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solution to develop. He employed the metaphor of the 'policy primeval soup' (Kingdon, 1984, 138), where policy ideas evolve and mutate as they are proposed by one actor in the policy community but then are reconsidered and modified by other actors. In this soup, only some ideas 'survive' as those looking for solutions apply certain criteria in their search. Such criteria include technical feasibility, value acceptability within the policy community, tolerable costs, public acceptability, and whether they are acceptable to elected decision-makers (Cairney, 2012; Spohr, 2016). Crucially, a policy solution does not rise to the top of the 'soup' and catch the attention of decision-makers simply because it is 'the best idea', but because policy entrepreneurs actively package-up policy concepts with policy solutions so as to make them palatable to policy-makers (Knaggard, 2015). These policy entrepreneurs are central actors in the policy stream – well-informed and well-connected people in (governmental) planning and evaluation offices, academics, or interest group lobbyists (Kingdon, 1984, 18). They are advocates 'for policy proposals or for the prominence of an idea' (Kingdon, 1984, 122) and they are experts in reducing ambiguity around problems and policies (Piggin and Hart, 2017).

The following shows how a set of policy entrepreneurs advocated for the issue of job quality, using both the concepts of 'decent work' and 'fair work', to be promoted onto the Scottish governmental decision agenda.

As mentioned earlier, in November 2013 the SNP-led government started developing a 'fair work' agenda and promised that Scotland would have an enduring 'Fair Work Convention' (Scottish Government, 2013) once independence from the UK was achieved. While this move indicated problem-awareness, it lacked the backing of concrete, underpinning policy. This was to be remedied, as before the independence referendum the government, in February 2014, asked Jim Mather – a former SNP Government minister – to conduct a review of workplace policies in collaboration with trade unions and employers. This resulted in the August 2014 'Working Together: Progressive Workplace Policies in Scotland' report, or the Mather Review. Among other recommendations, the Mather Review strongly affirmed the role of trade unions in a social partnership approach, linking 'high-quality jobs' to a 'more equitable society' (Scottish Government, 2014a, 5). The review also called for a 'fair employment framework' to be developed through a 'stakeholder body' established by the government (Scottish Government, 2014a, 59).

In the immediate aftermath of the referendum on Scottish independence from the UK (which resulted in a 'no' vote), in October 2014, the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC) and other pressure groups organised a conference under the title of 'Decent Work – Dignified Lives'. At the conference, Scotland's outgoing First Minister Alex Salmond renewed the SNP's commitment to 'fair work' as well as to working with the trade unions (STUC, 2014; Scottish Government, 2014b). In November of the same year, the incoming

First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon used her first speech to announce that she would convene the FWC – despite the fact that it would have none of the powers it was intended to have in an independent Scotland. In her new cabinet, Sturgeon also created the senior position of Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work, Skills and Training – later, in May 2016, this position was renamed as Cabinet Secretary for Employment, Jobs and Fair Work – thus strengthening the institutional arrangement for a potential key policy entrepreneur in the job quality policy community.

The FWC took up its charter in April 2015 with the objective to 'drive forward the Fair Work agenda by producing a Fair Work framework for Scotland' (Fair Work Convention, 2016, 5). Tasked to report in spring 2016 (just before the next Scottish Parliament elections), the Convention was populated with members from business, trade unions, and academia and was charged with providing independent advice to the Scottish Government on matters including fair work and the living wage in Scotland (Fair Work Convention, 2015).

Bodies such as the FWC are sometimes established as a mechanism to push an issue off the immediate public and governmental agendas. In this instance, however, the issue of job quality in Scotland was not buried. In the run-up to the May 2015 UK General Election, a number of civil society groups and the STUC renewed their call for more decent work (e.g. STUC, 2015; CAS, 2015), thus keeping the issue alive. At the same time, the Scottish Government continued its discourse about the importance of job quality for the country's economy. For example, during the July 2015 discussions around 'employability' – a policy area soon to be devolved to Scotland – reference was made to the FWC as a significant actor in the quest for more 'fairness' and 'employability' (Scottish Government, 2015c, e). Last but not least, the Convention itself conducted its work publicly by holding open hearings and publicising visits to communities, sectors and workplaces across Scotland.

Further momentum was added in July 2015 when the Scottish Government announced that it would sign up to the UN's SDGs (Scottish Government, 2015b). The Goals were to be achieved through existing strategic frameworks – specifically the National Performance Framework and the Scottish National Action Plan for Human Rights (Scottish Government, 2015b). Both these frameworks position Scotland as an independently-minded country with its own agenda, approaches and values, distinct from the rest of the UK. Arguably, the adoption of the SDGs constituted an element of the SNP's wider political strategy to promote Scottish independence. As such, it could be interpreted as a moment of 'statecraft' – the 'conscious gaming strategy where the application of domestic objectives can be achieved through the application of international agreements', in the course depoliticising a particular issue (Morphet, 2017; Buller and Flinders, 2005). In other words, the SNP-led Scottish Government pushed its independence agenda by subscribing to the

SDGs as a globally-agreed and ostensibly non-partisan set of objectives – best achievable in Scotland via independence.

On the back of the momentum of the FWC, and with funding from the Scottish Government to undertake an opinion poll of the issue, the collaborative project was formed with the objective of shaping the debate on job quality in Scotland. The terminological choice of 'decent work' arose out of the combination of the fact that Oxfam, as an international development organisation, was committed to the SDGs, the signing-up of the Scottish Government to the SDGs, the trade unions' usage of 'decent work', and a desire to use more normative language.[1]

The collaborative project was timed to inform the FWC's deliberations and to stimulate concrete policy thinking around 'fair work' and its relationship to poverty and inequalities in Scotland ahead of the May 2016 Scottish Parliamentary elections. The researchers communicated, throughout the project, with members of the FWC and other key stakeholders – via formal and informal channels, including deliberate overlaps between members of the project steering board and the FWC. Out of the four reports published between March 2016 and September 2016 (Simpson et al., 2016; Gibb and Ishaq, 2016; Miller and Borchardt, 2016; Stuart et al., 2016a), only a preliminary version of the first report on low-paid workers (Stuart et al., 2016b) was published around the same time as the FWC's framework report and about six weeks before the Scottish elections in early May 2016 (see for media coverage e.g. Kirkaldy, 2016; Martin, 2016; Naysmith, 2016; Paterson, 2016; The Herald, 2016a; The Scotsman, 2016).

While the FWC was primarily focussed on suggestions for 'progressive workplace policies' aimed at employers, the collaborative project presented a set of recommendations for the Scottish Government in September 2016 at an event at the Scottish Parliament, chaired by the Fair Work Cabinet Secretary Keith Brown and with a wide array of further policy entrepreneurs present (UWS-Oxfam Partnership, 2016). Beginning with the publication of the preliminary report in March 2016 and continuing into mid-2017, project findings were disseminated and advocacy around policy recommendations was undertaken via traditional media channels, blogs, academic publications and engagement with policy-makers in parliamentary committees or at relevant conferences. In short, those involved in the collaborative project sought to act as fully-fledged policy entrepreneurs in the hope that the Mather Review, the government's creation of a Cabinet Secretary with 'fair work' in remit and title, the FWC, Scotland's endorsement of decent work via the SDGs and the financial support and positive reception of the collaborative project by the Scottish Government were cumulatively creating conditions conducive to move job quality onto the governmental decision agenda.

However, even when policy entrepreneurs are diligent in their preparation of policy solutions and adopt a strategic approach, and even if there is governmental awareness of the problem and receptivity to policy solutions, this still

may not be enough to shift the policy problem onto the decision agenda. An open policy window – the right moment – is also required. The June 2016 'Brexit' referendum, when the UK electorate voted in favour of leaving the EU, meant that continuing discussion of job quality would thereafter happen in a much-changed political and economic context in which the previously established momentum to put the issue on the decision agenda would be under severe threat.

The politics stream – 'decent work' as an idea whose time is yet to come

Before the policy window is be considered in more detail, the politics stream requires elaboration. The politics stream is about 'how receptive people are to certain solutions at particular times' (Cairney, 2014, 236). In other words, even when problems are recognised as such, and policy solutions have emerged, there is no guarantee that decision-makers will dedicate efforts to changing policy accordingly.

Necessary for the policy issue to move from government agenda to decision agenda is the confluence of the policy, problem and politics streams. These three streams flow along different paths and typically can remain more or less independent of one another until a policy window opens. It is opened by certain events which can make 'some things possible that were impossible before' and 'create a receptivity to some ideas but not to others' (Kingdon, 1984, 152). When Kingdon used the term 'focusing events' he meant crises or accidents (Kingdon, 1984), but he also considered more or less predictable types of focusing events, such as elections, as moments when windows could open (Kingdon, 1984, 213). However, the policy window needs to be recognised as an opportunity by the policy entrepreneurs (Saurugger and Terpan, 2016) so they can coordinate their actions to exploit the window (Béland, 2015, 230). The emphasis on policy entrepreneurs – who can be the same actors as in the policy stream – stresses how important the timing of agency is, as policy windows are elusive and often short-lived and must be taken advantage of.

The first step of the analysis for the politics stream in this case study is an outline of the 'national mood' (Kingdon, 1984) in which the debate about job quality was conducted. This is a somewhat elusive concept, but can be understood as public opinion as perceived by policy-makers (Herweg et al., 2017). It is important, here, to consider that long before the establishment of a devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999, politics in Scotland were shaped by the question of 'Scottish distinctiveness' and, of course, the question of independence from the UK. In particular, the supposedly 'more social democratic' and 'more egalitarian' national character of Scots has played and continues to play a role (see for the debate Curtice and Ormston, 2011; Hetherington, 2014; Rosie and Bond, 2007; Hassan, 2012; Wigmore, 2015). Whether the claim to this Scottish

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distinctiveness was or is empirically true, it was hoped devolution would provide Scotland with enough room within the UK constitutional framework to allow it to develop its own policies – 'Scottish solutions to Scottish problems' (e.g. Stewart, 2004) – and also to marginalise demands for independence. However, the separatist SNP, coupling its increasingly centre-left social democratic rhetoric and policy programme with its agenda of leading Scotland to independence, gained in electoral strength. In 2007, it became the strongest party in the Scottish Parliament enabling it to form a minority government. The SNP also won the elections in 2011 and 2016 and outperformed all other Scottish parties at the UK general elections held in 2015 and 2016. It was thus able to vigorously promote the cause of independence on different levels of government. Given the SNP's core objective of Scottish independence, its discourse and policies should be interpreted in the light of the Scottish egalitarian national mood, the party's quest for independence and the resultant irresolvable antagonism with Westminster. This antagonism grew when a Conservative-led government came to power in Westminster in 2010. In particular, Westminster's severe fiscal austerity policies post-2010, specifically those embodied in social, employment, and labour market policies, made the alternative of the SNP's centre-left outlook seem much clearer as even the Labour Party was seen to endorse 'austerity light' politics. As a consequence, the SNP was able to position itself as the party of social justice and anti-austerity during the difficult years following the Global Financial Crisis. The SNP sought to use these years to guide Scotland's national mood towards independence, culminating in the referendum of September 2014. Though the Scottish electorate decided (by 55% to 45%) against separation from the UK, the Westminster Government later devolved further powers to Scotland, including those over employability and some aspects of welfare. However, the policy fields most relevant to job quality – employment and labour market policy, and minimum wage-setting – were not among the newly devolved powers (Scottish Parliament, 2016). The SNP, after the disappointing referendum outcome, had hoped for more powers by way of 'devo max' (Scottish Government, 2014c), as the extended devolution settlement after the failed Scottish independence referendum was commonly referred to. In the political struggle over independence and devolution, the creation of the FWC, with its limited remit and recommendations, focussed on the workplace and strong reliance on good faith between the employers and employees, could be seen as a means of demonstrating to the public that the narrow constraints of devolution would never suffice to bring about 'Scottish solutions for Scottish problems' and a society with higher job quality and more equality overall. In other words, the nature and timing of the FWC should be seen within the broader framework of the SNP's political strategy. Nonetheless, the policy entrepreneurs who in 2015 started to engage with the policy issue of job quality did so in the hope that a policy window could

open for them to influence policy change, even within the confines of the devolution settlements. After all, the SNP – widely expected to easily win the May 2016 Scottish Parliament elections – had now committed itself to a 'fair work' agenda by giving it institutional expression in the FWC and a dedicated cabinet post, whilst also closely aligning with the trade union movement on the issue of job quality. The hope was that the Scottish Government could be pushed into adopting concrete policies towards making 'more work more decent', thus living up to its own rhetoric. The elections were therefore seen as a focussing event to open the policy window.

In 2016, it seemed as if the national mood, the political environment and the actor constellation were conducive for job quality – in the guises of either 'decent' or 'fair' work – to arrive on the Scottish Government's decision agenda. However, the required policy window failed to open as the agenda of the new SNP government, after the successful May 2016 elections, was to be resituated in the much-changed context of 'Brexit politics'. While Blyth (2002) has shown that ideas play a greater and more direct role in shaping the perceived interests of policy-makers in periods of acute collective uncertainty, Brexit made it more difficult for job quality to move onto the Scottish Government's decision agenda. Because Brexit was expected by many observers to have severe negative economic consequences, putting together a set of policies to stimulate job quality was overshadowed by more immediate concerns about Scotland's future, in particular with regards to labour market stability and sustaining economic growth (see e.g. FoAI, 2016; Sturgeon, 2016).

In conclusion, despite job quality being recognised as a problem, and despite a set of policy ideas being developed for Scotland, there is little likelihood that the issue will rise to the top of the Scottish Government's decision agenda any time soon. The three streams are unlikely to come together until the ramifications of Brexit play out and perhaps until calls for a referendum on Scottish independence grow louder again. Consequently, the policy concepts of decent or fair work, as expressions of Scottish distinctiveness vis-à-vis the rest of the UK, have lost much of their significance for the Scottish Government, particularly as the number of policy issues that can be handled at any one time is limited (Pralle, 2009, 782).

What next?

As the article took a normative research and advocacy project as the starting point for its agenda-setting analysis, this section briefly highlights what policy entrepreneurs in the job quality policy community could do in the future to maintain problem awareness amongst decision-makers. For this purpose, the article draws from some of Pralle's recommendations targeted at those seeking to combat climate change (Pralle, 2009).

Pralle argues that in order to raise the salience of an issue, a small number of 'key problem indicators' should be innovatively framed, packaged to overcome the institutional and cognitive limitations of institutions and policy-makers, and persistently used to inform the problem stream (Pralle, 2009, 780). Applied to job quality, these indicators should support the development of a consensual expert view on job quality and its significance for key aspects also beyond work. According to Pralle, such 'scientific consensus' (Pralle, 2009, 790) is important. If people perceive experts to be at odds about a problem and its solutions, they are less likely to develop concerns about it. For the issue of job quality in Scotland this could mean (and, arguably, should have meant) that the policy community ought to adopt one terminology – that of 'decent' or 'fair' work or a third alternative – rather than operating with different concepts. Avoiding competing concepts will also allow consistent communication about how poor job quality affects a large group of workers and society as a whole. Such communication can be strengthened by giving the problem a strong and clear 'human aspect', ideally by inserting a more pronounced moral and ethical perspective into advocacy and by emphasising the high cost of doing nothing (Pralle, 2009, 793).

Those who have committed resources to promoting fair or decent work need to sustain their activities. However, different pressures and institutional logics affecting different policy entrepreneurs – Cairney's 'heroes' (Cairney, 2018) in academia, party politics, or in third sector organisations – may result in the fragmentation of the job quality policy community and therefore may make it much more difficult to take advantage of the next focussing event that could open a new policy window.

Conclusion

In this article, Kingdon's MSF was applied to agenda-setting in connection with a collaborative research project on decent work. The analysis has shown that in the three streams conditions initially seemed conducive to job quality – in the form of decent or fair work – becoming an item on the Scottish Government's decision agenda. However, the Brexit decision created a very different political landscape in which policy entrepreneurs were not able to open a policy window to merge the three streams and create the foundations for policy change. While the joint and parallel efforts of a range of policy entrepreneurs show what agenda-setting activities can achieve, the shock of the Brexit decision also demonstrates how stream coupling is exposed to exogenous influences.

The article has shown anew that ideas in themselves do not have the power to sweep away obstacles. They are not independent variables with a force of their own, because context and actors matter. The article has also demonstrated how the multiple streams approach is a useful tool to analyse agenda-setting in a

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manner which takes interests, ideas and actors seriously and to do so also in a context very different from that for which Kingdon originally devised his framework.

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Note

1 As outlined above, there were a number of valid reasons why the collaborative project used the terminology of 'decent work'. However, when operationalising the concept, a decision was made to avoid the (oft criticised) set of ILO Decent Work Indicators in favour of using a set of dimensions and indicators first developed by Eurofound (2012), as their conceptual framework was deemed to be more suitable for investigating job quality among low-paid workers in Scotland.

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