

United or Divided We Stand? Perspectives on the EU's Challenges

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European cooling on global warming? Climate change as a source of political legitimacy in the European Union

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Abstract

Since the mid-2000s the EU has been beset by a series of crises; crises that have endangered the future of the European project. One posited solution suggests that the transborder threat of climate change presents an opportunity for EU institutions to display their legitimacy by working on a widely popular issue (as demonstrated in successive Eurobarometer survey results). With grounding in political myth theory and by focusing on ‘the engine of European integration’, the European Commission, this paper explores the extent to which climate action is conceptualised in EU governance circles as an issue around which Europe can stand united. Interviews with senior Commission staff and Cabinet Members in both the Barroso and Juncker Commissions are used to inform the conclusions in this first operationalisation of political myth in relation to the EU and climate action. The findings reveal that climate change is not a political myth in decline. Rather, it can be understood as a ‘myth in hibernation’ – one that has been adapted for a time of crisis and for which there is a drive within the Commission to see further diffusion of. In the search for a cause to rebuild public support for the EU around, it is apparent that climate action is regarded in EU governance circles as a potential political myth.

Introduction

At what point does a state of crisis, so steeped in time, become the ‘new normal’? Surely this is a question that must be asked of the European Union (EU). Over the last decade, successive long-term crises have plagued the Union. From the constitutional crisis, kicked-off by the French and Dutch 2005 rejections-by-referendum of *A Constitution for Europe*, through to the years of economic crisis that onset in 2008, to the migration crisis that consumed headlines from mid-2015, the EU has seen its list of woes grow steadily longer. This state of crisis has impacted on popular support for the European project; for the pooling of sovereignty by the EU’s constituent 28 Member States. In a prolonged period of crisis such as this, the need for the development and deployment of political myth is paramount to halt the fragmentation of the polity in crisis (Aning & Nsiah, 2012).

One suggested political myth that could be deployed in the EU to boost the European project’s popularity is that of EU climate action. This is a notion that was pondered by the European Council and Council of the European Union (the Council) in the mid-2000s, as something of an antidote to the constitutional crisis (Oberthür and Dupont, 2011). An exploration and conceptual introduction of the Green Europe myth, that is the myth of the sum of EU environmental action, was put forward by Lenschow and Sprungk (2010). This paper explores the extent to which EU climate action is conceptualised within the European Commission as a political myth (practiced or potential). The Commission has been selected, not to provide an insight into the totality of EU institutional views on political myth and climate action, but as an indicative case. The Commission has long been recognised as the ‘engine of European integration’ (Hooghe, 1999:436). This unofficial but important role means that the Commission has a significant part to play (or at very least the capacity to do so) in the development and deployment of political myths in the EU. The exploration of the conceptualisation of climate action as a political myth within the Commission is undertaken therefore as a starting point for possible further research into the topic.

This paper continues in the following steps. In the first section political myth theory is introduced and detailed. The second section explores the capacity of the Commission to be a European myth-maker. In section three the political myth potential of EU climate action is illustrated to reveal why this policy realm could play a legitimising role for the European project. The first three sections construct a theoretical and conceptual context for the research findings that are detailed in section four. This

final section, opening with the research methodology, draws on the resulting empirical findings from interviews with key climate-acting Commission officials in order to assess the presence or potential of an EU climate action political myth.

The conclusion is reached that some actors within the Commission do perceive climate action as a likely cause around which popular support for the European project could be built. However, this view does not reflect a totality of Commission climate-actors' approaches to this issue. This illustrates that political myth within the Commission is a guarded and, ultimately, exclusionary process within the institution. This also gives reason to describe EU climate action as a 'myth in hibernation'. Throughout a period of crisis in the EU, where there has been a less welcoming landscape for climate action (Skovgaard, 2014), the myth has been adapted in order to ensure its survival and demonstrate its viability. There may have been some cooling on climate change as a publicly-appealing functional role for the EU to demonstrate its actorness on during the years of crisis. However, those Commission actors that are privy to the initial framing of legitimacy issues in the institution view climate as a potential boon for the European project in the future.

Political myth

As an academic field, political myth has suffered from a long-standing 'relative lack of theoretical work' (Flood, 2002:3). Further to this, political myth remains underexplored in an operationalised research sense. This is a lack that has been noted. For example, Bottici and Challand have argued 'for the need to recover the concept of political myth in order to understand the crucial phenomena of our epoch' (2006:315). Perhaps this need for recovery is partly due to the easily mistaken terminology at the core of the concept; as a term political myth should not be mistaken with the everyday and popular usage of the term 'myth' – to denote falsehood. As Flood has stated:

Studies of myth almost invariably open with the *caveat* that the reader should not confuse the popular, pejorative term *myth* as a synonym for falsehood, distortion, or delusion with the scholarly usage which stresses that myths have unquestioned validity within the belief systems of the social groups which cherish them (2002:32-33).

Flood illustrates that the political science treatment of myth is as a story that has a basis in reality. However, the claim that myths are of an 'unquestioned validity' overstates the case. Regarding political myths as absolute truths strays into the realm either of bland detailing of facts or of religious belief. As Bottici and Challand write, 'political myths... are not scientific hypothesis, but rather the expression of a determination to act' (2006:316). Political myths lie in a dark-grey middle ground between fact and fiction – they are narratives that are embraced by the majority of the relevant social group, accepted as fact, but very much up for discussion. Such discussion is in fact key to the development of political myth. Simply put, political myths can be understood as stories or narratives that are used for the purpose of 'generating legitimacy for political rule' (Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010: 136). Political myths can be understood to be continuations of ideology, as Bostanci has stated: 'By relating ideological content by means of narratives, myths provide inspiration and justification that can form the basis of any kind of human interaction' (2013:180). With political myth, the human interaction is that between people and a polity or other form of political authority. McNeil goes further in apportioning efficacy to political myths. He makes the claim that 'in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain' (1986:23). Political myths are essential to the success of any given regime or polity; they are the stories by which power is legitimised and on which political authority is based.

There are two distinct groups, or roles to be played, in myth development – storytellers and listeners (Della Sala, 2016; Della Sala, 2010; Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010; Flood, 2002). As Della Sala states, '[m]yths, then, are born in facts, but then take on a life of their own in the hands of storytellers and listeners (2010:4). Whilst policy leaders are recognised as being storytellers (Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010) there are, of course, a whole range of actors that can take on the role. For a myth to take root and pass the first stage of myth-building (initial framing) it must, to a certain degree, be set free from the control of agenda-setters:

If myths are left only to institutional actors to survive, then they are likely to atrophy as they will not have the capacity to adjust to changing social structures. Myths need social actors to bring them to life and to ensure that they can continue to tell a story that resonates. But if civil society chooses to craft and promote its own myths, then the legitimacy of political rule is likely to be put into question (Della Sala, 2010:8).

The role of storyteller, it is clear, has to be taken up by actors outside of the polity or political authority for which the narrative is building legitimacy. In that way, listeners are any institutions, organisations, or persons in the political landscape in question.

In the development of a political myth there are certain stages through which a narrative must go in the process towards mythification. Bouchard lists these steps as being '(i) initial framing, (ii) diffusion, (iii) institutionalization (or ritualization)' (2013:286). Stage one, the initial framing, is the establishment of a narrative as being important to the polity and the recognition, within governance circles (Aning & Nsiah, 2012), that it is a story important to the polity's political legitimacy. Stage two, diffusion, is the subsequent telling of that story to the wider public, to the listeners, in order to demonstrate that legitimacy. Stage three, ritualisation, is when a narrative has become an operational political myth; that is, it has become a widely accepted part of the political practice and discourse in the polity in question and that it contributes to the legitimacy of that project. Della Sala approaches the three stages in a different manner, excluding Bouchard's first stage and replacing it with diffusion first and ritualisation second. The third stage of Della Sala's model is 'sacredness' (2010:8). In this final stage, 'a myth become sacred so that to question the myth is to raise doubts about the polity and very basis of the political community' (Della Sala, 2010:8). This alternative third stage does not contribute to an understanding of myth development as Bouchard's model does as it fails to sufficiently build on the ritualisation stage to merit separation.

In examining political myth in relation to the EU, there are two distinct forms of myth that are of primary concern and analytical usefulness: foundational myths and functional myths (which can also be termed as primary myths and derivative myths, respectively). Foundational myths are those on which a polity is founded, or those stories of a polity's foundation that continue to demonstrate the legitimacy of its existence to non-founding generations. These myths are seen as being especially important for sustained political legitimacy (Della Sala, 2010). For the EU, the foundational myths are not about the *how* of European integration but the *why* (Manners, 2010). This, of course, relates to the peace and prosperity goals that made up the public-facing heart of calls for European unity, not only in the immediate post-war years but for decades after. However, these foundational myths are now recognised as no longer resonating with the European public to extent they once did (Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010). This decline in the success of the EU's foundational myths is recognised by Hooghe and Marks (2005) as linked to the decline of the 'permissive consensus'. Hansen and Williams posit that from its early years until the mid-1990s myth was actually missing from the process of European integration (1999). Whether due to the years of permissive consensus or a long-term wide acceptance of foundational myths, EU elites were left somewhat taken aback by the sudden need for policy and popular legitimacy in the post-Maastricht era (Obradovic, 1996).

Into this myth-gap came the recognition that Europe would have to build its public profile and earn its basis for political legitimacy on its functionalism. Functional, derivative, political myths are those myths that relate to a polity's worth based on the work that it undertakes. Post-Maastricht, the EU came to be presented as 'a rational, functional institution, as the natural extension of the processes of social and political rationalization already well advanced in the historical evolution of modern states' (Hansen & Williams, 1999:243). That is, the EU had to demonstrate its legitimacy as an actor as well as demonstrating the sense in supranational governance. With the drive for subsidiarity within the EU, EU legislation has to include the carefully worded recognition that:

Since the objectives of this [regulation/ directive/ decision] cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore, by reason of its scale and effects, be better achieved at Community level, the Community may adopt measures, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity as set out in Article 5 of the Treaty (e.g. The Renewable Energy Directive, 2008).

This created the need for the EU to forge particular areas of actorness based both on supranational necessity and the popularity of the subject matter with the European public. Examples of functional roles on which the EU has displayed its actorness, to the extent that they could be thought of as political myth include: the EU as an international actor (Manners, 2010); the EU as a champion of competition policy (Akman and Kassim, 2010); the EU as environmentalist (Lenschow and Sprungk, 2010); and the EU as an advocate of gender equality (Macrae, 2010). This list is far from exhaustive. One other potential political myth that has yet to be explored in the academic literature and that is put forward here is that of EU climate action.

EU climate action as a political myth

Climate action is an issue that bears the hallmarks of a potentially powerful and impactful political myth. After all, what story is of greater resonance than saving the world? It is also a story that calls for a transborder solution, for the pooling of resources, and sharing of efforts in order to elicit progress towards common goals. It is therefore a policy area which easily meets the subsidiarity standards of Article 5 of the Treaty. This is something that has not always been the case with broader environmental policy. In the 1990s subsidiarity crisis, during a period of heightened calls for sovereignty over European solidarity, the French and British governments published a list of 100 laws they wanted to see repatriated – 24 of which were environmental laws (Wurzel, 2012 and Jordan & Turnpenny, 2012). Previous academic study of the myth potential in the EU's green policy work has grouped climate in with other environmental policy fields (e.g. Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010 and Warleigh-Lack, 2010). Instead, climate action should be approached and studied as a potential political myth that is separate and distinct from other forms of environmental action. The narrative has a level of grandeur lacking in broader environmental policy. Drama and intensity are two qualities that Flood (2002) regards of being of central importance to a successful myth; more so than detail, in fact. As Della Sala writes, 'myths are less concerned with specifics than they are with the story itself, their acceptance will be subject to scrutiny that is of a different kind than scientific inquiry' (2010:7). True, climate change is a highly-technical matter where the majority of supporters of climate action will not have an in-depth knowledge of the science behind it. Yet, here is a myth (or part, as the EU actorness aspect should not be ignored) that is supported by scientific inquiry.

The use of climate action to boost the legitimacy of the EU is briefly mentioned in EU studies literature. Oberthür & Dupont (2011) and Oberthür & Roche Kelly (2008) both make the claim that the European Council chose to pursue climate action due to its high level of popularity with the European public and that it might therefore legitimise the EU. That these claims are rooted in the constitutional crisis of the mid-2000s gives them a degree of credibility, yet the points are unreferenced and under-explored. That such an important issue and political matter would have garnered such little academic attention is striking. Because of the lack of exploration of or basis for Oberthür & Dupont's and Oberthür & Roche Kelly's claims, one cannot treat the points made as entirely reliable. However, it seems likely that such a pathway to boosting the legitimacy of the European project might have been considered at the time, due the level of support, the viability of the option, and the fact that it predates the economic crises of post-2008 (which made climate a more divisive issue in the European Council (Skovgaard, 2014)).

Since the constitutional crisis and the possible foundation of the EU climate action myth, continued levels of support for climate action amongst European citizens have been shown through successive Eurobarometer surveys. Around half of respondents through successive versions of the surveys (2015, 2014, 2011, 2009a, 2009b, 2008) have thought that climate change is one of the most serious issues that the world faces. However, there has been a noticeable decline in the relative importance of climate in relation to other issues. In the 2008 survey, with the extent of the financial crisis yet to fully take hold, when only the respondents' first answer to the question of what was the most serious problem facing the world were taken into account climate change was rated as the most serious global issue. Since 2008 climate has not returned as respondents' primary concern. Instead, the economic downturn, international terrorism, and poverty, lack of food and drinking water, have each, at times, surpassed climate change in the order of European's primary concerns. In the 2015 survey, climate

came in at fourth in the list of issues that were of primary importance to Europeans. Importantly, for the potential of EU climate action as political myth, Europeans show a preference for governance-based solutions to climate change, rather than individual action. In the 2015 survey, 42% of respondents felt national governments were responsible for tackling climate change, 35% of respondents felt the EU was responsible, and only 19% felt that they were responsible. With the case for European solidarity on climate change in mind, it is clear that popular preference for governance-based solutions empowers EU actorness on climate.

For EU climate action to be understood as a potential political myth it must be able to fit the definition as such. Flood provides a working definition of political myth as: ‘*an ideologically marked narrative which purports to give a true account of a set of past, present, or predicted political events and which is accepted as valid in its essentials by a social group*’ (2002:44) (emphasis in original). In order to fit EU climate action within this framework, i.e. as an ideologically marked narrative, it is first necessary to define EU (supranational) action as ideology. Definitions of ideology abound, two are used here in order to represent something of the range of definitions and demonstrate the suitability of defining EU action as ideological. Bostanci, interpreting the work of Freedon (1996), writes that ideology can be defined as ‘clusters of concepts that give meaning to the world in empirical and normative terms and, thus, enable individual and, more importantly, collective action – and, simultaneously as a basis of and with it, identification’ (2013:179). Similarly, Flood, quoting Christenson *et al* (1972), puts forward the definition of ideology as being ‘a belief system that explains and justifies a preferred political order for society, either existing or proposed, and offers a strategy (processes, institutional arrangements, programs) for its attainment’ (2002:13). These definitions surpass the popular left-right treatment of the term and instead recognise all political action as inherently ideological. How does EU-level governance fit with these definitions? To begin with the Bostanci-Freedon usage, as already flagged-up, there are a number of motivations for supranational, EU-level action as opposed to sovereignty-based, subsidiarity-based Member State action. This cluster of concepts contributes to the understanding of the governance sphere in Europe and the wider world (in both empirical and normative terms, (e.g. Manners, 2002)). It is also based on this premise that collective, as well as individual, political, policy, and governance action – as well, though to a lesser degree, identification – are undertaken within the EU polity sphere. Likewise, EU supranational action fits easily within the Flood-Christenson definition of ideology. Here, the belief in European supranational governance (as opposed to individual Member State action) in some areas, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, explains and justifies the existence of the EU. It also carries with it the strategy of working within such a context in order to achieve shared, European goals and objectives.

Establishing EU action as ideology opens the path to the recognition of EU climate action as political myth. Using Flood’s definition of political myth, EU climate action can rightly be acknowledged as an ‘ideologically marked narrative’ – that is, the ideology of EU, supranational action marks the narrative of climate action in Europe and EU-led climate action. The account that is provided to the ‘listeners’ (Della Sala, 2010:4) of the myth is that climate action is necessary and is best undertaken at the EU-level of governance. The myth also relates a certain special level of actorness to the EU polity – demonstrated in the EU’s purported international leadership on climate change (Wurzel and Connelly, 2011). Eurobarometer results also demonstrate the widespread acceptance of the myth as being valid, i.e. that there is a need for efforts to tackle climate change and that governance-based (therefore EU) approaches are the popular preference for these efforts. This ideologically marked narrative as a component of political myth overcomes one of the key difficulties that Della Sala highlights of EU-level myth, as he states: ‘What makes myth-making in the European Union different and interesting is that its narrative has to find a way to coexist with the compelling story of the nation-state’ (2010:13). EU climate action is a myth that justifies EU-level action whilst not encroaching on national political myths – this is a key aspect of why functional political myths are more likely to take root in the EU.

Della Sala writes that ‘[p]olitical myths are sacred... in that their truth is taken for granted because it reflects a collective vision of how society should be organised and governed’ (2016:1-2). EU climate action has been clearly demonstrated to fit this description. The establishment of EU action as

ideological is something that has remained sorely underexplored in the political myth literature relating to the EU. This is striking as key political myth theorists (e.g. Flood, 2002 and Bostanci, 2013) place such a high degree of emphasis on ideology being a key component of political myth. Having addressed this issue (albeit briefly) has meant that it is more easily ascertained how EU climate action can be conceptualised as political myth.

The Commission as European myth-maker

This paper focuses on just one of the EU institutions as a potential instigator of EU climate action political myth. Aside from considerations of research focus, there are empirical reasons for choosing the Commission as the institution in which to begin any study of political myth in the EU. Put simply, if a process of myth-building is being undertaken within the EU institutions it is pertinent to believe that such a process would originate within the Commission or, at the very least, involve the Commission in some form. As Della Sala has written: ‘Political actors need to feel that not only are they the subject of political myth, but its creators and agents as well. Political communities are part of a myth-making process before they are part of one that makes history’ (2010:8). If the Commission wants to make the type of history that its President, Jean-Claude Juncker, called for in his 2015 State of the Union address and retrieve the EU from its long-standing state of crisis, then such myth-making processes are likely to have to play a part.

In 2004, the then Commissioner-Designate for Institutional Relations and Communications, after serving five years as Environment Commissioner, Margot Wallström, called for “a common European narrative which explains the social and environmental benefits of our [EU] co-operation, as well as the economic benefits” (2004). Language such as this bears the hallmarks of political myth. Certainly, it should be of little surprise that the Commission would be a centre of myth-making, and myth storytelling in and for the EU. Hooghe has labelled the Commission as the ‘engine of European integration’ (1999:436). This recognition represents the fact that the Commission is an institution at the heart of European integration, the European legislative cycle, and the only truly ‘European’ institution (in that its officials and Commissioners are supposed to surrender their Member State allegiances for their work, though this is largely an idealistic expectation (Hooghe, 1999)). With those points in mind, it would seem the institution is well-placed to take part in the creation (and subsequent diffusion) of political myths in the EU.

Such a role is tentatively alluded to in the academic literature on political myth and the EU. Della Sala identifies the Commission as the primary point of story-diffusion in the EU, while acknowledging that other EU institutions, civil society organisations and the academic community also play a role (2010). Both Weale (1999) and Lenschow & Sprungk (2010) see the empirical benefit of focusing on the Commission as a key storyteller in the EU, especially in regard to the EU’s greener policy fields. Warleigh-Lack (2010) identifies the Commission’s setting of five-year goals as an important factor in the development of the EU’s leadership on environmental matters. However, the explicit link between the Commission and myth development on EU climate action has yet to be explored in academic literature. This is due to the gradual emergence of political myth as a feature of EU studies – an emergence brought on, arguably, by the EU’s years of crisis. The Commission makes for a natural starting point for an operationalised-political myth study of the EU and approaches to myth within Europe’s supranational institutions.

Of course, identifying sources of political myths is in some way paradoxical. As Flood identifies: ‘In the eyes of its believers a political myth has no author. For how could a truth have an author?’ (2002:71). Yet, this sets up the Commission as being an all-the-more likely source of political myth within Europe. A frequent criticism made of the Commission is that it is ‘faceless’ (e.g. Nugent & Rhinard, 2015:1; Meyer, 2009:1053; Lodge, 1994:346). If this is taken as so, then it works to the Commission’s favour in myth-building efforts. Commission-based myth diffusion would not be overtly linked to a single actor or institution – even if there were a clear chain of diffusion that linked to a specific person (e.g. a Commissioner) or the Commission itself. Ironically, something that the Commission is often faulted for could benefit myth-building efforts in the EU. However, this should

be tempered with the consideration of myth transference in the extended intra-institutional wrangling that plagues the EU institutions across levels of governance (Lodge, 1994).

In fact, since the mid-1990s it has been acknowledged in the Commission and in academic work on the subject that the institution has been trying to play a central role in the preparing of public opinion for the introduction of policy, especially flagship pieces (Obradovic, 1996). Aside from overt examples such as that provided by Wallström, one can interpret other parts of the Commission's day-to-day functionality as part of myth-building efforts. One can interpret the undertaking of surveys and subsequent publication of Eurobarometer reports (which is undertaken by the Commission) as part of public preparation and myth-building work. The results from Eurobarometer surveys are also used as a justification for further policy action, proposed by the Commission (Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010). It is easy, therefore, to understand how the Commission has the functional capacity to build on its myth-creation successes. It seems especially pertinent to propose that the Commission plays a role of primary importance in the formation of political myth in the EU. It is on that basis that the current study has been undertaken.

Researching the EU climate action political myth

Methodology

The primary approach of this study, which makes up the first field-operationalisation of political myth theory in relation to climate action in the EU, was undertaken through elite interviews. The Commission-only focus was chosen in order to obtain insight into how governance actors within the Commission conceptualise EU climate action as a potential pathway to building legitimacy for the European project. In total, eight Commission officials participated in semi-structured interviews. All interviewees requested to remain anonymous. Potential climate-briefed interviewees were initially sourced through examination of publicly available directories of prominent Commission officials and DG Cabinet members. Initial interviewees were then asked to contribute the names of other Commission actors that they believed would be able to contribute to the research. The interviews were undertaken in two stages, September-October 2014 and August-November 2015, in order to ascertain whether there was a difference in approach between the Barroso and Juncker Commissions. Interviewees were asked questions on a number of topics related to the potential EU climate action myth. Themes include the political conceptualisation of EU climate action, its popular support and the recognition of the fact in the Commission, its possible legitimacy impacts, and non-climate motivations for pursuing climate action. Participant contributions were then considered and compared to the political myth theory literature in order to reach conclusions.

Findings

Of primary interest for this study was the possible existence of the formative stage of myth development as according to Bouchard (2013). It is axiomatic that an investigation into myth development should begin with questioning whether relevant institutional actors were involved in the initial framing of a narrative that might ultimately become an in-practice political myth. Rather than researching the manner of myth diffusion or the ultimate success of a myth in its ritualisation, what lies at the heart of this investigation is the *intent* to develop EU climate action as a political myth – the importance of which was theoretically established by Aning and Nsiah (2012).

Interviewees' views, as well as the insight they share on other Commission actors' approaches, can be grouped, for sake of analysis, into three categories. Firstly, there were those who did not consider that EU climate action could have any legitimacy-building impacts for the EU. Secondly, there were those that felt that whilst EU climate action had been considered a potential legitimacy boon in the past, this was no longer the case. Thirdly, the largest section of respondents expressed an awareness of a desire within the Commission to use climate action to boost the political legitimacy of the European project.

The following section is subdivided into those categories for clarity's sake and concludes with a brief discussion of the analysed findings.

1. Rejection of EU climate action myth

To begin with those respondents whose insight would give little reason to believe that there was the initial framing of EU climate action necessary to construct a political myth. One reason for rejection was on the grounds that climate-briefed Commission officials pay no attention to the public-facing appearance of their work or its potential popularity. Instead, climate action is seen solely as a technical and practical issue (Commission official 2, 2014). Yet, statements that regard climate action in that way have narrative language imbued in them. For example, one official, whilst maintaining that climate action was purely a technical necessity said that, "I would say on climate, you just want to make the planet at least safe for your children" (*ibid*). One is reminded of Bottici and Challand's (2013) assertion that political myth is the expression of a determination to act. Determination to act certainly seems to be loaded into the quoted approach. This gives reason to believe that within the Commission, the EU climate action myth might have unknowing storytellers. That is, officials approach climate action as a technical exercise, yet in the manner they carry out their work and their conceptualisation of their work, they are unconsciously diffusing a political myth.

A further reason that interviewees rejected the notion of using climate action to boost the legitimacy of the EU was on the basis that the exploitation of climate action for political ends would lead to a USA-style partisanisation of climate change – with the fear being that this would make climate action harder to commit to and carry out in the EU. As one interviewee stated:

I think fortunately it's still less of an identity issue than, for instance, in the US where it seems to be really polarised. In the US if you're a liberal then you believe in climate change if you're a conservative you don't... At least in Europe, still people and parties across the political spectrum... and you can see from all parties, don't question the reality of climate change and don't question the need to do something about it (Commission official 7, 2014).

Certainly, if these fears were borne out in the EU one could not conceptualise climate action as a potential political myth. This returns to Flood's scholarly definition of myth as having 'unquestioned validity within the belief systems of the social groups which cherish them' (2002:32-33). Whilst a political myth can be questioned it still, to be considered viable, needs to be believed by majority of a population.

Some respondents displayed an overt focus on climate action being of benefit to the EU's international standing rather than to its domestic standing (Commission official 5, 2015; Commission official 4, 2015; Commission official 7, 2014). A first reading of this could interpret such an approach as a rejection of an inwards looking myth-building process in the EU. This is the type of process that would have to be committed to if domestic political benefits were to be reaped. However, there are grounds to believe that this may also contribute to the development of the myth. Whilst this does not reflect the *intent* that this research undertook to explore the existence of, it does represent myth diffusion. That all Commission officials interviewed spoke of the EU's international leadership on climate change is part of building a myth around the EU's actorness. The EU's climate leadership record is not as successful as the participants' comments would give one reason to believe (e.g. Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). That this image of the EU being an international climate leader is the one that actors use, reflects a myth-like aggrandising of a polity's ability and attributes; This works to establish the polity as being in some way special (Della Sala, 2016). As Bottici and Challand have written: 'For the solidarity between strangers deriving from law not to remain abstract, it is necessary for citizens to develop an awareness that their community is somehow distinct from that of all others' (2013:13). It is clearly important for actors within the Commission to see the EU as distinct from other international actors in the level of its commitment to climate action. Recognising this focus on the EU's international climate action role as part of myth diffusion, rather than as a rejection of myth-building, reveals that some actors are excluded from the initial framing of EU climate action as political myth, i.e. they are unconscious of possible domestic political benefits. This represents both the exclusionary nature of the myth-building process within the Commission and that the myth has

capacity to evolve in a natural-looking form as the myth literature describes as necessary (Flood, 2002).

2. *EU climate action myth as past practice*

The second grouping of respondents and their comments reflects the view that whilst there was no current use of climate action in a way that could be interpreted as part of a mythification process, there was an earlier consideration of this pathway. The words of one interviewee are particularly illustrative of this point of view and are worth quoting at length:

There's this idea that the climate action is one of the good rationales for the EU to exist, [it] was really present in people's minds say maybe, five, ten years ago when we were really starting to build-up this policy. I think to some degree it has now subsided a little bit. I think now it's much more business-as-usual. I think now when we talk about climate action we much more focus on first of all the tangible effects and secondly on the international context... It's not something you emphasise all that much anymore (Commission official 1, 2015).

The business-as-usual and international context comments from this quote make for a striking similarity with the points arising from the interviewees' comments referred to in the previous grouping. This official's insight certainly gives support to the claims made by Oberthür & Dupont (2011) and Oberthür & Roche Kelly (2008) that the European Council pushed the climate agenda during the period of constitutional crisis in order to shore up support for the EU.

How should one regard a myth that is portrayed as past? Unfortunately, there is little attention paid in the political myth theory literature to the decline of myths. Della Sala does write that, '[f]or a political myth to survive, it must be able to adapt through periods of change' (2010:7). This small note can be used for this case. One can infer from this comment that myths can fail to survive, i.e. not take root, not capture the popular imagination, struggle to make it through the stages of mythification. Is this the case of the EU climate action myth? That is, did the myth fail to survive the years of economic crisis and the rise in European divisiveness on climate change (Skovgaard, 2014)? Arguably not. Ignoring the majority of Commission actors' comments that inform the conclusion that there are myth-building efforts within the Commission, it is apparent that an EU climate action narrative did survive (though not thrive) throughout the years of European financial hardship. Commission initiatives such as Beyond GDP (2007) were given less emphasis in place of more ecological modernisation-style approaches that emphasised a win-win between climate action and economic growth (Skovgaard, 2014). As one interviewee put it: 'We've always been able to sell green growth as a win-win-win. So this is the narrative' (Commission official 2, 2015). This would indicate the long-term viability of the EU climate action myth. Bottici and Challand state that, '[t]he elaboration of political myth is a process of working on a common narrative that takes place over time, via a constant process of reinterpretation of the same narrative core to adapt it to different circumstances' (2013:7). This emphasis on the green growth, ecological modernisation, win-win narrative during the time of economic crisis in the EU reveals the adaptability of the EU climate action myth and active framing efforts within the Commission to ensure the myth's diffusion. That this conclusion is reached based on the comments of officials that do not believe that the Commission is using climate action as a myth-like device represents that the myth does have the viability to move from the initial framing stage to those that were excluded from early myth-making, i.e. this represents a formative stage of myth diffusion.

3. *The existence of an EU climate action myth*

The largest proportion of respondents' comments demonstrated an explicit knowledge of efforts within the Commission that corresponds to the construction of an EU climate action myth. An illuminating example was provided by one interviewee who, when asked whether there was a desire within the Commission to use climate action to boost the legitimacy of the EU, replied, "it's an odd question because it's our *raison d'être*" (Commission official 5, 2015). The same official went on to support the point by adding, "it's our main currency, that we are perceived as being leaders on climate policy" (*ibid*). This latter point reinforces the idea, proposed within this paper, that the Commission

uses the EU's international climate leadership to deliver ontological security for the European project. This links to the assertion by Della Sala that much of political myth within the EU is based around the Union's *sui generis* nature (2016). Another interviewee provided insight into the internal drive for the narrative deployment of climate action by the Commission in saying, "I think it's a way to, yes, confirm that we can do something that's good, in fact. Probably to legitimise ourselves. It's the way that Europe can do something good that's not only the Single Market" (Commission official 4, 2015). Whilst this quote flags up initial framing of an EU climate action myth it also flags up another interesting factor – myth-competition. In order for myths to become viable they must compete for the public and political attention they need to thrive. Primarily myth-competition in the EU is between EU-level and Member State-level myths and that, therefore, the EU has forgone much myth-competition (Smismans, 2010). Myths can, of course, live in harmony with one another (Della Sala, 2010) yet the framing of the interviewee's comments make clear that there is a recognition within the Commission that there is a need for additional stories, stories that are not just primarily economic, in order to bolster legitimacy for the Union. It also makes clear that climate action is part of the focus of such efforts.

As one would expect with the Eurobarometer survey results on climate action, the drive for this greener narrative for the EU does come from the high levels of popular support. To quote one interviewee, "the average citizen is concerned about it and realises the added value of European Union activity in that area" (Commission official 8, 2014). Many actors within the Commission view this narrative as a key unity issue (Commission official 3, 2014). Smismans warns that a 'political myth is more than a public relations campaign' (2010:59); for those Commission actors that participate in the initial framing of the EU climate action myth it is apparent that the narrative is certainly more than that to them. Instead, the myth is viewed as a story that, whilst having suffered setbacks during the years of economic crises (Commission official 4, 2015; Commission official 3, 2014; Commission official 6, 2014; Commission official 7, 2014; Commission official 8, 2014) is one that remains viable and has a potentially promising post-crisis future. Tellingly, interviewees from the Barroso Commission were less likely to see the legitimacy benefits of climate action than were interviewees from the Juncker Commission.

There is, however, one warning sign that whilst the Commission wants to tell the story of EU climate action, it is not best enabling myth development. As detailed in section one, myths need storytellers to be diffused, to thrive, and to progress through the stages of mythification. Yet, within the Commission, there is a narrow conception of who can rightly constitute a storyteller. One interviewee's comments are particularly illustrative:

It's really difficult for politicians to actually say something intelligent about this because if they're not involved in the actual negotiations they can only comment from the side-lines and say "yes, this is super important". But they don't really have a place to discuss it properly. The two people can do it are, well maybe three people are Juncker, Mogherini [the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy] and MAC [Miguel Arias Cañete, the Climate & Energy Commissioner] (Commission official 1, 2015).

This limited view on who should be speaking on EU climate action, if it is representative of wider thought within the Commission, limits the viability of myth-building. The three listed figures are all Commissioners. Whilst this does represent the focus on the Commission as the international representative of EU climate action, it also means that the climate action myth would struggle to take root. Della Sala warns that if 'myths are left only to institutional actors to survive, then they are likely to atrophy as they will not have the capacity to adjust to changing social structures' (2010:8). The EU climate action myth, held in initial framing and early-stage diffusion by the Commission, has shown adaptability during trying times, however, the need for it to not be left solely in the hands of institutional actors remains. If the myth is to survive it needs to be passed out to other storytellers in order to reach and capture popular imagination.

Discussion

The above analysis of research data provides a clear picture. There are a number of actors within the Commission that, whilst briefed to work on climate action and active on it, are excluded from the

initial framing of climate action as a political myth. There are actors, however, that are cognisant of a desire within the Commission to deploy climate action as a narrative and a cause to demonstrate the EU's legitimacy and shore up its ontological security. It is apparent that the EU climate action myth has been adapted through the years of economic crisis and has, therefore, survived but also that it has suffered from a lack of attention. One could go as far as to argue that there has been a degree of myth-competition as the EU's foundational myth of ensuring European prosperity has come to the fore again and been at the heart of European political narratives. If there was a decline in attention paid to the climate action myth it is also clear that many actors within the Commission are turning back to the narrative in the hopes that it might re-ignite passions for European integration in a Union now long-plagued with crises. It is pertinent to conclude that the EU climate action myth, during the years of economic crisis in the EU, was not a myth in decline but instead a 'myth in hibernation' – that is, one adapted in order to ensure its survival, kept alive, but not pushed to the fore during a period of fierce narrative competition and other unwelcoming conditions.

Conclusion

It is one of the ironies of political myth in the EU that the Union's ontological security is one the main reasons it struggles to create narratives that stir up loyalties amongst Europeans to their supranational polity. The EU's *sui generis* nature means that its myths have to compete with the more powerful, more emotive, and longer-standing national myths (Della Sala, 2016). However, climate action is one myth that would appear to offer a solution to this difficulty. Climate change is a transborder issue that needs transborder solutions. It is also an issue that a united EU can offer a level of international leadership on and demonstrate that the EU can be greater than the sum of its parts. This paper has explored the political myth literature to establish a conceptualisation of EU climate action as an ideological narrative that drives political action. It has also established a methodological framework for field-operationalisation of political myth theory in the EU. That is, in investigating the process of mythification it is important to establish intent in first stage, the initial framing, of myth-building. Aning and Nsiah flag up the need for the intentional myth creation with the warning that, if it is not carried out by those from the polity in question, 'fringe groups would take the opportunity to construct myths [instead]' (2012:69) and that there could be no guarantee whether these myths would be for or against the polity. The European Commission has been justified as the natural starting point for such an investigation. The Commission lies at the heart of EU and has rightly been described as the engine of European integration.

The research into myth-building around EU climate action has shown that the process within the Commission is an exclusive one that not all climate-briefed Commission officials take a role on. It could be taken as something of an institutional failing that the significant task of developing a narrative to demonstrate a polity's legitimacy could exclude important actors within key institutions. Instead, it is interpreted as representing the idea that EU climate action is a 'myth in hibernation'. It is a myth that has survived a period of intense political and economic hardship that resulted in a less climate-friendly political landscape, by adapting to the conditions of the day. However, whilst the myth was kept alive during this period it was certainly not pushed to the degree it would need to be in order to take root in the public consciousness. Approaching 2017, the year that the 2030 Climate & Energy Framework is due to be converted into a package of legislative acts and that the UK (a significant EU climate actor) will take over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, it is pertinent to conclude that the myth is one that is likely to be further-developed during that period. Whilst this research has explored the initial framing and tentative early-stage diffusion of EU climate action myth it would be of great academic interest to return to the matter, post-2017, to see how the process of mythification progressed.

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