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Depoliticisation: Principles, Tactics and Tools

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Although the concept of depoliticisation has existed as an important theme in a range of disciplines for some time, in recent years it has become a significant issue for scholars interested in European politics, governance and public policy. Within the same period depoliticisation has been championed by government ministers and proposed by think tanks and pressure groups at the national level as a solution to both public policy and constitutional challenges. At the global level depoliticisation has been promoted by the World Bank and United Nations as a means through which developing countries can enhance state capacity and market credibility. However, the wider literature on depoliticisation has arguably failed to offer any definitional clarity. Nor has it sought to tease apart and deconstruct the concept of depoliticisation in order to distinguish between different types of depoliticisation tactics or understand the interplay between them. This article gleans insights from a number of disciplines and synthesises the wider literature in order to offer a multi-level analytical framework. This framework, it is suggested, facilitates a deeper understanding of contemporary depoliticisation strategies, tools and tactics while also providing an insight into shifts in contemporary modes of governance.
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"Depoliticisation is the oldest task of politics Ranciere," (1995, 19).

Introduction

Although the concept of depoliticisation has existed as an important theme in a range of disciplines for some time (see Table 1), in recent years it has become a significant issue for scholars interested in British politics, governance and public policy. Within the same period depoliticisation has been proposed by think-tanks and pressure groups as a solution to both public policy (Kings Fund, 2003) and constitutional challenges (Demos, 1998), and has been described by the European Policy Forum (2000, 11) as 'one of the most promising developments since the last war — the depoliticisation of many government decisions'. At the global level the World Bank has advocated

Table 1 Depoliticisation: an inter-disciplinary overview

Discipline	*Example*
International politics	Meyer-Sahling, 2004
Gender studies	Togeby, 1995
Critical/social theory	Habermas, 1996
American politics	Blinder, 1997
Central banking	Marcussen, 2005
Business studies	Wong *et al*., 2004
Economics	Sheffrin, 1978
History	Huang, 1999
Environmental politics	Hobson, 2004
Development studies	White, 1996
Third-world studies	Feldman, 2003
Anthropology	Douglas, 1999
Discourse analysis	Lam, 2005
Social policy	Cain, 1993
Sociology	Boggs, 2000
Political theory	Pettit, 2001, 2004
Philosophy	Ranciere, 1995

large-scale depoliticisation as a central aspect of building state capacity and market confidence (e.g. World Bank, 2000) while the United Nations organises conferences and seminars with such themes as 'depoliticising the civil service' (United Nations, 2003).

However, the increased use of depoliticisation as a key concept within modern governance debates has not been matched by analyses that attempt to define or clarify the meaning or content of the concept, let alone the variety of processes, institutions and relationships that commonly form its empirical manifestation. With very few exceptions the depoliticisation literature has remained the terrain of Sartori's (1970) 'unconscious thinker' and therefore offers a classic case study of the challenges of conceptualisation not just within different sub-disciplines of politics but also between and across cognate disciplines. As Sartori emphasised, concepts must be sufficiently precise to be meaningful in comparison; hence we need a filing system, organising perspective, taxonomy or 'conceptual containers' through which scholars can achieve conceptual *travelling* (i.e. the appropriate application of refined concepts to new areas) while avoiding conceptual *stretching* (vague, amorphous, often eviscerated, conceptualisations).

The focus of this article is therefore primarily conceptual. It complements the authors' research on the inter-relationship between depoliticisation and context, agency and structure (Buller and Flinders, 2005) and the impact of depoliticisation strategies on established frameworks of representative

democracy (Buller and Flinders, 2006) by seeking to achieve a degree of definitional clarity and precision through the construction of a multi-level framework. This will allow scholars in a range of disciplines to distinguish between different types of depoliticisation tactics, account for the rise and fall of particular tactics across time and space, while also understanding the adoption of specific tactics and tools by politicians and the manner in which various forms of depoliticisation may interact and complement each other. Although this article is empirically grounded in relation to British governance it is a central contention of the authors that the analytical framework and issues raised are of a far wider relevance.

This article has a simple three-part structure. The first section examines the definitional debates surrounding the concept of 'depoliticisation'. The second and substantive section offers an analytical framework that dissects the concept into three-component parts (principles, tactics and tools) before outlining three distinct forms of 'depoliticisation tactics' (institutional, rule-based and preference shaping), and examines how these can be employed in a mutually supportive manner. The final section reflects on the boundaries and limits of the concept and attempts to highlight specific issues demanding further empirical and conceptual research.

Defining Depoliticisation

In many ways this article is not about conceptualisation but re-conceptualisation: it attempts to provide a coherent understanding and analytical framework for a concept that is already in widespread use. However in definitional terms the wider literature on depoliticisation is largely barren. Contemporary scholars who have employed the concept as a central element of their work, such as Ranciere (1995), Gounari (2004), Boggs (2000), Douglas (1999) and Pettit (2004), write with a fluidity and verve that clearly denotes some kind of shared understanding or constellation of values and processes but yet never seeks to explicate the core essence of the term. An analysis of the wider literature allows us to harvest these shared values and processes which produces a set of common themes — for example, the role and power of a dominant rationality, shifts in political reasoning, the reallocation of functions and responsibilities to independent bodies or panels of experts, and the exclusion of politics through the adoption of 'rational' practices. Burnham's (2001, 128) definition of depoliticisation as 'the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making' complements the common themes and processes to be found in the wider inter-disciplinary literature.

Synthesising the wider literature leads us to suggest that depoliticisation can be defined as *the range of tools, mechanisms and institutions through which*

politicians can attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship and/or seek to persuade the demos that they can no longer be reasonably held responsible for a certain issue, policy field or specific decision. In order to justify this position it is necessary to briefly comment on a number of issues that flow out of this definition.

First, depoliticisation is something of a misnomer. In reality the politics remains but the arena or process through which decisions are taken is altered (i.e. the form of politics changes or the issue is subject to an altered governance structure). Frequently, the processes or procedures that are commonly referred to under the rubric of depoliticisation might therefore more accurately be described as 'arena-shifting'. A paradoxical feature of the literature listed in Table 1 is that none of it seeks to suggest that any of the issues under analysis became any less 'political' through the application of depoliticisation tactics. Depoliticisation, as a concept, therefore employs a very narrow interpretation of 'the political' that largely refers to the institutions and individuals commonly associated with representative democracy (legislatures, elected politicians, etc.).

Following on from this, and secondly, the retention of an *indirect governing relationship* is a critical caveat within the concept of depoliticisation (Burnham, 2001, 127). It is politicians who make decisions about what functions should be 'depoliticised', and the subsequent selection of appropriate tactics and tools. Politicians also commonly retain significant indirect control mechanisms (e.g. appointments), reserve powers (e.g. immediate authority in certain situations) or discretion (e.g. the creative interpretation of rules). Moreover, it is politicians who may from time to time face pressures to either justify their choices or even *re*politicise certain issues in terms of adopting a direct governing relationship.

Third, in terms of understanding the rationale or political benefits, depoliticisation can be understood as a means of reducing certain political transaction costs. As such, this strategy is thought to confer three main benefits on those actors looking to deploy it.

First, from a public policy perspective, reducing the direct control of politicians, either though institutional delegation or the minimisation of discretion, is commonly assumed to be a desirable state of affairs as politicians are portrayed as self-interested vote maximisers who are tied into a short-term electoral cycle (see Kiewiet and McCubbins, 1991). Depoliticisation therefore helps to alter market expectations regarding the credibility of policy-making (Majone, 2000). Second, the adoption of an indirect governing relationship provides a way of reducing political overload (King, 1975; Birch, 1984) that may in some circumstances empower ministers with a greater strategic capacity. Finally, from a political position, depoliticisation can help to insulate politicians in office from the adverse consequences of policy failure. Some

problems will be either controversial or intractable (or both), so much so that any decision runs the risk of making matters worse rather than better. In such situations, politicians (looking to protect their electoral position) may seek to shift the onus of action onto other groups or organisations (and with it, the potential for blame). Depoliticisation can therefore be interpreted as a defensive risk management technique (see Hood, 2002, 32).

To recap, 'politicised' modes of governance in this context appear to be most commonly characterised by the principles of direct state intervention, management and control of the economy and society. Whereas, 'depoliticised' modes of governance generally represent the adoption of a relationship (institutional, procedural or ideological) that seeks to establish some sort of buffer zone between politicians and certain policy fields. It is possible to identify a range of terrains that have, at various times, shifted between what have been termed 'politicised' and 'depoliticised' modes of governance. During the nineteenth century, for example, various reforms were introduced in a number of countries to 'depoliticise' the national administration through the introduction of open recruitment and promotion on merit, a significant reduction in political patronage and the establishment of independent civil service commissions (e.g. British Civil Service Commission in 1855). In the late twentieth century similar reforms have been instituted in a number of developing countries (Shepherd, 2003).

Ranciere (1995) goes as far as to suggest that politics is, at base, a conflict between parties competing to institute different forms of depoliticisation, but their inability to eliminate conflict and social division means that there are actually two fundamental and opposed forms of politics: one *de*politicising and the other *re*politicising. Politics is thus constituted (according to Ranciere) through an essential tension between *de*politicising and *re*politicising tendencies as competing elites seek to shift certain issues either within or beyond the boundaries of conventional visible politics. However, suggesting a distinction between *politicised* and *depoliticised* forms of governance risks suggesting a binary distinction that is a crude characterisation of a complex relationship (see Blinder, 1997). Depoliticisation commonly refers to a rebalancing or a shift in the nature of governance relationships that is a matter of degree — not a move from land to sea, but from cave to mountain or valley to plateau.

This section has provided a definition of depoliticisation that has been gleaned from the insights of the wider literature. Although this definition is designed to offer an initial starting point, a framework for future refinement, its strength in terms of this article is that it has the benefit of opening up a discussion about the tools or tactics available to politicians who wish to adopt an indirect mode of governance. These tools and tactics form the focus of the next section.

Depoliticisation: Principles, Tactics and Tools

The aim of this section is to give the concept of depoliticisation greater *discriminating power* through taxonomical infolding — an orderly and graded series of refined categories (within a framework that exposes inter-relationships, change and complementarity) thereby providing the basis for collecting and comparing adequately precise information. It is possible to suggest that depoliticisation has three elements. First, at the core of any depoliticisation tactic is an acceptance that the *principle* (macro-political level) of depoliticisation is an appropriate one for governments to pursue through the policy-making process. Second, the principle of depoliticisation should be distinguished from the *tactic* (meso-political level) used to realize this goal at any one moment. The word 'tactic' has been selected over 'strategy' as it suggests a less rational and more instrumental approach. As we shall see below, there are different tactics for implementing the objective of depoliticisation and these can vary across time and space, even when acceptance of the principle remains constant. Finally, as already noted, the principle and tactics of depoliticisation will be 'supported' by a particular *tool* or *form* (micro-political level). These policy supports are likely to be the most transient part of a depoliticisation tactic, 'pulled in' to operationalise a particular technique and then discontinued in the event of implementation failure. However, there may be cases when the link between a particular depoliticisation tactic and its policy support may be so tight that failure in the latter may lead to a discrediting of the former. These three elements or levels of depoliticisation are set out in Figure 1.

Once the principle of depoliticisation has been adopted in a particular policy area a choice has to be made concerning the most appropriate tactic, or mixture of tactics, to employ. This article offers three distinct depoliticisation tactics (see Table 2).

The next three sub-sections examine each of these tactics in more detail.

Institutional depoliticisation

Institutional depoliticisation is possibly the most frequently employed tactic. A formalised principal–agent relationship is established in which the former (elected politician) sets broad policy parameters while the latter (appointed administrator or governing board) enjoys day-to-day managerial and specialist freedom within the broad framework set by ministers. Institutional depoliticisation — cast frequently around the creation of 'non-majoritarian' institutions (see Majone, 2001; Thatcher and Stone Sweet, 2002) — is designed to release the agent (and its sphere of responsibility) to some extent from short-term political considerations — vote seeking, populist, short-term pressures to

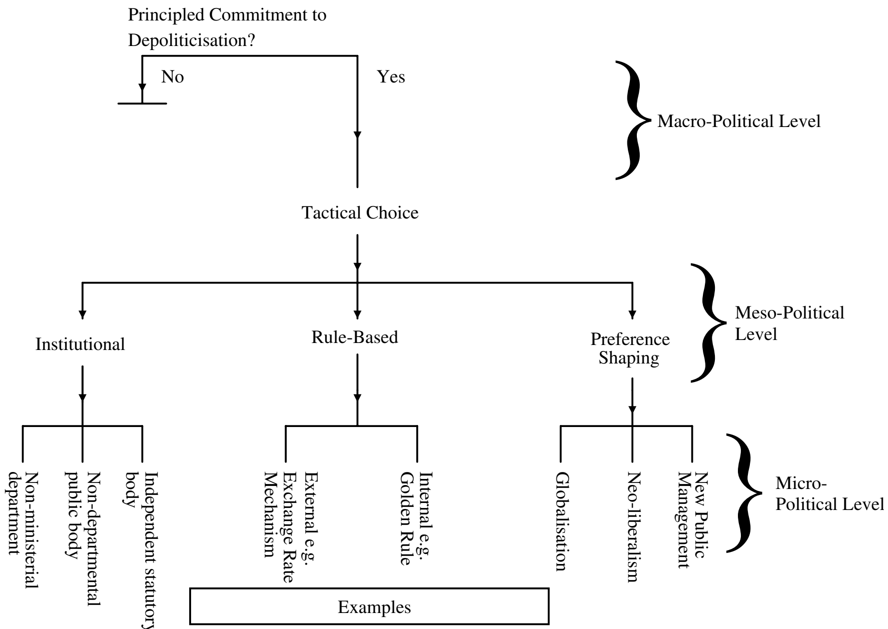


Figure 1 Flowchart of depoliticisation choices.

Table 2 Depoliticisation tactics

Depoliticisation tactic	*Form*	*Example*
Institutional	Principal–agent relationship created between minister and 'independent' agency	Police Complaints Commission
Rule-based	The adoption of explicit rules into the decision-making process	Exchange Rate Mechanism
Preference-shaping	The espousal of a rhetorical position that seeks to portray certain issues as beyond the control of national politicians	Globalization

which elected politicians are subject. It is notable that a significant aspect of British governance since the election of a Labour government in May 1997 has involved the application of institutional depoliticisation to a broad range of policy areas (see Table 3).

Table 3 New labour and institutional depoliticisation

Policy area	*Institutional tool of depoliticisation*
Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland Parades Commission, Independent Police Board
Health	National Institute for Clinical Excellence
Monetary policy	Monetary Policy Committee
Postal network	Postal Services Commission
Crime	Sentencing Guidelines Council
Food	Food Standards Agency
Constitution	House of Lords Appointments Commission, Electoral Commission, Information Commissioner, Judicial Appointments Commission.
Police	Independent Police Complaints Commission
Employment	Low Pay Commission
National lottery	National Lotteries Commission
Statistics	Statistics Commission
Railways	Strategic Rail Authority
Education	Qualification and Curriculum Authority

Source: Flinders, 2004a.

In all the policy areas listed in the first column of Table 3 ministers have rationalised and legitimated the decision to transfer powers and responsibilities to the new institutions listed in the second column through arguments based on the need to 'depoliticise' decision-making and place certain issues beyond the conventional political arena. A well-known historical example of this institutional depoliticisation involved the creation of the nationalised industries in Britain immediately after the Second World War. This case is instructive of the democratic implications and tensions that are frequently encountered when this tactic is selected. It also provides an opening into some of the conceptual and normative issues mentioned below.

During the period 1945–1951 the Labour government implemented a far-reaching programme of nationalisation. The reasons given for creating nationalised industries underpin many of the arguments frequently offered to legitimate the adoption of institutional depoliticisation tactics today. Certain issues, it was argued, demand esoteric knowledge and a degree of operational flexibility rarely found in bureaucratically dense ministerial departments. The electoral cycle encouraged politicians to focus on short-term measures; thereby undermining the long-term strategic capacity demanded by the management of business like organisations. Indeed, private sector confidence in the organisation could only be fostered, it was argued, by locating control of the body beyond the day-to-day political control of ministers. The favoured institutional tool was the public corporation, which, theoretically at least, appeared to offer an acceptable balance of independence, accountability and control. The BBC, Central Electricity Board, and London Passenger Transport Board had all

previously been established as public corporations in order to insulate the organisations from constant political interference. It was presumed that the board of each public corporation would be free from continual and direct political pressure, as ministers would not be responsible to Parliament for operational matters. The political and constitutional implications of this development did not go unnoticed. In 1937 Robson warned, 'Politicians of every creed, when confronted by an industry or a social service which is giving trouble or failing to operate efficiently, almost invariably propose the establishment of an independent public board'.

Ministers did, however, enjoy substantial powers in relation to nationalised industries over such issues as appointments, policy frameworks and investment. These directive and reserve powers were designed to preserve a link between the nationalised industries and Parliament via ministers, while at the same time maximising the operational autonomy of the industries. However, despite this formal arrangement, ministers were unwilling, or even unable due to parliamentary pressure, to govern at a distance. Critically, it became clear that ministers were exercising influence on the boards not through formal channels but via informal yet no less important processes. This ministerial direction — 'government by luncheon' — was exerted beyond the public gaze and the formal statutory relationship acted as a veil for de facto ministerial control. A situation was thus created in which the benefits of independence (expertise, flexibility, etc.) were impaired by ministerial involvement. This arguably contributed to the relative inefficiency of the nationalised industries; therefore stimulating even greater ministerial and parliamentary interest. Accommodating accountable management by boards within the convention of ministerial responsibility to Parliament was always problematic. Despite Morrison's 1954 attempt to display the potency of parliamentary accountability for public boards, his list of parliamentary control mechanisms was, according to Goodhart (1955, 55), 'more formidable in length than content'. The perceived need for greater accountability to Parliament led to the creation of the Select Committee on the Nationalised Industries in 1951 (see Daniel, 1960).

This brief review of the experience of the nationalised industries raises a number of issues that are of direct relevance to contemporary debates concerning depoliticisation. First, it demonstrates the importance of the specific form or tool of institutional depoliticisation. Put another way, nationalisation *per se* is not problematic — but the precise manner in which it was implemented meant that the arm in the arm's-length relationship was frequently very short. This leads into the second issue: a distinction needs to be made between an organisation's theoretical autonomy and the autonomy it enjoys in practice (see Bouckaert and Peters, 2004). This raises the point made above that it may frequently be useful to make an analytical distinction

between the *principled commitment* to depoliticisation by a politician or party and the *practical implementation* of a policy that purports to realise that principle. This leads, secondly, to an appreciation of the epistemological and methodological challenges of measuring informal political influence. The influence may be *explicit* or *subtle*. An accusation of explicit interference in an independent regulatory organisation that was unequivocally created to operate beyond political control has been made in relation to the Audit Commission in Britain. In 2003, the organisation's outgoing Chairman, Sir Andrew Foster, complained that sustained and 'improper' informal political pressure had been placed on the Audit Commission by ministers (*The Times* 12 February 2003). Similar criticisms have been made by Greg Dyke (2005) regarding his tenure as Director General of the British Broadcasting Corporation between June 1999 and January 2004, a public corporation established explicitly to operate beyond the influence of party politics. A more subtle form of influence would be the now fairly regular high-profile speeches by the British Chancellor of the Exchequer or the First Secretary to the Treasury in which the government's views on how the economy should be handled are set out on the eve of a meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Bank of England. Clearly measuring the actual influence, if any, of these speeches is extremely problematic.

Third, even within this form of institutional depoliticisation politicians enjoy great flexibility in relation to which form or model of institutional depoliticisation is employed. This may involve *Éstablissements publics Nationaux* or *autorités administatives indépendantes* in France, non-departmental public bodies, executive agencies or non-ministerial departments in Britain, '*organismos autonomos*' or '*entitades publicas empresariales*' in Spain, or '*autorita adminstrative indepdendente*' or '*agenzie*' in Italy (for a review see OECD, 2001; Flinders, 2004b). The specific tool of institutional depoliticisation is important as this may not only establish the degree of actual day-to-day independence the institution has from elected politicians (i.e. a permanent institution with legally entrenched powers compared with an informal *ad hoc* advisory board) but it may also affect the public's *perception* of whether an issue has actually been depoliticised. In 2004 the British Minister for Rural Affairs acknowledged the importance of this distinction when announcing his decision to create the new unified agency for rural policy as a statutory executive non-departmental public body. He justified this decision due to the fact that it was 'equally important not only that the agency was independent of politicians, but that it is *seen* to be independent by the public' (Hansard, 24 February 2004).

Fourth, attempts to 'depoliticise' issues can stimulate greater legislative attention than would otherwise have been the case. And yet a clear finding of the OECD's (2001) comparative research into 'distributed public governance'

(agencies, independent authorities and other 'independent' public bodies) was that most legislatures have failed to develop a capacity to oversee public bodies that exist beyond the departmental core. It is, however, important to understand that in many countries, especially those established upon the constitutional convention of ministerial responsibility, the legislature was always intended to have a limited role with ministers acting as gatekeepers — a buffer between members of the legislature and the wider state system (Flinders, 2004c). A paradox of institutional depoliticisation is that the process of delegation away from elected politicians may well stimulate greater political and legislative attention than would otherwise have been the case.

And yet the creation of numerous 'independent' bodies raises questions concerning organisational form in relation to institutional depoliticisation. The delegation of functions along a 'spectrum of autonomy' — with ministerial departments at one end and purely private bodies at the other, and executive agencies, non-ministerial departments, non-departmental public bodies, strategic health authorities, a vast range of statutory, non-statutory and 'unrecognised' bodies, and increasingly complex forms of public–private partnerships in between these two poles (to take the British case as a representative example of broader trends) — clearly raises a number of conceptual and empirical issues (Greve *et al.*, 1999). At which point along the spectrum does an issue actually become depoliticised? A non-departmental public body may enjoy more autonomy than an executive agency but given the minister's policy, appointment and reserve powers, can the former organisational form really be used as a tool of depoliticisation? Moreover, it is clear from past experience and more recent research that a 'rhetoric-reality gap' commonly exists in relation to *institutional* depoliticisation (Van Gramberg, 2002). Depoliticisation should not therefore be seen as necessarily part of the 'hollowing out' or evisceration of the state, but may be more accurately interpreted as an aspect of the transformation of the state — a key explanatory variable in relation to recent research on the 'unbundling' (Pollitt and Talbot, 2004) or 'unravelling' (Hooghe and Marks, 2003) of the state. Moreover, the degree of true 'depoliticisation' is questionable when the independent body operates within a frequently narrow and prescriptive policy framework set by ministers — 'the reality is that tight prescription is achieved through the choice of policy framework' (Van Gramberg, 2002, 12). This issue will be discussed further in the conclusion; the next sub-section examines rule-based depoliticisation.

Rule-based depoliticisation

As the sub-title suggests, rule-based depoliticisation tactics involve the adoption of a policy that builds explicit rules into the decision-making process

that constrain the need for political discretion. Faced with constant demands for action, a public commitment to 'tie one's hands' in this way can help insulate politicians from societal pressure. Such rules should be designed so as to be as neutral and universal as possible. Rules that discriminate (or are thought to discriminate) in favour of certain groups or against others are likely to generate a sense of iniquity and provoke societal protest, leading to constraints on elite action. However, once set up, policy implementation can be reduced to the 'technical' task of monitoring and occasionally adjusting these targets with little or no need for political negotiation. Some of the most prominent examples of rule-based depoliticisation tactics in British politics can be found in the area of monetary policy (see also Epstein's (2002) research on depoliticisation of monetary and agricultural policy in Poland).

One of the earliest examples of this technique was Britain's membership of the Gold Standard in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (see Kettell, 2004). At this time, it was commonly believed that adherence to an exchange rate target within this system would regulate the British economy with little need for political intervention. For example, if British policy-makers were faced with a situation (as they often were in the 1920s) showing a loss of manufacturing output and increasing unemployment, supporters of the Gold Standard asserted that the mechanism would automatically correct itself, leading to an improvement in economic conditions. In these circumstances of depressed industrial activity, the value of sterling would eventually decline to the point where reserves of gold would be exported abroad. The resulting loss of revenue would lead to an increase in interest rates which, in turn, would attract foreign funds. The expected decline in investment activity resulting from higher interest rates would lead to a process of destocking and a fall in the domestic price level. This outcome would curtail imports, stimulate exports and the balance of trade and domestic economic activity would be 'automatically adjusted' (Winch, 1969, 83). It should be noted that in practice, this 'rule' never operated as automatically or benignly as this description suggests. But it was the appearance as well as the reality of this policy instrument that mattered to politicians (Scammell, 1985). This distinction will be returned to below.

A more recent example of this rule-based technique was monetarism, which became fashionable in Britain in response to the growing problem of inflation experienced in the 1970s. Monetarism contravened the economic orthodoxy of the time, which claimed that high inflation was in large part due to the increasing wage rises secured by trade unions, especially in the public sector. The problem according to monetarists was not that these unions were demanding these increases, but that they were being *funded by the government* through the expansion of the money supply. Monetarists argued that if the money supply could be controlled, there would eventually be a corresponding

reduction in price levels experienced by the consumer. To operationalise this policy, the Treasury published a Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in 1980 containing targets for the growth of £M3 (the preferred measure of the money supply at this time) as well as interest rates and public expenditure. Workers who continued to demand wage rises above the rate of inflation would be automatically forced to change their expectations or price themselves out of a job. From a governing perspective, the need for an incomes policy and with it, direct and continuous political negotiations with trade unions would be nullified. Whole areas of economic policy could be depoliticised (see for example, Lawson, 1992, 66–67, 1021, 1025, 1040; see also Kydland and Prescott, 1977; Ham, 1981; Barro and Gordon, 1983; Browning, 1986, 261).

As a tool for this rule-based depoliticisation tactic, monetarism was beset by constant implementation problems before it was abandoned in the mid-1980s. Both Geoffrey Howe (Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1979–1983) and Nigel Lawson (1983–1989) never established a reliable relationship between the level of the money supply and the rate of inflation in the economy. Targets for £M3 were constantly overshot, yet inflation was brought down from nearly 22% in 1980 to below 4% by 1983. Other targets or rules including M0, M1 and PSL2 were tried but proved to be equally unsatisfactory. Ironically, it was the Conservative government's own free market reforms that were partly responsible for undermining this depoliticisation technique. In the first-half of the 1980s, moves to liberalise the financial services industry distorted monetary targets as a reliable gauge for charting inflation trends. For example, legislation-reducing controls in the banking sector encouraged these institutions to expand into the personal mortgage market, thereby unleashing a fierce wave of competition with existing building societies. The growth in lending that followed had unforeseen effects: it led to month-on-month increases in the money supply when Bank of England officials had only expected a one-off boost (Smith, 1987, 40; Lawson, 1992, 448).

In this context, Conservative politicians returned to exchange rate policy as a method of depoliticisation in this area. The exchange rate system thought to provide this governing advantage was the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) of the European Community. By fixing the parity of sterling to all other ERM currencies (with certain fluctuation bands) ministers hoped to remove the possibility of devaluation and, at the same time, discipline business and the unions into containing their costs. Indeed, this rule-based policy was introduced to bolster leadership autonomy not only from societal groups, but also from the Conservative rank and file itself. Many MPs (particularly on the left of the party) had become increasingly vocal about the need for some government intervention to alleviate the high levels of bankruptcies and unemployment being experienced by British industry at this time. In a

memorandum to Howe in 1981, Lawson was already viewing ERM membership in party political terms:

> those of our colleagues who are most likely to be pressing for the relaxation of monetary discipline, are those that are keenest on the UK joining the EMS (European Monetary System). In other words, we turn their swords against them (Lawson, 1992, 111–112; 1058; see also Scott, 1986, 198; Howe, 1994, 639).

ERM membership lasted even less time than monetarism. Britain became a member of this semi-fixed exchange rate system in October 1990. By September 1992, the policy had to be abandoned after it proved to be unsustainable. Part of the problem was that economic conditions in Britain had begun to diverge significantly from those in Germany, the dominant country in the ERM. While the Treasury sought to ease monetary policy for those businessmen and homeowners who were struggling in the middle of recession, the Bundesbank increased interest rates to deal with the inflationary pressures building up in the German economy as a result of unification. When the pound came under sustained pressure in the days leading up to 'Black Wednesday', an announcement by Norman Lamont (Chancellor, 1990–1993) that he was going to raise interest rates to 15% to defend sterling was met with incredulity on the financial markets. Ministers stood helpless as the Bank of England spent £3 billion in a failed attempt to prevent the currency falling through the floor of its target range. The political reputation of the Conservatives never recovered (for a discussion, see Stephens, 1996).

The experience of 'Black Wednesday' has led to increased scepticism concerning the utility of rule-based techniques in the area of monetary policy in recent years. While the Treasury still attempts to constrain public expectations through the employment of targets, since 1997 these have been accompanied by tools of institutional depoliticisation noted above. Under the Blair government, monetary policy is now guided by an inflation target (2% as measured by the Harmonised Consumer Prices Index). But responsibility for the achievement of this rule has now been devolved onto the Bank of England, which has been granted operational independence to carry out this task (Balls and O'Donnell, 2002). Indeed, the Treasury under Gordon Brown has developed an argument claiming that adherence to fixed monetary rules is now counterproductive in the new world of financial globalisation which engulfs all nations. Faced with this fluid international environment, policy-makers need flexibility in the short-term to respond to economic shocks, or another episode like Black Wednesday could occur once again. However, the ability to introduce discretionary measures will only be possible (that is to say, not punished by the financial markets) if it takes place within an institutional framework that commands credibility and public trust. The Treasury has even coined a

phrase for this new approach — 'constrained discretion' (Balls, 1998; Brown, 1999, 2000; Glyn and Wood, 2001).

This approach appears all the more justified if one considers the Treasury's own experience in the area of fiscal policy since 1997. As with monetary policy, decision-making in this area is constrained by the existence of rules. The Golden Rule stipulates that the government will only borrow to fund investment. Current spending must be financed from tax receipts and the budget must be balanced over the economic cycle. The Sustainable Investment Rule requires that net public sector debt be kept stable as a share of GDP (at a level of no more than 40%). Unlike monetary policy however, the implementation of these fiscal rules is not controlled or monitored by an independent body like the Bank of England. Not surprisingly perhaps, Gordon Brown's decision (in July 2005) to revise the beginning of the current economic cycle from 1999 to 1997, has led to charges that he is manipulating the rules to allow himself to borrow $12.5 billion more to meet the Golden Rule. For some City economists, the credibility of the fiscal rules has been damaged beyond repair (Giles, 2005). Other commentators have begun to call for the creation of an independent institution to supervise the conduct of fiscal policy in the future (Osborne, 2005).

Preference shaping depoliticisation

The final form of depoliticisation discussed in this article involves the invocation of preference shaping through recourse to ideological, discursive or rhetorical claims in order to justify a political position that a certain issue or function does, or should, lie beyond the scope of politics or the capacity for state control. Preference shaping as a form of depoliticisation has clear connections with Mary Douglas' (1999) work on cultural theory, risk and depoliticisation. Douglas has emphasized how a dominant rationality can be (silently) constructed in which certain factors, options or possibilities can be systematically deleted from public discourse and normative judgements presented as neutral rationality. A clear link also exists with Marcussen's (2005) work on central banking and his argument that a dominant discourse has created a broad consensus that politicians should not intervene in the sphere of central banking and that anyone arguing against this position is immediately labelled as 'irrational'. On this there is a clear association with Jurgen Habermas' (1996, 62) work on depoliticisation and the public sphere,

> The depoliticisation of the mass of the population and the decline of the public realm as a political institution are components of a system of domination that tends to exclude practical questions from public discussion.

The benefit of depoliticisation through preference shaping is that it involves investing no structural (*institutional* depoliticisation) or legal (*rule-based* depoliticisation) capital. In essence a stance is adopted in which a preference-shaping position is employed to justify a refusal to intervene or regulate a certain issue. This tactic may involve the construction of a position in which the availability of a political choice is denied in favour of either an insistence that a certain issue is beyond the domain of political control, or that a single rational and technically correct solution to a specific problem exists. Storey (2004) has demonstrated how the World Bank discursively constructs debate by determining what policies are (and are not) acceptable and how it seeks to depoliticise the presentation of these policy choices through portraying them as a neutral, technical exercise and, by so doing, creates 'choiceless democracies'. At the European level the research of Wodak (2000) on policy making within the European Union reveals a strong emphasis by the drafters of policy papers on persuading people of the merits of pre-agreed positions, by depicting normative policy choices as neutral expert opinion, rather than stimulating debate or offering choice. At the national level the work of Fairclough (2000, 172) has suggested that political discourse in the public sphere has shifted from being characterised by 'disagreement, dissent and polemic' towards the suppression, exclusion and marginalisation of disagreement.

However, the maintenance of this depoliticisation tactic may consume high levels of political capital as politicians may be repeatedly forced to justify their position. Although a government may seek to avoid or deflect responsibility for an issue it is possible that the public may still seek to ascribe blame on the government for non-intervention or the adoption of an inappropriate *rule-based* or *institutional* depoliticisation tactic. In practice, preference-shaping depoliticisation tactics involve the construction of a new 'reality' in which the role of national politicians, particularly at the national level, is presented as having been, to some extent, eviscerated by external forces or broad societal factors. These forces limit the flexibility of national politicians and reduce their role to managing and enforcing rule-based tactics or policy stances which are designed to alleviate the negative consequences of trends for which national politicians cannot reasonably be held responsible. The significant aspect of this third tactic is that it relies on the dissemination of normative beliefs that may be extremely powerful even though the empirical evidence on which they are based is debated — the creation of what could be termed an at*myth*sphere. Governments may seek to espouse or over-emphasise a distinct aspect or interpretation of an ideology in order to increase the potency of the line of reasoning being presented. The *preference-shaping* tactic is, therefore, potentially far-reaching in that it attempts to refine and change public expectations about both the capacity of the state and the responsibilities of politicians.

It is suggested that an example of this preference-shaping tactic is the Labour government's recourse to arguments concerning globalisation in order to justify certain decisions or non-decisions. The work of Colin Hay and others (Hay and Rosamond, 2002; Watson and Hay, 2003; Hay and Smith, 2005) on the discourses and discursive construction of policy restraints suggests that a crude conception of globalisation with its attendant 'logic of no alternative' has dominated the discourse adopted by the Labour government. They argue that it has appealed to the image of globalisation as a non-negotiable external economic constraint (or what we might call preference-shaping depoliticisation tactic) in order to render contingent policy choices about which the government may have enjoyed policy flexibility but for which they wished to abdicate or transfer responsibility beyond the domestic polity (for a broader discussion of the inter-relationship between depoliticisation and globalisation see Boggs, 2000). In essence, the rhetoric of globalisation, it has been suggested, has been employed as a tactic or tool through which the potentially negative political consequences of policy choices can be neutralised through the creation of an ideological context in which issues are depicted as being beyond the political control framework of national politics.

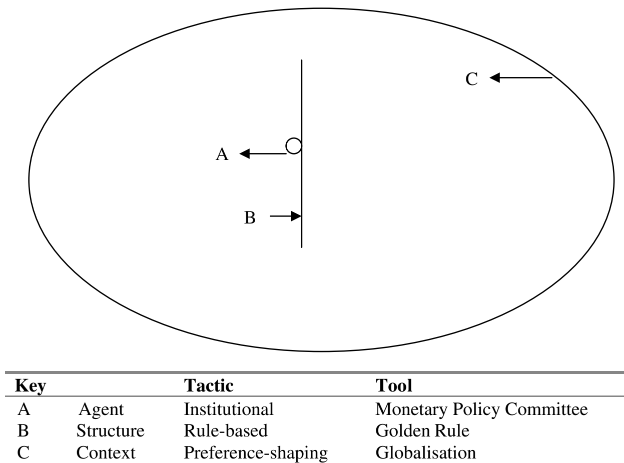
Although New Labour's association with the discourse of globalisation may serve as a particularly stark and prominent example of this tactic it is possible to isolate other preference-shaping stances. The dominance of New Public Management (NPM) during the 1980s and 1990s formed a powerful legitimating rationale or principled position upon which governments around the world could radically reform their state structures. The rhetoric and language of NPM with its emphasis on dismantling bureaucracies and empowering managers could be presented as normatively neutral while also being, at that time, difficult to argue against. In reality NPM was laden with normative judgements and assumptions regarding the role of the state and the utility of markets. NPM was for Pollitt (1983, 49) the 'acceptable face of New Right thinking with regard to the state'. The strength of this third tactic is that once disseminated into the popular and political consciousness it can be resilient in the face of empirical or ideological challenges. As Watson and Hay (2003, 291) note, 'in theoretical and, perhaps more importantly, empirical terms, the crude 'business school' globalisation thesis has been exposed for the myth that it undoubtedly is. Yet, in terms of political rhetoric, it continues to exert a powerful influence'.

Preference shaping highlights the fact that depoliticisation is far more complicated than existing authors have arguably allowed for. It also demonstrates the ontological and epistemological challenges in understanding depoliticisation strategies. Take, for example, a scenario in which a government convinces the public that it can no longer control the economy

due to wider global trends despite the fact that in reality is still has a number of significant control mechanisms at its disposal. If one emphasises the importance of rhetorical or ideological strategies then this situation may well be defined as one of depoliticisation due to the fact that the public *believes* that depoliticisation has occurred. However, if one focuses on institutional capacities and reserve powers then the same situation could well be understood as not being one of depoliticisation at all.

As already suggested, the explication of such distinct depoliticisation tactics risks over-simplifying the complexity of modern governance. Within any sector at any time it may be possible to identify a mixture or amalgam of tactics. Moreover, the three examples outlined above may not be exhaustive as a list of depoliticisation tactics. Nor should they be viewed as mutually exclusive. A government may pursue a number of different depoliticisation tactics at any one time; with the *preference-shaping* tactic providing a macro-political context or rationale; the *rule-based* tactic operating at the meso-political level and within a certain policy area; and, the *institutional* tool operating at the micro-political level and in response to specific incidents or demands (see Figure 2 for an example). (Although in reality, each of these tactics is unlikely to be confined to one level and one level only).

Clearly, the borders in the depoliticisation flow chart set out in Figure 1. can only be drawn fairly loosely and although it may be possible to sub-divide the macro-, meso- and micro-levels into a greater number of slices, we concur with Sartori (1970) that 'three slices are sufficient for the purposes of logical



Key		Tactic	Tool
A	Agent	Institutional	Monetary Policy Committee
B	Structure	Rule-based	Golden Rule
C	Context	Preference-shaping	Globalisation

Figure 2 Interdependent depoliticisation tactics: context, agency and structure in monetary policy.

analysis'. However, the attempt to dissect the concept of depoliticisation into its component parts and then highlight three distinct methods or depoliticisation 'tactics' has generated a number of themes and issues which will feed into the next and concluding section.

Depoliticisation: Reflections, Boundaries and Limits

The primary aim of this article has been to explore the concept of depoliticisation in order to achieve some definitional clarity and a greater awareness of the range of tactics and tools that politicians may employ. Specifically, this article has attempted to return to basic issues of logic, language and thinking in order to develop an overarching image of the way ideas or abstract principles fit into the policy process and a clearer conception of how and why these principles, tactics and tools may change or inter-relate. It is possible to suggest that Figure 1 provides at least a starting point towards the taxonomical infolding and conceptual precision that Giovanni Sartori so eloquently appealed for 35 years ago.

The framework is analogous to Hall's (1993) distinction between *basic instruments* (micro-political level or 'tools' in our analysis), *basic techniques* (meso-political level or 'tactic') and *paradigms* (macro-political level or 'principle'). Indeed, Hall's analysis of policy learning and change complements much of what has been suggested above — first- and second-order changes (tools and tactics) do not necessarily involve third-order (principle or paradigmatic) change. Politicians may, we have argued, retain a principled commitment to depoliticisation while adopting new tactics and/or tools to operationalise this commitment. At the same time, the replacement of a particular tool supporting depoliticisation, is not the same as saying that there has been a change in the tactic more generally. The principle and tactical approach to depoliticisation may stay the same: what is needed is a new tool at the micro-level to 'operationalise' these constant governing calculations. The British government's decision in October 2001 to place Railtrack in administration and re-take control of the British railway infrastructure, for example, did not represent the government losing faith in the principle of depoliticisation nor the tactic of institutional depoliticisation but it did represent the government adopting a new tool to implement these policy stances. In this case a public interest company — Network Rail. Similarly, the work of Hay and Smith (2005) on globalisation has demonstrated that political actors employ not one discourse but a range of discourses in a highly strategic preference-shaping game.

A marked feature of recent state reforms at both the national and European level is that governing elites (both politicians and senior officials) have explicitly stated their principled commitment to depoliticisation. In 2003 Lord

Falconer, for example, the British Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs set out a key governing principle for the Labour government:

> What governs our approach is a clear desire to place power where it should be: increasingly not with politicians, but with those best fitted in different ways to deploy it. Interest rates are not set by politicians in the Treasury but by the Bank of England. Minimum wages are not determined in the DTI, but by the Low Pay Commission. Membership of the House of Lords will be determined not in Downing Street but in an independent Appointments Commission. This depoliticising of key decision-making is a vital element in bringing power closer to the people.

At the European level the concept of depoliticisation formed a central component of the 2001 White paper on European Governance (COM 428; see Flinders, 2004b). Indeed, depoliticisation appears to have developed something of a momentum as an increasing number of scholars and public officials suggest that the rationale for severing the link between elected politicians and monetary policy, for example, apply just as forcefully to many other areas of government policy (Blinder, 1997; Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference (UK) 2004). In terms of understanding depoliticisation as a form of statecraft, therefore, this article has attempted to offer a degree of definitional and analytical clarity — an organising perspective around which future research in the field can be constructed. By way of reflecting on the limits or boundaries of the concept and hopefully stimulating complementary research in the field it may be useful to briefly highlight three issues — alternative tactics and tools, failure recognition and political power.

In a tentative discussion like this it is possible that a number of alternative depoliticisation tactics or tools have been overlooked. Four possible candidates might be labelled constitutional, judicial, conventional and scientific. Constitutional depoliticisation refers to the removal of certain issues or policy flexibility from the jurisdiction of elected politicians through an entrenched and legally binding constitution. The decision by a political elite to abide by the decisions of a court in relation to a specific and highly salient issue, such as stem cell research, assisted suicide or the right to life, could also be seen in many ways as a form of judicial depoliticisation. There is also the situation in which the main political parties within a democracy adopt an informal convention to keep a certain issue off the political agenda. From the 1920s through to the 1960s the main political parties in Britain had an informal agreement or convention that questions relating to policy in Northern Ireland would not be raised in Westminster. A similar convention held true in Britain from the late 1950s–2001 in relation to not making political capital from race and immigration issues. This tactic, what could be termed depoliticisation by convention, has therefore served to depoliticise some of the most potentially

explosive issues in twentieth century British politics. Marcussen (2005) has suggested a fourth form of depoliticisation through what he calls 'scientisation' in which a dominant rationality evolves to such an extent that certain policy fields have moved beyond depoliticisation to the point that they have become *apoliticised* in that there is no longer a debate about even the principle of depoliticisation and it is difficult to foresee a situation in which politicians would seek to move back to a direct mode of governance.

It is not clear whether constitutional, judicial, conventional depoliticisation or even 'scientisation' are tactical choices (meso-level) in their own right or if they should be interpreted as variants or tools (micro-level) of existing tactics. For example, judicial depoliticisation could be viewed as a rule-based strategy of 'tying one's hands', whereas depoliticisation through convention and scientisation could be understood as a form of preference shaping. The intention here is not to answer these questions but simply to point out that Figure 1 is likely to require future refinement.

A discussion of additional forms or types of depoliticisation clearly leads us into a discussion of the limits or boundaries of the concept by virtue of the likelihood that a greater number of governing strategies are likely to be included beneath this umbrella concept. The issue of boundaries or conceptual evisceration is further clouded by the fact that *depoliticisation* and *politicisation* may actually take place concurrently. The simple transfer of functions and responsibilities to the European Union from member states offers an example of this conundrum. The role of the Council of Ministers and the growing scrutiny powers of the European Parliament might suggest that the upward transfer of functions should not be perceived as 'depoliticisation' as the functions are being moved to another 'politicised' environment. However, the impact of this process may well be interpreted as one of depoliticisation for the nation state as national politicians have arguably lost a degree of direct control over those functions. Even if functions are transferred to the European Union there is reason to doubt that this should immediately be interpreted as a politicised environment. Hix's (1998, 54) research on the 'new governance agenda' leads him to conclude that, 'The EU is transforming politics and government at the European and national levels into a system of multi-level, non-hierachichal, deliberative and *apolitical governance* via a complex web of public/private networks and quasi-autonomous agencies' (emphasis added). Similarly Chalmers (2005, 1) states, 'Transnational depoliticisation is a growing phenomenon, but its crucible is the European Union'.

A final challenge for those interested in developing the concept of depoliticisation concerns the epistemological and methodological challenges presented by attempting to understand or gauge the impact of the concept in empirical terms. Accumulating practical evidence demonstrating the existence of depoliticisation strategies and its consequences is problematic; requiring as it

does the analysis of non-observable behaviour (i.e. preference shaping, public perceptions, informal political influence/control). These methodological challenges and issues of causation may become more apparent as scholars attempt to detect subtle shifts and changes in statecraft. Understanding macro-political changes in terms of a move away or towards a principled or 'third order' commitment to depoliticisation may, for example, demand more sophisticated methods of analysis than those required for identifying modifications at the level of tactics or tools.

Hall (1993, 279) suggests that third-order change of this kind is likely to reflect a very different process, marked by a fundamental change in the overarching terms of policy and political discourse. The work of Hay (1999) is useful as he defines the concept of 'crisis' (which can lead to change) as an accumulation of contradictions leading to a moment of decisive intervention. However, the question of whether crisis occurs (and change takes place) is not simply an objective one. Just because existing tactics and tools experience contradictions does not mean that change automatically takes place. Rather, what constitutes a contradiction or a problem in itself implies a subjective judgement. It follows that any decision concerning which contradictions or problems require a response will also imply an act of subjective judgement. Comparative case study analysis might usefully examine the generation of multiple arguments or narratives concerning the nature of certain problems and prescriptions for reform and the process through which depoliticisation (broken down into the level of principle, tactic and tool) became or was retained as the favoured mode of governance.

Despite the challenges of research methods, frameworks and boundaries, depoliticisation, carefully employed, offers fertile conceptual territory in which to expand our knowledge and understanding of contemporary governance processes. This is because depoliticisation is most closely associated with the (re)distribution and understanding of power in modern societies. Indeed there are clear correlations between the three depoliticisation tactics outlined above and Stephen Lukes' (1974) seminal work on power, particularly his 'radical approach'. 'Decision-making' power is clearly related to *institutional* depoliticisation as decision-making capacities are transferred to 'independent' public bodies; whereas Lukes' 'non-decision making' power is clearly related to *rule-based* depoliticisation in that politicians agree to abide by set frameworks and therefore forgo or significantly diminish their discretion. Finally, Lukes 'radical view', which involves power being retained and controlled through processes of thought control, has a clear resemblance to the tactic of *preference-shaping* depoliticisation.

Referring to Lukes' scholarship on power usefully encourages us to assert that the value and potential of 'depoliticisation' stem from the fact that it provokes new questions about the political realm and the evolution of the

public sphere; it may help explain new forms of statecraft and governmentality while also lifting the veil of political power beyond the state (Rose and Miller, 1992), or what Morison (1998) refers to as 'fugitive power'. From this the concept may help get beyond facile debates regarding 'big' *vs* 'small' government and help foster more sophisticated positions about different forms and styles of government and governance. The concept could also elucidate new tools of governance while also helping gauge their impact in terms of popular engagement, levels of trust and public expectations (for a review see Mair, 2005). The concept may give fresh meaning to current debates while also offering new perspectives on perennial problems. Depoliticisation may create democratic problems (Poggi, 1990; Boggs, 2000; Mouffe, 2000; Gounari, 2004) and it may paradoxically offer great democratic potential (Pettit, 2001, 2004). However, without seeking to disentangle the concept into its component elements or strands its potential is likely to remain unrealised. This article represents an initial endeavour in this direction.

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