

**New Labour and the politics of depoliticisation: the delivery agenda in Britain's public services
1997-2007**

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Abstract

The core argument of the paper is that while New Labour pursued a mode of depoliticised state management in relation to public services, there were contrasting and contradictory forces which ended up duly reinforcing a politicised mode of state management associated with the Westminster model. The relationship between politicisation and depoliticisation is essentially dialectical: that is, politicisation and depoliticisation are as much of a dualism (two essential, mutually integrated components) as a duality (binary opposites set against one another). The argument is that the British political system has developed so as to necessitate elements of both politicisation and depoliticisation in the governing strategies pursued by actors, manifested in the statecraft of Blair and New Labour. The analytical focus, at least according to this paper, ought to be assessing and explaining relative changes in the mix of governing instruments over time, rather than positing an absolute shift from 'politicised' to 'depoliticised' state management. Equally, it is necessary to conceptualise the governing pathologies and unintended consequences to which the dual processes of politicisation and depoliticisation give rise.

Introduction

This paper takes its title from Peter Burnham's ground-breaking article on New Labour, depoliticisation and the evolution of the British state. Burnham's original thesis examined New Labour's model of statecraft, the mechanisms by which it sought to establish *governing competence* given the historical reputation of previous Labour governments for economic and political failure. The statecraft perspective was applied to Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's preference for 'depoliticised' economic management: 'the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making' (2001: 127). This drew centrally on Jim Bulpitt's work on Thatcherism and the search for a new conception of governing competence in the Conservative party following the industrial and political defeats inflicted on the Heath Government in 1973-4. Burnham's concern was to elucidate how a social democratic administration sought to operate in a world of globalised

financial markets characterised by 'structural dependence' on mobile flows of capital, while simultaneously satisfying the aspirations and demands of its core supporters. The earlier work on depoliticisation addressed the shift from *discretion-based* economic management where the state intervened directly in the national economy through incomes policies, public ownership, and central planning, to *rules-based* economic management which prioritised gaining credibility with the financial markets, 'off-loading responsibility for the consequences of unpopular government decisions' (Burnham, 2001: 131). New Labour articulated a series of political constraints apparently reflecting immutable structural changes in the international economy to reject the British social democratic legacy of statist economic management. The aim was to restore trust in the capacity of Labour governments to manage the British economy prudently.

Burnham's theoretical contribution to the debate in British political science about the multi-faceted dimensions of 'depoliticisation' has focused on the broad parameters of macro-economic management. The 2001 paper briefly addresses the impact of the New Public Management (NPM) on the changing shape of the UK state, while Burnham alludes to an important paradox in New Labour's mode of governing: a tendency to devolve responsibility for delivery to a range of actors outside the central state, while at the same time strengthening the grip of the core executive (Number Ten, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury) over the policy-making and implementation process. This is an apparently contradictory approach based on operational devolution, accompanied by strategic centralisation in state management.

Nevertheless, Burnham's use of the depoliticisation concept in relation to Labour's post-1997 public service reforms is under-developed, given his explicit focus on 'rules-based' macro-economic management. Achieving credibility with established economic actors, especially financial capital was undoubtedly the centrepiece of the Blair Government's first term programme (Riddell, 2005; Hyman, 2004). The imperative of modernising and reforming the public sector only became paramount in the immediate run up to the 2001 election (Barber, 2007; Shaw, 2007; Riddell, 2005). The intention of this paper is to remedy gaps in the literature, applying the conceptual framework associated with 'depoliticisation' to New Labour's reforms throughout the period between 1997 and 2007. In so doing, I draw on subsequent work to provide a series of reference-points, in particular the distinctive contributions of Flinders, Stoker, and Hay to the literature on depoliticisation in the British polity.

The concept of 'depoliticisation' is particularly apposite in relation to New Labour, given the repeated association between a modernised Labour party and technocratic policy-making (Shaw, 2007). This was manifested in the government's zeal to create independent agencies outside the central state, alongside the modernisation of the policy process around 'evidence-based policy-

making', underpinned by the rationalist claim that 'what matters is what works'. Nonetheless, Burnham reminds us that 'depoliticisation' is an intrinsically *political* process – forging a governing strategy in which political leaders are able to influence and constrain the expectations of the wider electorate, at the same time remaining 'one step removed' from day to day operational responsibility for the performance of public actors and agencies.

That said, numerous scholars have challenged central tenets of Burnham's analysis of depoliticisation in British politics (Wood, 2013; Flinders, 2011; Moran, 2003). They contend that rather than appearing constrained by agencies insulated from short-term political pressures, ministers have been determined to project an image of authority, resilience and 'strong government' as the key to governing competence. Politicians are strategically calculating agents who adapt to any given situation by appearing in command and in charge, especially in a crisis environment following a terrorist attack or natural disaster. In the face of recurrent governing challenges, ministers are expected to act decisively rather than to prevaricate or pass responsibility down the delivery chain. The key dynamic in modern governance is less the 'hollowing-out' of the state, more the 're-centring' of the state: political actors are searching for new ways of rebuilding governing capacity at the centre of the state (Peters, 2004). This posits that 'politicisation' and 'hyper-innovation' in the public sector may be more pronounced than depoliticisation per se (Moran, 2003).

The core argument of the paper is that while New Labour pursued a mode of depoliticised state management in relation to public services, there were contrasting and contradictory forces which ended up reinforcing a politicised mode of state management associated with the Westminster model.¹ The relationship between politicisation and depoliticisation is viewed as essentially dialectical: that is, politicisation and depoliticisation are as much of a dualism (two essential, mutually integrated components) as a duality (binary opposites set against one another) (Marsh, 2010). The contention is that the British political system has developed so as to necessitate elements of both politicisation and depoliticisation in the governing strategies pursued by actors, manifested in the statecraft of Blair and New Labour, and latterly in the Coalition government of Cameron and Clegg. The analytical focus ought to be assessing and explaining relative changes in the mix of governing instruments over time, rather than positing an absolute shift from 'politicised' to 'depoliticised' state management.

¹ Wood (2013) notes that a series of 'ontological dualisms' can be located beneath any binary understanding of state management in relation to politicisation and depoliticisation: first, structure versus agency; second, the material versus the ideational; third, punctuated change versus incremental change; and finally, power as 'domination' versus power as 'influence'.

As such, the paper proceeds in the following sequence. First, New Labour's agenda for public service reform is explored, contextualised within a broader set of political and policy preoccupations. The article then outlines five key depoliticising mechanisms in the Blair Government's statecraft regime: external validation and surveillance of public sector performance; 'arms-length' mechanisms for the management of state services; further delegation and agentification around the delivery of public services; 'evidence-based policy-making' and the role of bounded rationality in the policy process; alongside central steering instruments that seek to, 'shield the government from the consequences of unpopular decisions' (Burnham, 2001: 127). Third, the paper examines how these mechanisms co-exist alongside apparently contradictory forces which have, in practice, served to reinforce the historically dominant narrative of British politics predicated on the Westminster model. Fourth, broader conclusions are drawn about the impact of depoliticisation on the British state, giving rise to a series of governing pathologies and unintended consequences which future administrations will have to confront. Finally, there is a brief concluding discussion of future trends in politicisation and depoliticisation in the British polity and the case for new research agendas.

New Labour and public services

New Labour's approach to public services² was initially uncertain, but always inherently *political* in terms of securing electoral hegemony and governing competence for the Labour party. This was the case for several reasons. Firstly, Labour governments historically have sought to project an appeal based on their capacity to defend public services and to extend the parameters of the public sector, explaining the 'heroic' status of the 1945-51 Attlee government in Labour party circles. By the mid-1990s, Labour was able to ruthlessly exploit voter's anxiety about the condition of Britain's public services following a decade of perceived under-funding, alongside an apparent attack on the ethics and principles of public service in British society (Marquand, 2004). It was alleged that a decade of Thatcherism had promoted 'private affluence' at the expense of 'public squalor': British voters by the time of the 1997 election were especially concerned about the state of the NHS (Shaw, 2007; Riddell, 2005).

Secondly, Labour had undergone a painful process of modernisation in the late 1980s and early 1990s in which it had been forced to discard its historic opposition to the market economy, and the role of the private sector in economic affairs. The effect of this 'revisionist' undertaking in social democratic ideology was to harden the resolve of leading figures, including Blair and Brown, to protect welfare universalism and public sector provision as the final bulwark of centre-left values in

² 'Public services' in the 1997-2010 period refers to provision in schools, post-16 education, the NHS, criminal justice and policing, and public transport. The term 'public services' was preferred to the 'public sector' emphasising delivery through diverse channels of state, private and voluntary sector providers.

an otherwise free market capitalist economy. Retaining an explicit commitment to extending the frontiers of public services ‘free at the point of use’ enabled the leadership to retain the support of the party and its key supporters while learning to ‘love’ the market.

Thirdly, focusing on public services was consistent with an ongoing preoccupation of New Labour strategists: sustaining a broad electoral coalition combining less affluent voters and the ‘socially excluded’ with better-off, middle class groups (Hyman, 2004). At the core of this strategy was the belief that better-off households were anxious about relying on private sector provision (as they did predominantly in the United States): it was more economically and socially efficient to safeguard universal provision as free *at the point of delivery*, a claim supported by the independent Wanless review of NHS financing published in 2002.³ Any move towards targeting in public services was rejected on the basis of the Titmuss edict coined fifty years previously that, ‘services for the poor are poor services’. Moreover, it was considered essential to keep middle-class groups within the state system: ‘The Government was convinced that a universal system of state education could only survive to the extent that it retained the confidence of the middle-class’ (Shaw, 2007: 78); according to Riddell (2005: 103), ‘Blair was particularly sensitive to the frustrations of middle-class people, notably in London’.

Fourthly, Labour’s approach to public services was consciously political since being perceived as an effective manager of public services was central to New Labour’s aim of re-establishing its reputation for governing competence so painfully conceded in the 1960s and 1970s. Blair in particular was determined to banish the historical memory of Labour ‘tax and spend’ policies at the heart of Thatcherism’s iconography. Gone was any hint of restoring the regime of post-war corporatism, central planning, import controls, and public sector monopolies which had spawned what Anthony King characterised in the mid-1970s as ‘the overloaded polity’. In its place was an agenda to ‘modernise’ public provision using ‘quasi-market’ mechanisms such as diversity, choice, competition and contestability, strategies which built systematically on the New Public Management (NPM) reforms introduced by the previous Conservative administration (Riddell, 2005). The aim was to satisfy the individualist preferences of voters according to the growing emphasis on ‘valence’ issues in British electoral politics, where performance replaces ideology as the key driver of voting behaviour.

New Labour’s motives in government were undeniably *political* in relation to public services. What is striking, nevertheless, is that in seeking to fulfil these explicitly political objectives, the Blair

³ The Wanless Review had been commissioned by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, and was used to justify the decision in Budget 2002 to raise employer and employee National Insurance contributions to fund increased spending on the NHS.

administration pursued a mode of state management that encompassed depoliticising mechanisms. In 1997, the Labour government had come to office having proclaimed its support for state education and the NHS, but without having much idea at all about the substantive challenges facing public services in Britain (Riddell, 2005). It was recognised that public services had been severely under-funded under the Thatcher and Major governments: during the 1980s and early 1990s, public spending was reduced from 45 per cent to approximately 35.5 per cent of national income.⁴ Nonetheless, Blair and his Chancellor proceeded cautiously after 1997, making no commitment to major increases in public spending while famously sticking to the previous public expenditure limits set by the Conservative Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke, in 1995. During the 1997 election campaign, Labour had promised not to raise either the basic or the higher rate of income tax; it was clear that New Labour had no coherent strategy for how to resolve the conundrum of UK tax resistance: British voters apparently desired American tax rates, but aspired to European-quality public services. With the exception of particular policy initiatives such as the literacy and numeracy strategy in primary education, the early phase of the Blair government's management of public services was largely focused on media-driven initiatives designed to convey ministerial action and purpose; the underlying structural weaknesses in core areas of public service provision were seldom addressed. However, it was evident that the challenges facing UK public services were not only about funding: there were major issues concerning the framework, structure, motivation and internal organisation of public sector institutions. Labour learnt that exhorting staff to perform better while imposing crude output targets from the centre was unlikely to produce significant performance improvements. Abolishing the NHS 'internal market' and 'grant maintained schools' in secondary education had been key pledges in the 1997 manifesto, but appeared naïve in the absence of an alternative view of how to incentivise delivery. In the winter of 1998-99, the health service was assailed by a 'winter flu crisis' and a shortage of hospital beds which threatened to destroy Labour's hard won reputation as the party of the NHS. It was increasingly clear to Blair and his ministers that a major shift of strategic direction was required (Riddell, 2005).

From this, the quintessential New Labour framework of 'investment and reform' emerged, underpinned by several competing purposes. The first was to address the apparent absence of a coherent reform strategy in key policy sectors, notably the NHS, schools and criminal justice. The second aim, more importantly, was to use reform as a lever to gain permission from voters to raise the cumulative level of public spending, and as a consequence, the rate of income tax and national insurance. Sticking to the previous government's spending plans meant that by 2000, UK public

⁴ http://www.ukpublicspending.co.uk/spending_brief.php

spending was merely 36 per cent of national income. Blair and Brown now grasped the extent of 'chronic' under-funding, and that improvement depended, at least in part, on additional capacity: more and better-paid doctors, nurses, teachers and police officers alongside upgrading capital infrastructure. If it could be shown that money would be used judiciously to deliver tangible improvements in public sector performance, citizens would be satisfied that public expenditure (and, in due course, taxes) should rise in order to expand public service provision. The culmination of the strategy came nearly a year after the 2001 election, when Gordon Brown as Chancellor raised National Insurance (NI) contributions in order to pay for further improvements in the health service.⁵ At least for the moment, New Labour had apparently uncovered a means of navigating its way through the 'tax and spend' minefield, a major breakthrough in social democratic statecraft and governing competence.

Reform in public services can be variously defined. On one level, the reform agenda adopted by New Labour was merely a continuation of the New Public Management (NPM) reforms inaugurated in the Thatcher years, and accelerated by the Major government in the 1990s. This emphasised in particular the importance of separating 'purchasers' and 'providers' in public services to introduce an element of *internal competition* and *contestability* into public provision. Julian Le Grand, unquestionably one of the most important intellectual influences on Labour's public service reform agenda, underlined the importance of preventing public services from being captured by producer interests: public sector workers were self-interested 'knaves' as well as altruistic 'knights' (Le Grand, 2004: 3). Reforms were required that better aligned the intrinsic motivations of public service managers and professionals.

This paper, nonetheless, focuses on an understanding of public service reform as the encapsulation of depoliticised state management. That is, reform as a governing strategy which involves, 'a process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making' (Burnham, 2001: 127). The aim, in short, is to radically reduce politicians (and particularly ministers) day to day operational responsibility for public service delivery and implementation. There is an obvious link between depoliticisation and Hood's concept of 'blame-shifting' through mechanisms of delegation ('arms-length' distancing), articulation (reshaping popular perceptions of who is at fault), and policy-making (reducing the operational liability of institutions and officials). Hood (2009) drew on the American literature which emphasised that politicians are more concerned to escape the blame for what goes wrong than to win approval for policy successes. Moreover, the notion of depoliticisation augments Bulpitt's (1983) characterisation of the British state as centralised, while permitting a significant

⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1934690.stm

degree of devolution to autonomous bodies outside the periphery enabling the centre to focus on matters of 'high' politics. The governing elite have little appetite to be caught up in the messy and unrewarding arena of local service delivery, being content to pass power back to the 'sub-national' level.

As such, New Labour had an 'input/output' model of depoliticised state management. The government was committed to increasing public expenditure alongside capital investment, while granting individuals greater choice and breadth of access in education and the NHS. But having injected resources, it was now up to public sector providers and staff to deliver results: a depoliticising mode of governance. The section that follows will examine various mechanisms of depoliticised state management deployed by New Labour to advance its public service reform agenda drawing on interviews, government White Papers, legislation, parliamentary reports, and other relevant secondary sources alongside interviews with key actors. Detailed case-studies are not presented here, but it is necessary to recognise the dangers of over-generalisation and the importance of disaggregating claims about politicisation and depoliticisation across a variety of policy sectors and institutions.

Depoliticising mechanisms in the British state

Flinders and Buller (2005) distinguish between three broad types of depoliticisation⁶: 'institutional depoliticisation' such as delegation and 'arms-length' management; 'rules-based depoliticisation' where explicit edicts such as a 'golden rule' for public borrowing 'tie the hands' of ministers; and 'preference-shaping depoliticisation' where discourse is used to shape public expectations of what national governments can achieve, most notably in relation to the constraints imposed by globalisation. The paper focuses on five over-arching mechanisms of 'institutional depoliticisation' adopted by the New Labour governments in relation to public service reform after 1997: external validation; arms-length mechanisms; delegation; evidence-based policy-making; and central steering instruments. This builds on the work of Mattei (2006: 2) who observes: 'Recent reforms of welfare delivery in Britain...illustrate the adoption of new organisational models enhancing autonomy from centralised control and political interference in the day to day running of services'. Integral to New Labour's 'managerialism' (Shaw, 2007) was a depoliticised mode of governance and statecraft.

⁶ They also usefully point out that there is no nothing inherently novel about depoliticisation, as evidenced by the decision of the Attlee Government in the 1940s to adopt a 'public corporation model' in the nationalised industries which nominally ensured ministers operated at 'arms-length' from industry managers (Flinders & Buller, 2005).

External validation and surveillance of public sector performance

New Labour made a systematic attempt to audit, record and assess relative performance in key public services, affirming its depoliticising credentials by putting the onus for improvement on sectoral providers rather than central government. Prior to the late 1980s, performance information about the public sector in the UK had been patchy at best; it was notoriously difficult to compare performance across localities, for instance. The Major government introduced a performance management reporting framework in the early 1990s, further enhanced by New Labour's Public Service Agreements (PSAs) after 1998 (Talbot, 2010). New Labour placed an emphasis on measuring and evaluating how well public providers were performing according to key milestones and targets prescribed by the centre. This was epitomised by the creation of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU) in 2001, which deployed highly specialised and differentiated performance data to advise ministers about how well services were performing on key measures.

This approach meant that missing targets or an unduly sluggish pace of delivery would result in intervention by the centre at different levels of 'intensity': from 'problem-solving exercises' led by the PMDU designed to tackle particular challenges such as overly-long Accident and Emergency (A&E) waiting times, to 'personal intervention' by the Prime Minister, as occurred with escalating levels of street crime in 2002 (Riddell, 2005). The programme of action and a timetable for implementation was then agreed between the PMDU and the relevant government department and ministers. Alongside this, there was a discernible expansion in the role of inspectorates. For example, Ofsted was given additional powers to inspect Local Education Authorities, as well as schools (Peck & 6, 2004). The further assessment of financial efficiency and 'value for money' was provided by the Audit Commission.

The emphasis on external validation reinforced a mode of depoliticised public management, since it relocated responsibility for improved performance directly onto providers, beyond central government and the core executive. Individual hospitals and schools could not excuse visibly weak performance by claiming that they were underfunded, or had structural disadvantages; senior managers were increasingly exposed to quasi-market pressures justified by the NPM rationale that public sector managers ought to be 'free to manage' (Mattei, 2006). The role of headteachers, for example, was no longer simply to provide pedagogical oversight, but to act as 'school leaders' exposed to the challenge of attracting and retaining pupils while managing large organisations. Institutions serving similar localities with cohorts consisting of equivalent populations and socio-economic groups could be systematically compared to provide accurate measures of relative

performance (Talbot, 2010). The reforms were further enhanced by the devolution of budgets to local public service institutions (Mattei, 2006; Glennerster, 2001).

The aim of the reforms was to increase transparency and accountability but among public service providers at 'street-level', rather than ministers and officials at the centre in Whitehall. Political actors at the centre remained largely insulated from public management reforms and were, as such, largely intent on preserving centre autonomy. The aim was to protect their capacity to determine strategic policy direction at the centre, rather than being distracted by the task of operational implementation at the front-line – although there were occasions where the centre was prepared to intervene directly in the minutiae of public service delivery.

'Arms-length' mechanisms for the management of state services

Depoliticisation is perhaps epitomised most of all by the decision to place key institutions and services at 'arms-length' from day to day control by ministers, the signature NPM reform. The logic of depoliticisation has recurrently influenced key New Labour reforms. Among the most prominent and politically controversial was the creation of Foundation Trusts in the NHS, where independent governing boards were created to run NHS hospitals as public interest institutions, rather than being directed by the Department of Health in Whitehall.⁷ Hospital management was to be overseen by the regulator, Monitor, a body independent of Whitehall control. Although the regulator had intrusive powers to regulate hospital services, day to day ministerial interference was curtailed (Mattei, 2006).

Similarly in secondary education, academy 'boards' took over the running of designated secondary schools replacing Local Education Authorities, with 206 academies created by the 2010 election. Academies had the freedom to opt out of national pay scales and to adapt the National Curriculum, although there were limits to their autonomy: for example, academy schools could not select according to ability, although they could admit up to ten per cent of pupils on the basis of 'aptitude' in their subject specialism. Beyond academies, the aim of policy was to develop 'independent, self-governing state schools' through 'trust schools' announced by the then Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly, in 2005. Making schools independent but still state-financed was a central pillar of government policy.

Moreover, a key motivation for introducing 'top-up' tuition fees in higher education was to give further operational freedom to universities, reducing the role of the central state in imposing 'burdensome' regulations and red tape. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was granted powers to

⁷ <http://www.monitor-nhsft.gov.uk/about-nhs-foundation-trusts/what-are-nhs-foundation-trusts>

regulate admissions as an independent public body, rather than ministers and officials in Whitehall. The rationale underlying this strategy is encapsulated in the following quotation from the then Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, Lord Falconer, in December 2003:

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 (quoted in Flinders & Buller, 2005: 2).

Over time, additional proposals for 'arms-length' management were outlined by key New Labour actors. In 2005, for example, James Purnell and Andy Burnham argued that Labour should place the NHS under the management of an independent national board, operating at 'arms-length' from government ministers.⁸ This would have had a similar composition to the BBC Trust, giving the NHS defined operational autonomy from Whitehall with freedom from day to day ministerial interference. The onus was on reducing day to day intervention by Whitehall in the management of key public services. The increasing tendency towards a depoliticised mode of state management reflected the growing complexity of the modern welfare state and public services since, 'the complex evolution of large welfare bureaucracies with multiple goals and actors made it difficult for ministers to control street level bureaucracies' (Mattei, 2006: 6).

Delegation and agentification around the delivery of public services

These 'arms-length' mechanisms were complimented by a further shift towards delegation and agentification in the British state, consolidating the creation of Next Steps agencies in the late 1980s which had sought to enact a principal-agent model in British public administration. Prior to its 1997 victory, Labour had embraced the creation of agencies, expressing no desire to roll back the reforms but pledging to end secrecy and expand accountability. The total number of 'quangos' fell from 1128 in 1997 to 679 by 2010, although the cumulative costs of running public bodies rose.⁹

New Labour was by no means averse to further advancing delegation and agentification in the British state. For example, the Home Secretary, John Reid, had the Immigration and Nationality

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/5372920.stm>

⁹ <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-05609.pdf>. Numbers vary according to what are counted as 'non-departmental public bodies'; the definition was changed by the Cabinet Office in 2002.

Directorate (IND) in his department turned into an operationally independent public agency, the UK Border Agency, under the leadership of Lin Homer, a senior Home Office official, in 2008. The claim was that the Home Office as a department was no longer 'fit for purpose', having discovered that there were up to 450,000 unresolved asylum cases in the immigration system, some dating back over a decade. Reid's motives appeared to be two-fold: as Home Secretary, he wanted less direct operational responsibility for the day to day performance of the immigration and asylum system which had been the cause of previous ministerial casualties, including his immediate predecessor, Charles Clarke.

Moreover, Reid sought to create greater scope to focus on policy strategy in the aftermath of '9/11' security threat and the Blair government's 'war on terror'. He was therefore content to significantly curtail his operational role in the day to day public management and implementation process. Delegation has remained among the most immediate and attractive mechanisms of 'blame-avoidance' for political actors in British government. New Labour was not afraid to revert to agentification in order to deal with the myriad 'wicked problems' afflicting British public administration and governance during this period.

'Evidence-based' policy-making and the role of bounded rationality

Nonetheless, New Labour's mode of depoliticised state management was not confined to external validation, 'arms-length' institutions, and delegation. Depoliticisation influenced the core of the policy-making process through the apparent turn to 'evidence'. Wilkinson (2007: 3) defines 'evidence-based policy-making' as, 'an iterative process of selecting and synthesising advice and opinion, using this information as the basis for solutions to policy problems, implementing and later re-evaluating the resultant policy'. When New Labour came to office in 1997, it placed EBPM at the core of its agenda for modernising public services: ideological prejudice and distortion arising from political bias should be discarded in favour of 'what works'. The Cabinet Office White Paper on *Modernising Government* argued that, '...policy decisions should be based on sound evidence' (1999: 31).

As such, objective evidence would inform which policy options were chosen, and public policy would develop according to the continuous empirical measurement of success and failure. This was manifested in the emergence of 'evidence institutions' (Rutter, 2010) designed to co-ordinate the collection and analysis of evidence and data to inform the policy-making process: key examples include the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) in the NHS, and the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) overseeing the setting of interest rates according to economic forecasts in the

Bank of England. This underlines Clarke and Newman's characterisation of New Labour's depoliticised mode of governance:

The rationalism of managerialism provides a non-partisan (and depoliticised) framework within which choices can be made. Competing values are reduced to alternative sets of options and costs, and are assessed against their contribution to an organisation's performance (1997: 66).

The changes served to enhance the role of 'experts' in the policy process; there was an influx of social scientists into Whitehall; funding for the social sciences increased significantly in comparison to the previous twenty years; there was a marked increase in the longitudinal evaluation of major government programmes, notably the Sure Start early years initiative; moreover, a host of 'celebrity' policy reviews were commissioned from experts outside government including the Stern review on climate change, and the Barker review of planning regulation (Wells, 2007; Newman, 2005). The Blair administration established the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) in 1998, reorganised as the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in 2001, in order to provide further internal expertise while advancing the claims of rationality and objectivity in the policy process (Wilkinson, 2007).

Wells (2007) has attested that evidence-based policy-making is multifaceted, and cannot be regarded merely as a return to traditional forms of 'technocratic' government. EBPM necessarily involves 'reflexive' policy learning which takes account of broader British state traditions and practices. Nonetheless, this emphasis on the use of evidence has enhanced depoliticised state management by increasing (or appearing to increase) the objectivity of the policy-making process. Moreover, it has placed more responsibility for the delivery of outcomes onto those who were implicated in the accumulation and interpretation of evidence – namely social scientific 'experts'. The authority of experts has been used to legitimise key decisions, reducing the degree of blame inflicted on ministers when things go wrong, covering a host of issues from food safety to climate change (Riddell, 2005).

Central steering instruments

The final instrument deployed by New Labour in relation to depoliticised public management was its use of centralised steering mechanisms, notably targets. Although the Blair government's approach to targets was frequently criticised for undermining professional judgement, discretion and autonomy (Marquand, 2004), there was a marked reduction in the number of targets from 366 in 1998 to 123 by the end of the second term (Barber, 2007). This coincided with the recognition that a

‘centrally-driven’ target-based approach had inherent limitations, as the Prime Minister insisted at the beginning of the second term:

After years of intervention centrally, necessary to get the foundations right and basic standards in place, I want power devolved down in our public services, so that the creative energy of our teachers, doctors, nurses, police officers is incentivised and released (Blair, 2001).

While targets might be viewed as unequivocally centralising, augmenting the powers of the core executive and directly increasing political pressure on ministers, targets can be interpreted as a further means of passing back responsibility for the delivery of public services to ‘front-line’ staff and agencies, ‘placing at one remove the political character of decision-making’ (Burnham, 2001: 128). Maintaining the target regime but strongly emphasising the government’s determination to ‘release the energies’ of front-line staff was but a further attempt to retain central control, while placing the ultimate responsibility for effective delivery onto public service providers, rather than ministers and officials in Whitehall.

The extent to which targets did markedly increase the pressure on local public service agencies and staff is encapsulated in this commentary by Peter Hyman, a former Number Ten political strategist:

Perhaps the biggest eye-opener for me on my journey has been how the approach I have been part of creating, to deal with twenty-four-hour media and to demonstrate a decisive government, was entirely the wrong one for convincing frontline professionals, or indeed for ensuring successful delivery...What the frontline requires is a policy framework and goals, not hundreds of micro-announcements. I am beginning to see how teachers felt like a circus act having random objects hurled at them by a ringmaster, and being expected to catch them all (Hyman cited in Riddell, 2006: 61).

The Treasury’s high-level targets, known as Public Service Agreements (PSAs), create an artificial separation between ‘investment’ which is the explicit responsibility of central government, and ‘reform’ which is mandated by the centre, but which public service managers and agencies are explicitly responsible for delivering on the ground. Once again, the burden of implementation rests with ‘street-level’ agents rather than ministers at the centre: targets increase the myriad pressures on front-line professionals and institutions. The target-based approach has arguably further advanced and aided key dimensions of the depoliticisation process in the British state. As such, targets can be interpreted as a further lever of ‘blame avoidance’ for ministers and officials in Whitehall.

Politicisation and the Westminster model

Mattei (2006: 37) finds that a delegatory and depoliticised model of governance in the UK has led to widespread, 'strategies of blame avoidance and displacement of political responsibility'.

Nonetheless, Peck and G (2004) do not find the depoliticisation view of British public management since 1997 plausible or convincing. They reflect that the dominant theme in the period has been the determination of ministers to seize back political control, aided by an increasingly 'presidential' Prime Minister. The dominant discourse of 'modernising' public administration is neither technocratic nor apolitical, but is intended to explicitly signal a willingness to assert direct political control from the centre over the reform and management of public services.

In this regard, it is necessary to acknowledge that the logic of the various depoliticising mechanisms so far outlined is rarely contested. In the machinery of the British state under New Labour, politicisation and depoliticisation have operated concurrently. They are best seen, it is argued, as a dialectic: as two, mutually reinforcing and often complimentary processes. As such, the five mechanisms of 'institutional depoliticisation' so far outlined – external validation and audit, 'arms-length' management, delegation and agentification, evidence-based policy-making, and central steering – have served to underpin and reinforce the central narrative of British politics encapsulated in the Westminster model. The status and evolution of the Westminster model has been discussed extensively in the recent literature, and there is little need for further elaboration here.

The Westminster model is, nonetheless, defined by two overriding constitutional principles: parliamentary sovereignty and collective cabinet responsibility which 'fuse' together the executive with the legislature in a unique set of governing arrangements (Whitehead, 2013). This characterisation of the Westminster model is elaborated by Whitehead:

The core doctrines of constitutional orthodoxy are the sovereignty of parliament, and collective cabinet responsibility to that legislative body, giving rise to 'Cabinet government' – the specifically English way of conjoining executive and legislative authority, which can be traced back to such Victorian authorities as Walter Bagehot and Albert Venn Dicey (2013: 11).

Authors differ as to whether the Westminster model has been comprehensively *undermined* since 1997 (Bogdanor, 2009; King, 2007), or thoroughly *reconstituted* (Marsh, Richards & Smith, 2001).

The Westminster model and 'politicisation' are not one and the same; nevertheless, it might be conjectured that the Westminster model is predicated on a high degree of centralised control associated with active participation in decision-making by key political actors, both ministers and their officials. An influential interpretation of the Westminster model is that it perpetuates a 'legitimising mythology' in which accountability resides with the minister who is responsible to Parliament. This claim nevertheless appeared increasingly questionable after three decades of delegation and enhanced operational 'autonomy' at the front-line.

On one level, New Labour's depoliticisation strategy in relation to the state management of public services can be interpreted as a straight-forward pursuit of *governing competence* in the manner predicted by Bulpitt (1983), and subsequently, Burnham (2001). The period of governance associated with British social democracy between 1940 and 1979 predicted on state intervention, centralised planning, corporatist industrial relations, an expansion of the public sector through state-based monopoly provision, and higher public spending was explicitly rejected as an 'Old Labour' era of 'tax and spend' politics. As a result, where public spending did increase after 1998-99, the rises were tied to explicitly defined institutional reform and modernisation objectives. Moreover, New Labour sought to implicitly undermine the traditional machinery of government encapsulated by the 'Westminster-Whitehall model' (Campbell & Wilson, 1995) which it associated with amateurism, an unresponsive civil service lacking technical expertise, anachronistic central and local government institutions, and a public sector unresponsive to the diverse needs of citizens.

In so doing, New Labour clearly sought to modernise, adapt and restructure the Westminster model and the attendant processes of Whitehall policy-making (Goodwin, 2011). The Blair administration took on the core task of recalibrating the Westminster model, with depoliticisation as a key element in its hybrid mix of institutional reforms. This hybridity is less novel than it might, at first, appear: although the Westminster model has previously been 'idealised' as a coherent and unique fusion of legislative and executive powers, in reality there have always been inconsistencies, ambiguities and anomalies which the post-1997 constitutional reforms have merely accentuated (Whitehead, 2013).

That said, it is by no means clear that the five mechanisms of 'institutional depoliticisation' relating to the reform of public services outlined in this paper did serve to undermine the Westminster model and the attendant principle of centralised political control, as much as reinforce and strengthen its 'power-hoarding' credentials. The claim is that the dynamic of depoliticisation in the British state was countered by an equally rapacious shift towards *politicised* state management. The fusion of these apparently contradictory but often mutually reinforcing tendencies has novel, unpredictable and seemingly unintended consequences.

External validation and monitoring

The assimilation and analysis of performance data in the public sector enabled the development of a centralised performance management framework, encapsulated institutionally at the centre through the creation of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU). The core executive was able to use empirical data not only to compare and evaluate performance nationally and to put pressure on civil servants to intensify the 'delivery agenda', but to establish direct relationships between the centre and front-line providers, bypassing government departments and local authorities: an approach best captured in New Labour's Academy schools initiative which was directly overseen by officials in 10 Downing Street (Adonis, 2012; Riddell, 2006; Hyman, 2004). The literacy and numeracy strategy in primary education had, to some extent, already initiated this centralising drive after 1997.

What is clear is that while monitoring performance against particular outcome targets might appear to shift operational responsibility to 'street-level' providers and public service managers under the guise of devolution and earned autonomy, it merely intensified the capacity and authority of the centre to intervene in service delivery. This was a pronounced element of Blair's own conception of his role as Prime Minister, leading to a somewhat misleading debate about the extent of 'presidentialisation' in British politics (Foley, 2000). Blair argued that where under-performance visibly occurred he should use his personal authority to intercede, as occurred in the case of street-crime, school behaviour and truancy, and hospital cleanliness during the second term (Riddell, 2005).¹⁰

The Labour leader was establishing a 'COBRA' model of executive leadership¹¹ where any given problem was addressed by pulling together key actors at the centre and mandating urgent action (Barber, 2007). In crisis situations Blair yearned to seize control, often bringing in the armed forces, as he had done during the 'fuel blockade' and 'foot and mouth' outbreak in 2000-01 (Diamond, Richards & Smith, 2013). Moreover, the assertion of centralised control was only made possible by the systematic collection and analysis of public sector performance data. This is consistent with the argument of Peters (2004) that executive leaders in recent decades have been busily rebuilding governance capacity at the centre of the state.

Arms-length mechanisms

Similarly, the creation of 'arms-length' agencies nominally independent of formal Whitehall control appeared to disguise what was more often a re-imposition of political control by the centre.

¹⁰ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/3107133.stm>

¹¹ 'COBRA' was the emergency response unit located in the Cabinet Office where senior ministers and officials met following major national emergencies.

Academy schools are a telling case in point: under the New Labour leadership, academies were no longer overseen by Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Until the late 1980s and the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS), central government had played little role in the education system. Now, the chain of command ran directly to central government: funding was allocated by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Moreover, Number Ten played a key role in identifying and rewarding private sector academy 'sponsors', and academy heads often had a direct link to officials in 10 Downing Street (Adonis, 2012). At least one academy head teacher was removed following reports of Number Ten's dissatisfaction with the school's initial performance. In secondary education, it was as if the traditional doctrine of departmental ministerial responsibility had given way to a new constitutional doctrine of *prime ministerial core executive responsibility*.

Labour's motives were arguably consistent with its overarching strategy for establishing governing competence: Labour local authorities were part of the 'folk-memory' of public sector mismanagement and 'state failure' that the party leadership was so desperate to banish. Academy schools were among the most prolific examples of innovation in public service delivery. Moreover, the previous Conservative government sought to create 'City Technology Colleges' as the precursor to Academy schools. The initiative had not developed much momentum since the early 1990s, however, since implementation relied heavily on the education department, where officials were generally unenthusiastic. Only prime ministerial patronage with delivery driven by Number Ten would ensure the Academy schools policy succeeded (Adonis, 2012).

In one sense, the process of placing institutions at 'arms-length' from ministers will always be contested given the tendency of sudden crises and unforeseen events to force politicians to appear in command, visibly regaining operational control and authority. In relation to public services, however, institutional reforms which were nominally intended to 'externalise' responsibility for performance outside the direct purview of central government in Whitehall often ended up reinforcing a centralised mandate, a development consolidated more recently by the Coalition Government's 'free schools' programme which has further entrenched the direct relationship between schools and the Department for Education: as a consequence, 24,000 governing bodies are wholly accountable to the Secretary of State.¹²

This is accentuated in relation to what happens to failing public sector institutions. In theory, quasi-markets will lead to organisational closures since resources follow patients and pupils, and the unsuccessful literally go to the wall. Nonetheless, politicians have rarely been prepared to

¹² <http://www.lgiu.org.uk/2012/09/19/are-we-sleepwalking-into-a-centralised-education-system/>

countenance the closure of 'valued' local community institutions: political realities undermine the logic of quasi-market reforms.

Delegation and agentification

The relationship between delegation and depoliticisation has been extensively elaborated in the literature (Flinders, 2008; Flinders & Buller, 2005). The claim that the delegation of authority and operational responsibility to public bodies outside the core of the state may lead to *politicisation* and centralised political control is by no means novel. As Flinders indicates, it is important to recognise that the British state is a 'diverse ecosystem' comprised of multiple layers of delegation which are variable across time and space. There is a 'spectrum of autonomy', so the degree of delegation in contrast to centralised political control is always relative and subject to change. This can be illustrated by comparing and contrasting the operational relationship between the Department of Health (DoH) and two distinct public bodies in the NHS, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) and Foundation Trust hospitals (FTs). The purpose of NICE, a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) which is 'sponsored' by DoH, is to provide strategic advice on clinical matters according to ministerial priorities. Foundation Trust hospitals, in contrast, are intended to be overtly independent of ministers having significant managerial, operational and financial autonomy: there is less regulation and monitoring combined with additional borrowing powers for capital investment.¹³

Flinders alludes in particular to how the nature of delegation necessarily evolves over time. One of the 'pathologies' of governance in recent decades has been that central government departments and ministers have lacked the information and strategic capacity to oversee organisational delegation. The central state has rarely been equipped to understand how the executive agencies it monitors actually operate in practice. A pertinent example was the Financial Stability Team in the Treasury which had been reduced to three officials prior to the financial crisis, demonstrating that the core executive was prepared to invest extraordinary faith in the ability of the Financial Services Authority (FSA) to maintain 'healthy' financial markets in the United Kingdom.¹⁴

Moreover, despite lacking strategic capacity, ministers and departments at the centre have been prepared to recapture operational control where governing crises occur. In 2002, a debacle over the marking of A-level exam scripts led Estelle Morris, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills to seek to remove William Stubbs, the Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), wresting back control over the oversight of the examinations system in England and Wales.

¹³ <http://www.monitor-nhsft.gov.uk/about-nhs-foundation-trusts/what-are-nhs-foundation-trusts>

¹⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220506/review_fincrisis_response_290312.pdf

In response to a controversy surrounding A-level standards and 'dumbing down', the minister ordered the re-marking of 700,000 exam scripts (later revised to include only select A2 units), allegedly over-stepping her powers and undermining the responsibilities of the regulator.¹⁵ In contrast, Alan Milburn's preferred model of Foundation Trusts was diluted following an arduous and bruising battle with HM Treasury: strict borrowing limits were to be applied; there were further restrictions on how many private patients FT's were able to treat; ministers retained powers to intervene in cases of egregious incompetence and Monitor carefully regulated service standards (Riddell, 2005). The limits to managerial discretion and autonomy through external regulation are usually considerable. There are a number of prominent examples which illustrate that delegation in the British state is usually subject to contingency; the possibility of a contrary shift towards *politicisation* is always evident.

Evidence-based policy-making

Although EBPM can be interpreted as a mechanism of 'blame-avoidance', passing back responsibility to experts and public managers 'at one removed' from ministers and Whitehall mandarins, the model of policy-making practised by New Labour in public services is associated with a further shift towards centralised political control. Despite Labour's emphasis on institutional reform and its paradigm of 'modernising governance', EBPM is consistent with, rather than a threat to, the dominant narrative of the Westminster model. Moreover, 'evidence-based' approaches entail the re-imposition of centralised state control and core executive discretion, encapsulating the British post-war modernist tradition of governing society and the state from the 'commanding heights' of Whitehall.

This is illustrated by the use of evidence in relation to New Labour's 'flagship' third term social policy reform, 'Nurse-Family Partnerships' (FNPs). In this instance, extensive empirical research gleaned from the United States is used to design and implement a centralised early intervention programme. While Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and local authorities make joint consortium 'bids' to run the FNP scheme in local areas, its oversight and design (including, for example, how many hours per week nurses should spend with socially excluded families) are mandated by the centre.

As such, there is a centralised performance management framework which is more often used to steer the implementation process. Hilary Armstrong as the responsible minister, her political advisers, and a close-knit group of social science experts exercised a significant degree of control over the delivery of FNPs from Whitehall (Dodds, 2009). The growth in the number of special

¹⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2382423.stm>

advisers at the centre after 1997 and their role in the policy-making process indicate a further, much debated form of counter-politicisation.

Central steering

The final, and in some ways most striking, example of institutional politicisation in response to depoliticisation relates to the central steering capacity of the core executive, namely Number Ten, the Cabinet Office, and the Treasury. Target-setting and resource allocation through Public Service Agreements (PSAs) may lead to some passing of responsibility for delivery to front-line staff and agencies, but where targets are not met, 'the buck' clearly stops with the designated minister. The most glaring example was Estelle Morris' decision to resign as Secretary of State for Education and Skills in 2002, partly because Level Two targets for literacy and numeracy in primary education had been missed.¹⁶ In the first term, David Blunkett had been a highly interventionist Education Secretary, 'naming and shaming' failing schools and Local Education Authorities, placing institutions on 'special measures' programmes overseen by Whitehall.¹⁷

There was no obvious constitutional precedent for Estelle Morris' resignation, which illustrates the ambiguity concerning ministerial accountability in the British state after two decades of ostensible delegation and agentification. Nonetheless, it is clear that even in an era of 'devolving power to the front-line' (one of New Labour's 'four principles of public service reform'), the combination of targeting-setting, the development of the accompanying policy framework, and key decisions about the allocation of resources (including 'ring-fencing' and the use of specific grants to public service providers, particularly to help disadvantaged groups and 'raise the floor' in overall achievement levels) strengthened the power of actors at the centre, in so doing under-writing core tenets of the Westminster model.

Indeed, it might be argued that the delineation of national standards will inevitably lead to centralisation in the management of public services, since ministers and officials will want to have a say in how services operate (Riddell, 2005). As such, there has not been a single, linear shift towards depoliticisation; the mechanisms of institutional control shaped by New Labour have reinforced apparently contradictory tendencies. Nonetheless, it is worth exploring the extent to which trends towards politicisation and depoliticisation may not only be contradictory, but also complimentary, overlapping and mutually reinforcing.

¹⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2359695.stm>

¹⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/455826.stm>

Depoliticisation and governing pathologies

The work of Flinders (2008; 2005; 2002) has been significant in identifying pathologies and unintended consequences arising from the dialectical process of politicisation and depoliticisation in the management of the British state. This emanates in part from a perceived lack of 'order' in the gestation of various depoliticising and delegatory mechanisms which are the product of ad hoc, piecemeal 'pragmatic adaptation' and 'muddling through', rather than a set of coherent overarching constitutional principles. This reflects the apparent resistance of the British Political Tradition to abstract theorisation and institutional rationality. Increasingly, the Westminster model, 'looks to the analyst more like a muddle than a model' (Whitehead, 2013: 10). As such, several key points are relevant at this juncture.

One argument is that from the perspective of ministers, depoliticisation did have real effects which unduly limited and qualified their powers. As the then Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham has opined, the powers invested in Foundation Trust hospitals circumscribed his ability as the responsible ministers to intervene in institutions that were manifestly under-performing, or even failing, most prominently in the case of the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust.¹⁸ The former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, similarly insisted that after a decade of New Labour, 'no-body knows who is responsible for anything any more...everybody passing the bloody buck'.¹⁹

This alludes to a second argument enunciated by a range of authors, notably Flinders (2012), Hay (2007), Stoker (2006), and Gamble (2000), namely that citizens are increasingly disillusioned with politics since no-one knows who is responsible for decision-making any longer. The structure of the state that emerged from the New Labour years is increasingly ambiguous and opaque, as managerialism separates purchasers from providers, delegates responsibility from the centre to a multitude of 'street-level' agents, and puts power in the hands of unelected managers rather than elected politicians. Even the capacity to express dissatisfaction with the performance of public services through periodic elections may not result in any meaningful change either in how services are run, or who delivers them.

This raises a third argument that depoliticisation (and contrary moves towards politicisation) did not achieve the results which New Labour initially intended, namely to restore the party's reputation for governing competence by reshaping the politics of public expectations. This underlines that depoliticisation is always an inherently *rhetorical* exercise, even if it also means recasting actual institutions. Depoliticisation is about shifting expectations of what is possible, redefining where

¹⁸ Interview with Rt. Hon. Andy Burnham MP, 21st September 2011.

¹⁹ Interview with Rt. Hon. David Blunkett MP, 16th October 2011.

responsibility lies, and subtly shaping citizen's assumptions about what they might expect from 21st century 'enabling government' – at times breaking with the premise at the heart of the post-war welfare settlement that citizens should be protected 'from the cradle to the grave'.²⁰

The growth of external validation and monitoring was designed to provide 'objective' evidence that public services were improving, encapsulated in a series of delivery reports compiled by the PMDU. Nonetheless, what became clear was that while voters valued their local hospital and school, they were sceptical that services nationally were actually improving, a dynamic characterised by public opinion experts as 'cognitive dissonance'.²¹ Moreover, there was increasing suspicion that government statistics were contaminated by a culture of 'spin' and manipulation, and that New Labour's claims about improving public services could seldom be believed. The party's assertions about transformation in public service delivery too often appeared out of sync with the reality on the ground.

Conclusion

The core argument of this paper has been that no fundamental, one-way shift towards depoliticisation in the British state occurred through New Labour's reform of public services from 1997 to the end of Tony Blair's premiership in 2007. On the other hand, it is incorrect to infer that a single dynamic of politicisation operated during this period. Instead, what we observe are a series of 'trends and counter-trends' in the evolving structure of the British state (Jessop, 2007). This dialectical process can be viewed as a set of disparate forces pushing and pulling British government in apparently contradictory directions. This might, at least in part, explain why increasingly the British state is believed to be 'walking without order' (Flinders, 2008).

Nonetheless, it is important to examine how politicisation and depoliticisation in New Labour's statecraft can, in fact, be seen as complimentary and self-reinforcing, a 'duality' rather than a dualism. For instance, it is clear that to a significant extent, the British political system is still infused by the Westminster model; as such, the Westminster model is a 'story' which shapes how actors think and behave (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003). The notion that the minister is responsible and accountable to Parliament is hard-wired into the 'DNA' of the British constitution and the polity. Responding to a series of proposals that the management of schools be taken out of 'party politics', the then Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke, responded: 'We live in a democracy where

²⁰ This phrase was attributed to William Beveridge, author of the 1944 White Paper on the creation of the welfare state.

²¹ http://www.ipsos.com/public-affairs/sites/www.ipsos.com/public-affairs/files/documents/what_do_people_want_need_and_expect_from_public_services.pdf

the general public elects people to reform and improve public services' (cited in Flinders & Buller, 2005: 22). The predominant influence of the Westminster model is merely underlined by what happens when crises occur: from a breakdown in the passports agency to prisoner escapes, central government departments and their ministers are invariably drawn back into direct political management, a reality acknowledged in Burnham's initial article on depoliticisation (2001: 145).

Nevertheless, that state of affairs has come under significant challenge in recent decades: government departments struggle to oversee public bodies to which powers have previously been delegated. The doctrine of ministerial responsibility has been qualified by the, 'long chains of delegated authority through which so many twentieth-century policy decisions were crafted' (Whitehead, 2013: 12).

At the same time, ministers needed greater scope and flexibility to shape policy, think strategically, deal with the '24/7' media, and work alongside supra-national institutions in the European Union and beyond. This has encouraged them to step aside from immediate matters of policy implementation. Moreover, the attempt to redefine officials as 'delivery agents' means that public managers are more visibly in charge than ever, a claim powerfully supported by Margaret Hodge's efforts as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee to hold civil servants to account.²² As the British state has evolved, adopting new agencies, institutions and structures, mechanisms for holding public bodies accountable have rarely advanced, although there are renewed signs that parliamentary select committees are beginning to flex their muscles.

To this extent, depoliticisation can be understood as an attempt by ministers at the centre to *modify* the balance of parliamentary accountability and operational responsibility. New Labour's aim was to ensure that decision-making in public service delivery was perceived as less immediately 'political', even if the ultimate goal was deeply *political*: to restore the party's reputation for governing competence encapsulated by the mantra of 'investment and reform'. This is consistent with the need to distinguish between 'theory' and 'practice' in relation to depoliticisation: ministers may rhetorically commit to the delegation of authority, but in reality they attempt to maintain ever more intrusive day to day political control (Flinders & Buller, 2005). The challenge of governing in contemporary Britain necessitates a process of *balancing* mechanisms of institutional politicisation and depoliticisation. This is a shift which surely merits further synthetic and comparative research, analysing change over time while disaggregating the impact of politicisation and depoliticisation throughout diverse institutions, organisations and policy sectors.

²² <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/nick-pearce/margaret-hodge-mandarin-and-black-hole-of-accountability-at-heart-of-white>

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