

Exploring the political character of decision-making: The BJPIR and the politics of (de)politicisation

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Abstract

In this short contribution to this special issue, we attempt three main things. Firstly, to highlight the pivotal role that the BJPIR has played in helping to initiate and develop a myriad of attempts to understand processes of (de)politicisation. Secondly, to provide a very brief and admittedly selective overview of some of the broader developments in these debates. Thirdly, to pay a brief tribute to the seminal contribution and wider legacy that Pete Burnham's work has made to our understanding of depoliticisation and its wider role in the state's attempts to manage its credibility and legitimacy and avoid crises.

Keywords

de-politicisation, governing strategies, policymaking, politicisation, statecraft, UK politics

Introduction

During the last two decades, the concept of de-politicisation – broadly defined as the strategic shifting of blame and responsibility away from political actors and the removal of potentially contentious issues from the realm of public debate – has emerged as a significant analytical framework in political science. Scholars have engaged with a wide range of issues and perspectives to explore its effects on processes of governance, statecraft and the management of public policy. Examples from what has become a rich and diverse research agenda include studies of public sector reform (Blühdorn, 2007) the functioning of democracy (Rancière, 2007), monetary and economic policymaking (Baker et al., 2024; Buller and Flinders, 2005; Kettell, 2008), immigration policy (Donmez and Sutton, 2020), environmental policy (e.g. Kuzemko, 2016), the impact of flooding (Wood, 2016), social inequality (Etherington

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and Jones, 2018) and the imposition of austerity (Dönmez, 2021; Wamsley, 2023). Scholars have also debated both the conceptual and practical characteristics of de-politicisation (Flinders and Buller, 2006; Hay, 2007; Johnson et al., 2024) and linked it to wider literatures around themes of trust and anti-politics (e.g. Beveridge and Featherstone, 2021; Fawcett and Wood, 2017).

This comprehensive body of work attests to the versatility of de-politicisation as an analytical framework and highlights its significance in understanding contemporary political processes. While such a multi-faceted concept cannot be reduced simply to a single source, scholarship in this area owes a considerable debt to the work of Pete Burnham and to the pages of the BJPIR. In 2001, just three years after its inception, the BJPIR published a seminal piece by Burnham examining the governing strategies of the New Labour government. As any scholar of de-politicisation knows, that piece became the cornerstone for a significant volume of scholarship on the concept, much of which has also appeared in the pages of this journal.

As a friend and colleague to us both, and as the former PhD supervisor to one of us, Burnham's work has, in different ways, had a significant influence on both of our work. But its broader influence within the discipline is worthy of some special recognition. It provides the most oft-used definition of de-politicisation within the literature and has become one of the most influential contributions to our understanding of the general character of contemporary statecraft and elite decision-making.

The purpose of our contribution to this special anniversary edition of the BJPIR is to reflect on some of the ways in which this periodical, and particularly the work of Pete Burnham, has helped to develop the study of de-politicisation. Our aim in what follows is threefold. First, to highlight the pivotal role that the BJPIR has played in helping to spark a myriad of conceptual and empirical studies into different aspects of de-politicisation. Second, to provide a brief overview of the evolution of some of these debates. Third, and with an element of personal sentiment here, to pay a brief tribute to the contribution and wider legacy that the work of Pete Burnham (and that of a number of his PhD students) has made to our understanding of de-politicisation as a growing field of study.

Governing Britain: Discretionary vs de-politicised policymaking

The opening to Burnham's (2001a) seminal BJPIR piece highlighted the stark inability of British governments throughout the twentieth century 'to solve the fundamental problems that beset the British economy'. Given this context, an obvious question to emerge from this is simply: how do governments in general, and social democratic governments in particular, successfully maintain a level of credibility if most of their economic strategies fail to achieve their desired objectives? Burnham's response to this question draws on two key bodies of work. The first is the broader tradition of Open Marxism, which centres on the recurring nature of capitalist crises (a field to which he has also made some notable contributions – see, for example, Burnham (1994, 2001b)). The second is the highly influential work of his late friend and University of Warwick colleague Jim Bulpitt (1986, 1995, 1996), whose research on the politics of domestic statecraft highlighted the enduring imperative for all governments to engage in strategies which enable them to project and maintain an image of governing competence. While Bulpitt's work has been well documented throughout the literature on British politics (e.g. see Critch, 2024), Burnham's own contribution pointed to the Blair government's use of de-politicisation as 'a

distinctive form of statecraft' which enabled them to maintain a level of economic credibility within a globalised, neo-liberal structural context unfavourable towards social democratic policymaking.

While Burnham's work was not the first to explore the idea of de-politicisation, his BJPIR article gave formal expression to a concept that had remained implicit within earlier, often theory-laden, accounts and translated this into a readily understood and applicable interpretation. His definition of de-politicisation as '*the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision-making*' has subsequently become the main starting point for much of the available scholarship on the topic. To Burnham (2001b: 128–129), this definition best captures an approach in which 'state managers retain, in many instances, arm's-length control over crucial economic and social processes, while simultaneously benefitting from the distancing effects of de-politicisation'. This approach diverged from the dominant governing strategies of earlier postwar administrations, who tended to favour politicised methods of economic control and intervention, placing responsibility for both success and failure directly onto state managers. This was a potentially regrettable consequence in a context dogged by the persistent inability of successive governments to resolve Britain's underlying economic problems. In the wake of the widely recognised failure of both Keynesianism and monetarism, the Blair government perceived the advantages of a de-politicised approach to economic management through the displacement of direct responsibility and control and by limiting the degree of governmental discretion in key economic policy areas.

Burnham identified three main ways in which New Labour employed the tactic of de-politicisation. First, though the reallocation of decision-making responsibility onto ostensibly 'non-political' bodies; a process that had found momentum under the later Thatcher governments and continued through the Major period. Burnham's work cited the granting of operational independence to the Bank of England as an example of the reassignment of responsibility to an arms-length body with relative autonomy from direct governmental control. Second, the Blair governments attempted to displace responsibility by increasing the 'accountability, transparency and external validation of policy' (141). This primarily involved the establishment of clear and open principles and codes for the management of fiscal policy in order to shape public expectations and insulate the government from any negative fallout from their tax and spending decisions. The third aspect of New Labour's de-politicisation was the establishment of 'credible rules' which would bind government decisions and constrain their room for discretion. The advantages to limiting governmental 'room for manoeuvre' in this way are neatly summarised as follows:

By switching from a politicised (discretion-based) to a depoliticised (rule-based) system, governments establish credible rules for economic management, thereby altering expectations concerning wage claims, in addition to 'externalising' responsibility for the imposition of financial discipline (134).

Burnham's work has advanced the study of de-politicisation in at least two other important respects. First, throughout his work, Burnham is at pains to point out that de-politicisation does not imply the absence of politics or even the complete removal of governmental control, two assumptions which have sometimes come to underpin wider de-politicisation scholarship. Rather, de-politicisation should be regarded as an intensely political manoeuvre (Burnham, 2014). A second key element of Burnham's work, which is not so evident in many other studies of de-politicisation, is that it seeks

to locate de-politicisation strategies within the longer-term historiography of British politics and, in particular, to utilise archival evidence from institutions such as the Bank of England and the National Archives. This latter approach adds notable empirical value by bringing to light the strategic thoughts and discussions of state managers in their attempts to manage economic crises and regulate class relations (for a further example of this archive-based approach, see Burnham, 2003). By delving into the postwar archives, Burnham's work reveals the fact that de-politicisation is not a governmental tool specific to neo-liberalism (although he recognises that it has become more prevalent in this context); rather it is better understood as a central part of the state's enduring efforts to regulate capitalist relations.

As a result, in a later debate with Jim Buller and Matthew Flinders, taking place again within the pages of the BJPIR, Burnham cautions against any tendency to depict a clear, linear transition from politicised to de-politicised governance over the course of the 20th century (Burnham, 2006; see also Buller and Flinders, 2005, 2006). Thus,

rather than conceptualising a simple transition from politicised to depoliticised forms of management, it is more productive to analyse statecraft regimes in terms of the dominance of one form while recognising that it will inevitably contain elements of the other. This enables a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the last hundred years of the British political economy to be produced (Burnham, 2006: 303).

In this context, Burnham argued that New Labour's governing strategies involved a mix of both 'old' and 'new' economic management techniques. As such, he points to areas of comparison between the de-politicisation strategies of the Thatcher and Blair governments and earlier attempts at de-politicisation, such as the return to the gold standard in 1925, the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act in 1971 and the aborted Operation Robot scheme of the 1950s (Burnham, 2006).

The BJPIR and de-politicisation

Burnham's definitive piece has been enormously influential in sparking a plethora of later attempts to develop both the theoretical and empirical understanding of de-politicisation (at the time of writing, Google Scholar reports that it has been cited no fewer than 852 times). Some of the key works have also been published by the BJPIR. Among the notable contributions to have appeared in this journal, the work by Jim Buller and Matthew Flinders (2005) alluded to briefly above, is particularly worthy of note. In their attempt to build on Burnham's original article, these authors provide a detailed and sweeping account of some of the key domestic dynamics that worked to thwart politicised strategies in the postwar period and open up the space for the development of de-politicised governing techniques from the 1980s onwards. In their view, the structural composition and inherent contradictions of the UK's postwar political economy created a 'strategically selective' environment which militated against the successful implementation of interventionist strategies, thereby creating the conditions for an 'evolutionary' transition to a more de-politicised mode of governance. As they put it, this outcome had become 'an end in itself, as opposed to a means to the broader objective of winning elections and achieving an image of governing competence' (540).

Buller and Flinders argued that this strategically selective context was shaped by five key features of the UK's postwar political economy: (1) a supposed 'duality' between the

industrial and political spheres; (2) a decentralisation of control over industrial relations; (3) the 'open' character of the British economy, which resulted in the privileging of financial interests over manufacturing capital; (4) the divided character of British capital and (5) the dominance of the principle of 'parliamentary sovereignty', which worked to undermine wider forms of interest representation. While Burnham's (2006) response to this piece suggested a number of potential problems with their interpretation (not least that Buller and Flinders viewed de-politicisation as an end in itself), their contribution is an important one, reminding scholars that de-politicisation strategies often emerge from a range of complex dynamics between domestic and external, as well as political, social and economic factors.

Subsequent to this exchange, the BJPIR has published a range of other notable contributions to the scholarship on de-politicisation. Steven Kettell (2008) discussed ways of judging the 'success' or 'failure' of de-politicisation via a reassessment of Britain's membership of the ERM (1990-92). Chris Rogers (2009) analysed the use of de-politicisation techniques by the 1974-79 Labour government as part of their efforts to secure financial discipline and wage restraint. Wood (2015) examined the appraisal of the drug Herceptin by NICE as a case study of the 'resilience' of de-politicised institutions in the face of politicisation pressures, and Caroline Kuzemko (2016) showed how different forms of energy de-politicisation had hampered the political capacity of UK governments to coordinate an effective climate change policy. Sam Warner (2019) examined trade union resistance and charted attempts to re-politicise the Industrial Relations Act of 1971.

One of the most recent of these studies is a further contribution to the pages of the BJPIR by Sam Warner, this time in collaboration with Darcy Luke (Warner and Luke, 2023). In their examination of the management of nationalised industries in the 1970s, these authors set out to challenge two common binary logics that often shape interpretations of postwar British politics. The first is the idea, previously noted by Burnham, of some type of simple demarcation between an earlier postwar period dominated by 'politicised' governing strategies and a post-Thatcher period characterised by de-politicised governance. Rather, these authors point to key continuities in the approaches that state managers throughout the postwar period have taken in their attempts to solve a series of 'recurrent dilemmas' (Haydu, 2009), including the use of quasi-market mechanisms as a disciplinary tool. The second, and related, idea that they seek to challenge is the notion that de-politicisation and politicisation strategies remain separate from one another. Instead, the authors point to what they term the 'intercurrence' of politicisation and de-politicisation, 'understood as the simultaneous operation of older and newer governance arrangements' (365).

This contribution is an important one in a number of respects. In applying the idea of the intercurrence of politicisation and de-politicisation, Warner and Luke provide a meaningful expression to, and strong empirical backing for, an idea that has been developing in the literature over a number of years (see Bates et al., 2014; Fawcett and Wood, 2017; Foster et al., 2014; Kettell, 2008) and which forms a key part of our own recent contribution to this journal (Kettell and Kerr, 2022). Warner and Luke also help to advance our understanding of the wider development of postwar British politics. In line with Burnham's own contribution and the earlier work of Bulpitt, Warner and Luke provide a corrective to accounts which over-rely on ideological explanations and place too much emphasis on a simple 'paradigm shift' from Keynesianism to neo-liberalism. Instead, their work reminds us that successive UK governments are confronted with a series of recurrent governing problems – which, as Burnham points out, remain unsolved – and that they tend to adopt

a mix of old and new management techniques, some of which are discretionary and some of which are placed at ‘one remove’, to try to address these problems.

At this point, it is worth noting that a number of these studies have been conducted by Pete Burnham’s former Ph.D. students. These include Steven Kettell, Chris Rogers and Caroline Kuzemko, as well as Sam Warner and Darcy Luke. Several of Burnham’s other former students have also made valuable contributions to debates on de-politicisation, such as Alex Sutton (2017), Pinar Dönmez (2019, 2021) and Thomas Da Costa Vieira (2023). These works help to showcase the variety of ways in which Burnham has influenced the study of de-politicisation, further underscoring the significance of his impact on this field.

Broad developments in the de-politicisation literature

Our aim in this section is to highlight a small selection of the wider literature on de-politicisation, to briefly note some of the ways in which key contributions have differed from, or built on Burnham’s work. One of the most influential of these has been the contribution of Colin Hay (2007), who proposed a slightly different conception of de-politicisation to that provided by Burnham. In his study of political disengagement, Hay posits an expansive conception of ‘politics’ as involving a mix of choice, agency, public deliberation and social interaction, linking politics to the ‘capacity for things to be different’ and locating this within what he referred to as ‘the realm of contingency and deliberation’. It follows from this that to depoliticise an issue is to restrict the capacity for human agency, choice and deliberation, or to move it to ‘the realm of fate or necessity’. This definition was later echoed by Jenkins (2011: 160), who suggested that: ‘a strategy of de-politicisation entails forming necessities, permanence, immobility, closure and fatalism and concealing/negating or removing contingency’.

In assessing the interaction between processes of politicisation and de-politicisation, Hay suggests that the realm of politics could be disaggregated into three main spheres, the ‘governmental’ sphere, the ‘public’ sphere and the ‘private’ sphere. Outside of these three spheres lies the ‘non-political’ realm of necessity and fate. This allows Hay to posit different stages of politicisation and de-politicisation, as issues are moved in and out of the realm of necessity and shifted through the private, public and governmental spheres. Hay’s identification of different spheres (or levels) of (de)politicisation has had a significant impact on later studies. It was most notably developed by Wood and Flinders (2014) in their account of the three ‘faces’ of de-politicisation. Building directly on Hay’s spheres, Wood and Flinders posit a dynamic interplay between ‘governmental’, ‘societal’ and ‘discursive’ forms of (de)politicisation, which ‘points to the existence, not of isolated or self-standing strategies but to the layering and interdependency of governmental, societal and discursive strategies in a range of policy areas’ (165). Thus, as the title to their piece suggests, these authors were keen to move some of the focus of future (de)politicisation literature ‘beyond the governmental sphere’ and into the ‘societal’ and ‘discursive’ realms.

This type of contribution has been characterised as a ‘second wave’ of perspectives on de-politicisation (Hay, 2014) – a body of literature which attempts to push the debate beyond what is sometimes regarded as a ‘narrow’ focus on de-politicisation as a ‘governmental’ tool of statecraft and the view that de-politicisation always comes in the form of a simple, singular government ‘act’. Thus, scholars have sought to move beyond the work of Burnham and others, such as Flinders and Buller (2006), who attempted to provide

more detailed accounts of the types of ‘principles, tactics and tools’ that governments deploy to achieve their depoliticising goals. In their place, these second wave accounts have tended to depict (de)politicisation as a more fluid and contingent process, often operating beyond the control of state actors. This operational complexity has been well captured, for example, by Wood’s (2016) analysis of de-politicisation in respect of the UK’s flooding crisis of 2007. Here, Wood shows that de-politicisation outcomes were not simply due to the strategic actions of state officials, but owed much to the way in which the crisis was framed by non-state actors, particularly elements of the media. In another example, Johnson et al. (2024) have examined the strategic approach to opposition taken by the Labour party leader Keir Starmer, arguing that he sought to depoliticise issues by applying principles of law to the political domain, a process that they describe as one of ‘juridification’.

A key part of this more fluid conception of de-politicisation is the recognition, noted earlier, that politicising and depoliticising processes are often intertwined in a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship with one another. Thus, we see a gradual shift within the literature towards increasing recognition of the ‘intercurrence’ of (de)politicising effects. One of the first studies to flag up this idea was by Bates et al. (2014: 244). As they put it:

politicisation and depoliticisation should not be viewed solely and simply as opposing forces, as much of the literature does, but rather as operating, at least sometimes, as parallel and simultaneous socioeconomic trends within and between governmental, public and private realms.

Another key aspect of this growing tendency to view (de)politicisation as an often fluid, contingent and dynamic process is the increasing focus on what has, following Wood and Flinders (2014), come to be termed ‘discursive depoliticisation’ (e.g. see Fawcett and Wood, 2017; Hjermann, 2023; Jessop, 2014). This focuses attention on the way in which particular issues are framed, moving the focus away from more institutional forms of de-politicised strategy. Baker et al. (2024) provide an interesting example of this, showing how the Bank of England has been able to protect its independence and dampen perceptions of creeping politicisation resulting from policy spillover by using its communicative agency to manage expectations across the financial system. Our own recent study (Kettell and Kerr, 2022) of the rhetoric used by UK government ministers during the COVID-19 pandemic can be located within this strand of discursive de-politicisation literature. In this, we drew on insights from Fawcett and Wood’s (2017) research into the governance of coal seam gas extraction in New South Wales, which showed that, in their attempts to regulate conflicts over coal seam gas extraction, policy-makers used ‘storytelling’ as a depoliticising strategy and as a means of denying the concerns of protesters. Importantly, Fawcett and Wood’s study highlights the efforts of government officials to discursively ‘hop’ between stories which have simultaneous politicising and depoliticising effects, further highlighting the issue of intercurrence.

In this type of study we see key differences with the depiction of de-politicisation put forward by Burnham’s initial contribution. While Burnham’s work, as with the majority of studies, highlights de-politicisation strategies which are deployed through a governmental ‘act’ – one which is often held in place over the medium to long term – more recent studies have a tendency to highlight a more complex and dynamic relationship between simultaneous politicising and depoliticising forces. On a related theme, a number of scholars have also sought to advance our understanding by seeking to untangle the

dynamics through which strategies of de-politicisation break down, drawing out another dimension of the complex interplay between politicising and depoliticising forces. Dönmez and Sutton (2020) have shown how attempts by the UK government to depoliticise immigration policy by discursively using nationalist ideologies to shift the blame onto globalisation and the institutions of the EU failed, leading to a re-politicisation of the issue and a subsequent ‘crisis’ of immigration. Similarly, Dönmez (2021) has captured the way in which civil society organisations and campaigns were able to progressively politicise the imposition of austerity in Turkey in the face of governmental attempts to depoliticise the issue, and Onoda (2024) examines the breakdown of regulatory structures for drug rationing in the United Kingdom and France, showing how attempts to depoliticise issues by handing control to an ‘arms length’ agency can provoke a public backlash.

Another group of studies have also attempted to advance the study of de-politicisation by pushing beyond the study of single cases (the focal point of most work in this area) to draw insights from more nuanced comparative analyses of de-politicisation strategies across different political systems. Key examples here include Dönmez and Zemandl’s (2019) analysis of monetary policymaking in Turkey and Hungary; the edited volume by Buller et al. (2019 (2018)), which examines strategies of de-politicisation from a variety of countries around Europe, such as Bulgaria, Portugal and Cyprus; and Wamsley (2023), who shows how state managers in the United Kingdom and the United States used de-politicisation techniques and processes to deal with the fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis by framing the imposition of austerity as a technical necessity rather than a political choice.

By developing the concept of de-politicisation in multiple ways, the second wave of de-politicisation studies has clearly added to the depth and sophistication of our understanding of (de)politicising processes. Yet some of the differences between the first and second waves can sometimes be overstated. As Hay (2014) astutely points out, many of the insights derived from this so-called ‘second wave’ of de-politicisation literature draw directly from insights from the first wave. As such, although scholars have gradually expanded the idea and application of de-politicisation, few studies ultimately stray too far from the original conception and definition provided by Burnham. More importantly perhaps, given the criticism that the first wave literature was too ‘narrowly’ focused on governmental actors, the majority of studies continue to take a state-centric approach, despite their recognition of a much wider variety of tactics and methods through which de-politicisation can be deployed.

Conclusion

In our short contribution to this special issue, we have attempted to do three things. First, to highlight the pivotal role that the BJPIR has played in initiating and helping to develop the important body of scholarship on de-politicisation. Second, to give a brief and (admittedly) selective overview of some of the key developments and contributions to those debates. And third, to pay tribute to the invaluable and definitive contribution that Pete Burnham’s work has made to our understanding of this enduring form of statecraft.

As we have tried to show, since Burnham’s seminal contribution a number of studies have expanded the conception of de-politicisation in a variety of ways. In particular, these studies have pointed to the non-binary character of politicised and de-politicised forms of governance, and have expanded our understanding of de-politicisation strategies to include methods and techniques that go beyond the idea of de-politicisation as a singular

governing act. In such ways, these studies have further refined and developed our recognition and understanding of the wide variety of ways that de-politicisation can be deployed.

At the same time, however, despite a number of conceptual advances, most studies of de-politicisation remain broadly aligned with the spirit of Burnham's original contribution. Most continue to concentrate their attention on the institutions of the state, or on the attempts by policy actors to shape expectations, maintain credibility and manage or attempt to avoid points of crisis. In this sense, Burnham's approach to de-politicisation remains highly relevant. Indeed, as commonly accepted methods of de-politicisation (such as the granting of central bank independence or the application of fiscal rules) face increasing levels of public scrutiny in today's political environment, the need for political science to be attentive to these forms of statecraft becomes ever more pertinent. This is particularly evident in the United Kingdom, where the incoming Labour government faces the daunting task of addressing the fallout from a decade-and-a-half of governing failure amid slow economic growth, public discontent and sustained pressure on public services. In this context, the tensions between a potentially technocratic approach to government and demands for democratic accountability are likely to become increasingly apparent.

Yet, as the study of de-politicisation itself reveals, the field of the 'political' extends beyond the confines of the state's decision-making and policymaking processes. Perhaps, then, the study of de-politicisation is due for a 'third wave' of research that seeks to push these boundaries further, taking the concept into new territories and directions. While it is by no means our intention here to set out an agenda for future research, a number of potential areas for future development can nevertheless be identified. First, the tendency to focus on single-country cases could, for example, be supplemented by more comparative analyses, particularly studies which look beyond the Western context, highlighting possible variations in depoliticising strategies between different political contexts and historical periods. Second, there is considerable scope for scholars to apply de-politicisation as an analytical lens to the study of social movements, political identities and actors in global civil society, thereby developing the concept beyond the confines of the state and its central institutions. Third, research into the longer-term effects of de-politicisation could also help us better understand its enduring impact on democratic institutions and civic engagement, considering the extent to which particular modes and instances of de-politicisation become normalised, and what this could mean for democratic cultures and processes. Finally, research into the intersectional character of de-politicisation would also help to deepen our understanding of its longer-term effects, by exploring the differential impact that de-politicisation strategies might have on social groups by factors such as race, class and gender. Whatever directions future scholarship might take, we have little doubt that the BJPIR will continue to play an important role in highlighting those developments.

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