

# Exploring the role of the state in the depoliticisation of UK transport policy

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## Introduction

In recent years there have been significant attempts to provide analytical clarity on what constitutes depoliticisation and the contexts in which it occurs. Wood and Flinders' (2014) 'three faces' (governmental, societal and discursive) organising perspective of depoliticisation, is one such notable attempt. The three faces approach aims to advance the field of depoliticisation away from a focus on definitional debates, towards an identification of the nuance of depoliticisation in practice. Wood and Flinders (2014) argue that depoliticisation processes should not be treated as isolated individual strategies, but rather as having overlaps and blurred boundaries as issues become contested and repoliticised (Wood and Flinders 2014, 165).

However, while such analytical development has led to calls for more empirical investigation of the dynamics of de and repoliticisation (Hay 2014, Wood and Flinders 2014), such studies have remained limited, meaning the utility of these analytical developments is yet to be fully interrogated (Wolf and Van Dooren 2018). This article aims to contribute to the contemporary body of knowledge on depoliticisation, by applying the three faces organising perspective to a longitudinal analysis of transport policy in the UK. This case is of interest because acceptance of the current dominant policy solution – infrastructure spending - appears to have come full circle over a 30 year period.

The UK government is implementing a National Infrastructure Plan that allocates £78bn of funding to transport projects, making transport the most significant part of the infrastructure investment pipeline in coming years (IPA, 2017). The government argues that this investment is needed in order to 'increase productivity and drive economic growth' across the country (DfT, 2017, 6). This major infrastructure programme has strong parallels with the 'Roads for Prosperity' investment plan, adopted in the 1980s, but which collapsed by the mid-1990s in the face of major public protests, technical analysis which showed that congestion would continue to rise, and concerns over affordability. Depoliticisation is valuable in helping to understand how the removal of contingency (through various means) can shape policy processes, and therefore is a potentially fruitful approach for exploring, over time, the processes which have led to the re-emergence of this once discredited policy solution.

In applying the three faces organising perspective across a thirty year time period, the research finds that today's focus on infrastructure provision is enabled as a legitimate policy solution, due to a number of intersecting and reinforcing depoliticisation processes, supporting the argument underpinning the three faces approach (Wood and Flinders 2014). However, the article also identifies ways in which the three faces organising perspective is challenged and avenues for further development, most notably in relation to the role of the state, and the need for a more fine-grained recognition of what aspect of policy – what aspect of the 'issue' (policy solution or problem) - is being de and repoliticised.

The article has six sections. Section one introduces the depoliticisation literature and in particular, the 'three faces' perspective on depoliticisation. Section two then outlines the methodology used to apply the three faces approach. In section three we trace the policy processes underpinning transport policy from 'Roads to Prosperity' onwards; identifying four periods of depoliticisation. Section four then reflects on what utilising the three faces approach

helps us explain about the case. While section five, discusses the implications of the case's findings for the theoretical development of the three faces approach and the depoliticisation literature more broadly. In section six, the article sets out its key conclusions.

## **1. Theoretical Lens: 'Three Faces' of Depoliticisation**

At the core of much of the depoliticisation literature has been an attempt to understand 'the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision making' (Burnham 2001, 136). Such an understanding treats depoliticisation as a process of statecraft. A range of 'tools, mechanisms and institutions' are employed by politicians in an 'attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship' or 'to persuade the demos that they can no longer be reasonably held responsible for a certain issue, policy field or specific decisions' (Flinders and Buller 2006, 295). Therefore, as argued by Burnham (2001, 136), in understanding depoliticisation as a governing strategy, depoliticisation 'remains highly political' and 'should not be taken to mean the direct removal of politics from social and economic spheres or the simple withdrawal of political power or influence.'

While this understanding of depoliticisation has borne fruitful empirical analysis (for example, Beveridge 2012, James 2010, Newman 2009), it has been criticised for utilising a too state-centred understanding of the political which underplays other catalysts for the removal of the political (Jenkins 2013). In seeking to redress this imbalance and in turn bring 'a degree of analytical order on a hitherto confused and complex intellectual terrain' Wood and Flinders (2014, 156) developed a 'three faces' - 'governmental', 'societal' and 'discursive' - 'organising perspective' of depoliticisation. This perspective aims to bring to the fore the importance of both the *content* of depoliticisation and the *context* in which depoliticisation is occurring, and therefore to better elucidate the interplay between them (Bates et al 2014, Wood and Flinders 2014).

The typology builds on Hay's (2007, 79) understanding of the 'political' as the 'realm of contingency and deliberation' and Hay's disaggregation of the political into three 'spheres'; the governmental, public (non-governmental) and private. Depoliticisation in turn refers to the processes by which an issue becomes less political or removed from the political realm all together; the 'non-political' referring to the 'realm of necessity' in which 'in the absence of the capacity for human agency' fate and nature reign supreme (Hay 2007, 79). In contrast, an issue can be considered politicized when it becomes 'the subject of deliberation, decision making and human agency' where previously it was not (Hay 2007, 81) and is 'apparent to a wider group of people' than those with an immediate or obvious interest in the issue (Beveridge and Naumann 2014, 279). As Beveridge and Naumann (2014, 278-279) note politicisation 'might occur through the realisation that interests are under threat, and that needs will not be met.'

Politicisation and depoliticisation are therefore not treated as 'fixed states, but ongoing dynamic processes' with the capacity for political agency to be exercised throughout (Beveridge and Naumann 2014, 278). As Wood and Flinders (2014, 154) note, the 'immediate benefit' of considering depoliticisation in this way - as the movement between political spheres - is that 'it identifies forms of both politicisation and depoliticisation as mirror-image developments across a spectrum of public governance.'

The first face of depoliticisation is governmental; focussing ‘on the transfer of issues from the governmental sphere to the public sphere through the “delegation” of those issues by politicians to arm’s-length bodies, judicial structures or technocratic rule-based systems that limit discretion’ (Wood and Flinders 2014, 165). In synthesising the literature, Wood and Flinders (2014, 158) identify three key tools of governmental depoliticisation utilised by the state.

The first is the ‘institutional approach’ of creating and giving quasi-autonomous bodies, agencies, commissions and boards decision making powers which in turn remove the political character of the policymaking process (Burnham 2001, Kuzemko 2016). The second tool ‘revolves around the “binding of hands” of politicians through the introduction of new rules and regulations that are designed to limit and constrain their discretion’ (Wood and Flinders 2014, 158). Related to this second tool, the third is that politicians utilise the ‘problem of many hands’ (the diffusion of responsibility across a range of interdependent actors) as a way of blurring accountability and avoiding individual responsibility.

The second ‘face’ of depoliticisation is ‘societal’; referring to ‘the transition of issues from the public sphere to the private sphere and focuses on the existence of choice, capacity, deliberation and the shift towards individualised responses to collective social challenges’ (Wood and Flinders 2014, 165). For example, this form of depoliticisation would treat the response to environmental degradation as the responsibility of consumers who should make sustainable choices through the marketplace, rather than as the responsibility of government or businesses (Hay 2007, 85). This form of depoliticisation reflects a situation in which there is ‘very little debate about major social issues or political options alongside a very barren political landscape in terms of public engagement and social dynamism’ (Wood and Flinders 2014, 159). In turn, it is argued that governmental depoliticisation (the first face) is often accompanied by societal depoliticisation (the second face). The depoliticisation process may also work the other way; the social depoliticisation of an issue – its decline as a ‘salient matter in societal debate’ – ‘fuelling, or at least facilitating’ governmental depoliticisation; the lack of public consciousness and salience of the issue making delegation easier (Wood and Flinders 2014, 161).

The third face is ‘discursive depoliticisation’, which involves the movement of issues from the private realm to the ‘realm of necessity’ in which contingency is absent. This form of depoliticisation focuses on the use of language and ideas, in identifying processes that while often of our own making, are treated as no longer having the capacity to be managed (Watson and Hay 2003). This form of depoliticisation ‘...disavows and denies the very possibility of deliberation, choice and human agency, and entails a certain fatalism – be it optimistic or pessimistic’ (Hay 2007, 87). Operationalisation of a TINA discourse – ‘There is no alternative’ is an example of this form of depoliticisation, and often exercised in justifying economic policies (Miró 2019; Standring 2018).

A key tenet of Wood and Flinders’s (2014, 165) argument is that the three ‘faces’ of depoliticisation should not be treated as strategies existing in isolation, but instead have ‘areas of overlap and blurred boundaries’. The organising perspective suggests ‘that specific themes or decisions will be the focus of competing pressures and narratives, as different social groups seek to either politicise, depoliticise or repoliticise certain issues’ (Wood and Flinders 2014, 165). As Bates et al (2014, 246) identify, ‘...both politicising and depoliticising processes [can

occur] within the same moment and same political space in that depoliticising content can be found within contextual politicising shifts and vice versa’.

Such theorising calls for more empirical research on processes of depoliticisation (Hay 2014, Wood and Flinders 2014). Indeed, while not applying the three faces typology specifically, such empirical studies have been forthcoming, for example Kuzemko (2016) on the energy sector, Hartley, Pearce and Taylor (2017) on research governance, Etherington and Jones (2018) on city region governance, and Standring (2018) and Miró (2019) on austerity. However, as Wolf and Van Dooren (2018, 289) note, how ‘politicization, depoliticization, and repoliticization interact...still remains an underexamined topic in the (de)politicization literature.’

This article’s longitudinal approach therefore aims to help fill this gap in the research on depoliticization, and in doing so assess the applicability of the ‘three faces’ organising perspective in practice. Moreover, it responds to calls for greater recognition of the temporal dimension in understanding de and repoliticisation processes (Beveridge 2017), while also adding to the growing empirical literature, which until recently has remained ‘...relatively narrow in empirical depth and scope...’ (Beveridge 2017, 591).

## **2. Research Design and Methodology**

The empirical aim of this article is to understand the processes that have led to infrastructure provision re-emerging as a central tenet of UK transport policy, with the contention that depoliticisation theorising will aid understanding of these processes. Depoliticisation is operationalised at the micro-level (see Wood 2016) through process-tracing; a method used fruitfully in other studies of depoliticisation (Bates et al., 2014; Beveridge and Naumann, 2014). As Collier (2011, 824) explains, process tracing ‘is an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence—often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena.’ Etherington and Jones (2018) also reinforce the importance of process and studying periods in which specific processes unfold as important for identifying depoliticisation processes. However Collier (2011, 824) highlights how it is impossible to understand the unfolding of events, without being able to first understand a situation adequately at one point in time, and therefore stresses the importance of ‘taking good snapshots at a series of specific moments’. In this study, ‘snapshots’ are gained through the use of documentation as the primary source of data.

One of the strengths of documentary analysis is as a means of ‘tracking change and development’ which complements the aims of process-tracing (Bowen 2009, 30). However, as Beach (2017, 12) notes, ‘it is important to be clear about where in the empirical record one would expect the evidence to be found’ for causal mechanisms. Given this article’s focus on change to transport policy and the reasons for this, the focus is on documentation relating to policy development. It is in 1989 that the white paper ‘Roads for Prosperity’ (DoT 1989) proposed an ‘unprecedented’ level of spending on transport infrastructure in response to high traffic growth forecasts and therefore can be identified as an appropriate ‘critical juncture’ from where to begin the data collection (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 26). The analysis is therefore longitudinal over a 30 year period, and therefore responds to calls for a greater recognition of

temporality in the analysis of depoliticisation processes (Beveridge 2017, Etherington and Jones 2018).

The strategy for data collection started with identifying the key milestones of policy action (see Figure 1) enacted from Roads to Prosperity onwards. For example the publication of white papers and tabling of legislation. Key word searches relating to these policies (such as their name, but also the issue such as ‘roads’ and ‘traffic’) were used to find relevant documents for analysis. In total over 150 documents were analysed, including Hansard transcripts of House of Commons and House of Lords debates; policy documents (including reports, briefing notes, and White and Green papers); transcripts of ministerial speeches; and secondary sources such as media reports and briefings by the House of Commons Library.

Given the nature of the data collected, the type of evidence gathered falls in to one of two categories. The first is categorised as ‘account’ based; evidence from the content of empirical material (for example, policy aims as stated in a White Paper). The second is ‘trace’ evidence, in which the very existence of such evidence provides proof that may support a causal inference (for example, a non-governmental agency being set up, may be an example of a government devolving responsibility) (Beach 2017, 14). As Beach (2017, 13) notes, it is important ‘to situate a particular piece of evidence within the full body of potential evidence in a given case’ in order to avoid the ‘cherry picking of evidence’. Analysis of a range of different forms of primary and secondary evidence (analysing parliamentary debate transcripts, alongside published policy documents and media reports for example) therefore enabled triangulation and cross-checking of the inferences made (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 27).

As Collier (2011, 824) notes; ‘Identifying evidence that can be interpreted as diagnostic depends centrally on prior knowledge’. The three faces organising perspective provides this prior knowledge for our purposes. The three faces perspective draws comprehensively on evidence from previous depoliticisation research to provide characterisations of how depoliticisation can be operationalised and in turn enables the identification of the phenomena of analytical interest. Table 1, adapted from Wood and Flinders (2014), outlines the key characteristics of each face of depoliticisation. Once all evidence was collected, it was coded for instances of depoliticisation, using the three faces framework. For example, where a Minister in a House of Commons debate referred to traffic growth as an inevitability it was coded as an example of discursive depoliticisation. Where a government white paper deferred to the judgement of an arms-length agency or where a Bill enacted responsibility to another organisation it was coded as an example of governmental depoliticisation.

### **Table 1 Here**

### **3. Transport Policy: Four Periods of De (and re) Politicisation**

Through process tracing, four ‘periods’ which demarcate shifts in approach to transport policy are identified, highlighting what Etherington and Jones (2018, 53) refer to as the importance of ‘periodization’ in depoliticisation. These periods represent key de (and-re)politicisation processes (discussed in section 4). The periods are shown in Figure 1, which also includes many of the key events of the period referred to in the text below, alongside an indication of changes in the party in power through the period.

## Figure 1 Here

### *Period One (1989-1996): Politicisation of Infrastructure as a Response to Travel Demand*

In 1989 the Department of Transport forecast that there would be an ‘unprecedented’ increase of 142% in vehicle miles travelled (travel demand) by 2025 (DoT 1989, annex). The government argued that; ‘...the prospect – unless further action is taken – is one of growing congestion...ever increasing delays and costs, mak[ing] British Industry less able to compete internationally...’ (DoT 1989, para 24-25). In response, the Transport Secretary, Paul Channon argued that; ‘our main efforts to provide additional transport capacity in support of growth and prosperity must be directed towards widening existing roads and building new ones’ (Hansard 1989, cols 483-4). A high profile commitment of six billion pounds of investment (£14.2bn in 2017 prices) for new motorways and trunk roads was subsequently made in the government’s investment strategy ‘Roads for Prosperity’; the very title of which linking economic growth with the necessity of facilitating the inevitability of travel demand growth.

The implementation of *Roads for Prosperity* however, faced significant opposition (and much media attention) with organised groups formed to protest road infrastructure projects across the UK, on the basis that these schemes were damaging to protected and high grade environmental sites as well as to the social fabric of the local areas. Coupled with this, academic research began to undermine increasing road capacity as a reasonable policy response to travel demand growth. First, analysis showed that if the government’s traffic growth forecasts were right then the scale of the road building programme was never going to be sufficient to reduce congestion. Second, providing more road space would actually induce more road-based trips and would therefore only make congestion worse in the long run. Third, most trips were found to start and end in urban areas where there was neither space nor appetite for road expansion (Goodwin et al., 1991).

In response, the government launched what it referred to as a ‘great debate’ on what its approach to tackling growth in travel demand should be, given that its infrastructure programme had proved so controversial (DoT 1996, 5). In its response to the ‘debate’ the government accepted the need to alter its approach and recognised ‘...the need for measures which influence traffic, and reduce traffic growth’ (DoT 1996, 92). However, despite calls in the consultation for national traffic reduction targets as one such measure, the government argued they were not practicable and that they posed ‘too great a risk of imposing costs on society which would not be justified by the benefits produced’ (DoT 1996, 92). Instead, the government argued that it was at the local rather than national level, where the greatest levers were available to reduce travel demand (Hansard 1997). The subsequent Road Traffic Reduction Bill, placed a duty on local authorities to draw up local traffic reduction plans and set targets for reducing and curtailing traffic in their area and was passed into law in March 1997, just prior to the general election.

This devolved approach was accompanied by the Department of Transport’s (DoT 1996, 12) caveat that while the consequences of growth in travel demand need to be recognised ‘other factors need to be taken into account, especially competitiveness and freedom of choice’ (DoT 1996, 12). It argued that ‘Freedom to travel, and to choose how and when to travel, or to transport goods, is a principle which the Government firmly supports’ (DoT 1996, 32). The

Department of Transport noted that 'Choice of travel mode is one area where people can make responsible decisions' for themselves (DoT 1996, 33).

*Period Two (1997-2000): Depoliticising Issues of Travel Demand to the Local Level*

The election of a new government in 1997 opened a window of opportunity for supporters of a national travel reduction target to have another attempt at legislation, introducing a revised Road Traffic Reduction (*United Kingdom Targets*) Bill. The Bill stated that the Secretary of State should adopt an explicit set of national targets for reducing travel demand over the following decade. The argument was that local targets would only be meaningful if set in the context of a national strategy on travel demand reduction. However, as with the Conservative government before it, the New Labour government was reluctant to set an explicit national target.

The government would only support the Bill with the caveat that the Secretary of State was not required to specify a target for travel demand reduction if they considered other targets or measures (for example relating to air quality or the environment) were 'more appropriate for the purpose of reducing the adverse impacts' of travel demand (Hansard 1998). The then Secretary of State for Transport, John Prescott, argued that such an approach was sensible because 'no country in the developed world has cut traffic while growing the economy' (BBC News 1999).

With the Bill passed, the government continued to refuse to set a specific travel demand reduction target. In so doing they deferred to advice from the Commission for Integrated Transport; an arms-length advisory body it had established. The Commission argued that national targets would mask local variation in demand, restrict flexibility and incentivise local areas to only work to the target. They also reiterated the position of the previous Conservative Government, that most of the tools in the policy 'armoury' should be agreed on and implemented 'at local level in line with the new principles of local autonomy' (CfIT 1999, 8). The 1998 white paper *A New Deal for Transport* sought to bolster this autonomy, and again put some political distance between central government and the problem of travel demand.

*A New Deal for Transport* proposed legislating to allow local authorities to implement road user charging schemes and work place parking levies to reduce travel demand. After consultation, the legislation was brought forward under the Local Transport Act 2000. The Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions, John Redwood, argued that such schemes showed the government had a 'vendetta' against motorists (BBC 1999). In turn, the Government made concessions, promising no road charging schemes would be introduced for at least four years until local authorities could ensure they were ready for such a scheme and that referenda should be used to approve the schemes if necessary (The Guardian 1999).

Just at the point where the government appeared to have removed travel demand reduction from the political agenda, it faced a crisis that re-politicised the issue and exposed its lack of commitment to other demand reduction policies. Back in 1993, the then Conservative government had introduced a 'Fuel Duty Escalator', which meant that the tax on fuel at the pump increased initially at 5% a year and then 3% a year, which the Labour administration



continued. Over the course of seven years the Escalator moved the UK from one of the cheapest places to buy petrol in Europe to one of the most expensive. A protest by farmers and hauliers in September 2000 successfully blockaded several oil refineries, which coupled with panic buying at the pumps, led to a national shortage in fuel that lasted several days (Marsden, 2002). The Escalator was abandoned by Prime Minister Tony Blair without any reference to the political logic for using fuel price to manage or limit travel demand. The incident instead underlined the political dimension of any form of intervention on transport pricing.

### *Period Three (2000 – 2009): Policy Drift due to Re-Politicisation of Policy Solutions*

In 2004, the Department for Transport brought forward a new white paper (DfT 2004). Entitled 'The Future of Transport: A Network for 2030', the White Paper promised to address historic underinvestment in the transport network. The conflicts between concerns over the environmental impacts of road building and the sensitivities of pro-actively managing demand are evident throughout the document, with road building argued for only where 'it makes economic sense, and is realistic environmentally' (DfT 2004, forward). Demand management policies, in particular road user charging, were argued to be a necessary part of future travel demand management to 'lock in' the benefits that the additional capacity from road building would bring (DfT 2004, forward).

Sir Rod Eddington was subsequently commissioned by the government to assess the long term links between UK economic growth and transport to further set out the right pathway for future investments. The report gave high profile support to a national congestion charge scheme, arguing it was the most appropriate way to tackle the negative externality of congestion, facilitate economic growth and would deliver benefits 'unrivalled by any other intervention' (Eddington 2006, 39). The then Secretary of State for Transport, Douglas Alexander subsequently argued that his 'personal priority' would be to move the debate on national road charging 'from "why" to "how" we might make a national system work in practice' (Alexander 2006).

Six months after Alexander's speech an e-petition was set up on the government's Number 10 Downing Street website in opposition to introduction of a national road-pricing scheme, and by its close in February 2007, had received 1,811,424 signatures, the largest amount for any Number 10 petition up to that point. The issue became high profile through intense protest from the motor lobby and civil liberties groups (Butcher 2010). Concerns were raised as to the type of technology and surveillance that would be needed for such a system to work effectively, the amount and type of data it would collect, and its potential implications. Consequently, the government backed away from publically supporting a national road user charging scheme and emphasised the need for public support before any scheme would be taken forward (Butcher 2010, 14).

As a consequence, the government re-directed its attention back to delegating responsibility to the local level through the announcement of the Transport Innovation Fund which would support local authorities to implement their own locally based demand management schemes. However, while national financial support was there, no public support from Ministers for local schemes was forthcoming. In 2007 Greater Manchester's road charging scheme, supported by the Fund, was granted approval by the government. However, when put to a local referendum,

79.2 per cent voted ‘no’ on a turnout of 53 per cent. It had been a similar story four years earlier in Edinburgh, where their scheme was also rejected through a referendum (Butcher 2016, 15-16).

*Period Four (2009 – 2018): Infrastructure Re-Politicised as a Policy Solution for Economic Growth*

In the face of the economic downturn that followed the global financial crisis in 2008, the automotive sector looked to national governments to support the international market for car purchasing. The UK government offered this support in two ways. The first was the introduction of scrappage schemes where people were offered incentives for scrapping older vehicles and replacing them with a new one, which the motor manufacturers argued was necessary for the sustainability of the industry and would help accelerate the uptake of less polluting vehicles (NAIGT 2009).

With a new Coalition government in 2010, and the scrappage scheme ended, government support for the automotive sector continued in a second, more indirect way, through investment in research and development, re-framing support for the sector as a solution to the problem of the negative externalities of inevitable travel demand (DfT 2011). In 2013 the government committed £900 billion of capital investment to support the development of Ultra Low Emission Vehicles (DfT 2013). In justifying this spending the Department for Transport (DfT, 2013, 6) argued that ‘Increasing use of ultra-low emission vehicles...has a very important role to play in supporting mobility while reducing the carbon and air quality impact of road transport.’ Moreover, the Department’s most recent policy document ‘Road to Zero’ links delivery of zero emissions vehicles explicitly with the Industrial Strategy (DfT 2018b). In doing so, the policy couples the achievement of economic growth with the importance of the environment, in marked contrast to the separation of the two agendas in Period 1.

The focus on the industrial strategy is also coupled with a shift in the locus of control over infrastructure from the Department for Transport to the Treasury. There has been the establishment of bodies such as the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (which works across Treasury and the Cabinet Office as a centre of excellence for project delivery) and the National Infrastructure Commission as a non-Ministerial government department tasked with advising the Government on the infrastructure needs of the UK every five years through a National Infrastructure Assessment for all sectors.

Whilst the immediate period from 2009 to 2010 saw real term reductions in planned transport spending, by 2011 a new infrastructure led approach to transport policy is gaining momentum. The Treasury published its first National Infrastructure Plan setting out the importance of expenditure on infrastructure as both a means to strengthening the construction sector but also to remaining globally competitive (Docherty et al., 2018). Central government engaged in a variety of exercises linking the need for infrastructure to economic growth and a failure to invest to falling behind in global competitiveness (Cameron, 2012; HM Treasury, 2011; DfT, 2014). The increased movement of goods and people was also seen to be a necessary and inevitable part of economic growth (DfT, 2013; DfT, 2014). Here, the dynamic has shifted back to that of the late 1980s but in even stronger terms, with the spectre of economic downturns, ‘lost jobs’ and housing shortages hanging over any decisions not to build more roads (DfT, 2017). As well

as seeking guidance on future infrastructure needs from the arm's length National Infrastructure Commission, the central government also converted the agency responsible for motorways and major road construction and maintenance to a government-owned company. Critically, the new company (Highways England) receives a funding settlement for five years which has more than doubled its capital programme, and its activities are overseen by a regulator (the Office of Road and Rail).

#### **4. Reflections on the Case**

Casting the analysis over an extended period of time has enabled identification of the interweaving depoliticising and repoliticising processes and logics that led to the downfall of the infrastructure driven transport policy of the 1980s and the pathways and mechanisms that have facilitated its re-emergence as a legitimate policy approach in 2019. Moreover, utilising the three faces of depoliticisation approach has helped to identify how the removal of contingency (through various means) has affected this policy process. The 'face' of depoliticisation and the act accompanying it within each period, are identified in Table 2.

#### **Table 2 Here**

The analysis finds three key factors that have enabled the re-emergence of infrastructure-led policy. First, there is a sustained discursive depoliticisation of the volume of demand from Period Two onwards, after it became repoliticised in Period One. Explicit reference to reducing the amount of travel demand stops after the Traffic Reduction Bill of 1997 and in its place is reoccurring reference to the inevitability of future demand rises and the need to accommodate for this, be this through increasing road capacity or facilitating public uptake of low-emission vehicles. This discursive depoliticisation is enabled through the sustained decoupling of the volume of travel demand, from its negative externalities. Although subtle, this has a significant bearing on politicisation processes. The negative externalities of demand become the problem to be solved, rather than demand in and of itself.

Related to the first factor is the second, also a tool of discursive depoliticisation; the argument that successful economic growth is predicated on growing travel demand. This discourse is used in justifying the government's repeated attempts to remove travel demand as an issue from the governmental sphere in the face of repoliticising processes. This is seen across all four periods, even the end of Period One and start of Period Two where arguably the issue of travel demand is at its peak of politicisation. For example, the potential effect a national travel demand reduction target would have on national competitiveness was used to justify the reticence of implementing one. Paradoxically, even where central government moots the idea of a national congestion charge in Period Three, this is because of its potential to lock in the economic benefits of travel growth.

It is important to contrast the discursive depoliticisation of travel demand growth with the evidence. The Department for Transport's own statistics show that since the mid-1990s the amount of travel per capita by car, has fallen on average by 10% (DfT, 2018a). Total commute trips have also been falling over a similar period both per capita and in total as the employment market changes (Le Vine et al., 2017). Moreover, it is largely demographic factors – the growth in population from net immigration and aging – which has maintained overall travel demand,

not economic activity (Marsden et al. 2018). Therefore, the inevitability of growth in travel demand and the necessity of such growth for good economic performance is open to challenge.

The third factor is the central government's sustained shifting of responsibility for mitigation of the negative externalities of travel demand to the local government level and to the private sphere. Here we see the arena shifting inherent in processes of governmental depoliticisation reinforced by the framing of travel demand as an essentially private issue; one of individual choice. In turn, this is used by government as a defensive risk management strategy, shifting the need for potentially controversial decision making from the central, down to local government level (Flinders and Buller 2006, 297). This finding supports the work of Stranding (2018) who finds that rather than removing politics, depoliticisation processes 'relocate' politics to different arenas.

With responsibility for addressing the negative externalities of travel demand depoliticised to the local level and within the private sphere, the ability to implement a national infrastructure policy that may increase many of the negative externalities of travel demand is enabled. The expansion of inter-urban road expenditure is now 'demanded' through an arm's length body and delivered through a government company with oversight by a regulator. Central government is a step removed from the major infrastructure programme it is funding relative to the 1990s. The overspill impacts (onto local networks), which contributed to the failure of the roads programme in the 1990s, remain unresolved but have been relocated to the local level.

That action is not taken at a local level is unsurprising given policy responses to travel demand can become politicised in the social realm incredibly quickly and intensely. As Stranding (2018, 160) notes, this repoliticisation may be due to changes to the economic and political conditions within which initial depoliticisation strategies are instigated, which in turn mean 'politics may (re)emerge in unexpected and unpredictable ways.' Such changes in conditions were seen in the case presented here, for example with the changing of government and economic downturn, redefining and bringing attention to existing policy solutions.

## **5. Implications for Depoliticisation**

Apparent within each of the factors identified in Section 4, and indeed in the processes of repoliticisation of travel demand, is the co-existence of the three different 'faces' of depoliticisation (see Table 2). It is through analysing processes over an extended period of time that the co-existence of these faces is identifiable. Moreover, in many instances within the four periods, these faces subsequently facilitate and reinforce one another. For example, in Period Two tools of governmental depoliticisation are enacted; with central government devolving powers (and shifting accountability) to local authorities. However, in binding the hands of the local level, government also sought to shift the issue to the public (rather than governmental) sphere through the appeal to referenda on local congestion charging measures for example. Indeed, the justification for lack of substantive governmental action in Period One was through recourse to private choice. Moreover, the discursive depoliticisation of the volume of travel demand in Period One, and its links to economic growth, were used to justify the governmental depoliticisation processes that followed as policy responses. And vice versa, tools of governmental depoliticisation, such as recourse to guidance from arms-length bodies – were

used to support arguments utilised in discursive depoliticisation. The transport case outlined here therefore provides support to the argument of Wood and Flinders (2014) that depoliticisation processes should not be considered in isolation, and indeed that it is more fruitful to understand depoliticisation as a multi-faceted entity.

However, our analysis does show the state as key to all three faces of depoliticisation. So while the findings support the argument made by Wood and Flinders (2014) that depoliticisation should be more broadly conceived than just as a mechanism of state action, the analysis highlights the pivotal role of the state in triggering de (and re-) politicisation processes. Subsequently, these findings provide empirical support for Fawcett and Marsh's (2014) theoretically-based refinement of the three faces; with central government acting as primary meta-governor of processes of depoliticisation. In this transport case, it is central government who are the primary drivers of the discursive depoliticisation of the volume of travel demand, it is also central government who are the primary drivers of societal depoliticisation through their policy responses to repoliticisation of the issue.

As Fawcett and Marsh (2014) note, the recognition of the ability to meta-govern does not suggest that meta-governance is always done well, and in the instances where there is a repoliticisation of travel demand this is demonstrative of the case. Periods of repoliticisation were catalysed in response to central government attempts to avoid conflict (Wolf and Van Dooren 2018) and remove the issue from the governmental agenda by implementing a policy solution. This can be seen most notably in the protests that were instigated in response to the central government's attempt to provide a solution to the 'problem' of travel demand in Period One and in the national disquiet that followed attempts to implement road-user charging schemes in Period Three. Moreover, it is helpful to unpack the notion of the governmental sphere to recognise its multi-level nature, and the privileged position of central government.

In identifying the role of the state in each of the three faces of depoliticisation, and in focusing our analysis over time, the case presented here also more specifically explains the aspects of the issue that are being depoliticised (see Table 2). The case highlights for example, that it is the policy 'problem' of rising travel demand that is depoliticised over time, with the policy responses (the 'solutions' to the problem) that become politicised (infrastructure building, or congestion charging, for example) and in turn end up re-politicising the problem. Highlighting what Wolf and Van Dooren (2018) refer to as 'boomerang effects' in depoliticisation strategies.

Here then, the article highlights the value of analysis over time, in order to unpack mechanisms of de and repoliticisation. In being able to trace the interweaving of de and repoliticisation processes, this case identifies the policy solutions as more prone to repoliticisation than the policy problem. It is the solutions that are more noticeable to the public and are what interests mobilise around. In contrast, the logics underpinning the policy problem (in this case the depoliticisation of travel demand) which enable those solutions, are more obdurate over time, supported by broader neo-liberal perspectives. In this case for example, the sustained discursive depoliticisation of travel demand (underpinned by ideas of its links to economic growth – see Section 4), successfully re-framed the policy problem from the end of Period 1 onwards, and in the long term enabled the successful repoliticisation of infrastructure as a legitimate policy solution.

These findings therefore speak to parts of the depoliticisation literature that call for greater engagement with what the ‘political’ means within depoliticisation (Beveridge 2017), but also the way in which ideas are embedded in depoliticisation. As Kuzemko (2016, 110) notes, in recognising ideas it then becomes ‘important to understand which norms become embedded within processes of depoliticisation’. In this regard, more pro-active dialogue between the depoliticisation and the agenda setting literatures may also be helpful. The agenda setting literature, most notably the Multiple Streams Approach (Kingdon 1995), highlights the importance of coupling of problem definition with policy solution for issue recognition, and therefore may help elucidate the role of ideas in shaping and embedding depoliticisation and repoliticisation processes.

## **6. Conclusions**

This article aimed to help advance the depoliticisation literature by applying the three faces organising perspective to an empirical analysis of the UK transport sector, and subsequently assessing its applicability in helping identify and explain depoliticisation in practice. In doing so, the article responded to calls for greater empirical investigation of de and repoliticisation processes, and a greater focus on temporality in the analysis of depoliticisation processes.

Analysis of the case demonstrated elements of each of the three faces of depoliticisation and supported the argument underpinning the three faces approach about the parallel and intersecting nature of different depoliticisation processes. Yet, the case also highlighted the need for greater recognition of the state as a meta-governor of depoliticisation, and the need for a more nuanced recognition of what aspect of an issue (policy solution or problem) is being de (and re) politicised within the three faces perspective. However, process tracing over an extended period of time - three decades – has been essential to uncovering the dynamic and interconnected nature of the faces of de and repoliticisation, and the role of the state in these processes.

The current politicisation of infrastructure cannot be understood holistically without understanding how the previous policy interest in infrastructure was brought to a halt and therefore what depoliticisation techniques needed to be deployed to make the current policy pathway acceptable. Focus on temporality has also enabled better elaboration of the political opportunism inherent within depoliticisation processes, and in turn the use of each face of depoliticisation as a tool of and/or response to, governmental action facilitated by a desire to avoid conflict. It is critical to recognise that issues have a history and so depoliticisation at any point in time is likely to be related to the previous positions and arguments adopted. Our approach found clear evidence of this over a period of almost 30 years.

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