

WHY PUBLIC POLICY IDEAS CATCH ON:  
EMPTY SIGNIFIERS AND FLOURISHING  
NEIGHBOURHOODS

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Asking the question ‘why do ideas catch on in public policy’ reveals the inadequacy of ideational accounts to compete with the predominance of mainstream models of policy analysis. This thesis reasserts ideational accounts through the application of the political discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. The approach posits ideas as demands operating in governing discourses and understands how general equivalent demands then become empty signifiers. This thesis develops current understanding on how general equivalents and empty signifiers function through an application to urban governance. It develops a qualitative account of governing in Birmingham using interviews between 2003-2005, and documents and media archives from the past twenty years.

The thesis examines how mainstream ideational, rational, institutional and interpretative accounts understand the emergence of policy ideas and their role in coalitions, policy change and agency of actors. Discourse theory is revealed as a comprehensive approach for understanding these questions of ideas. The thesis develops a framework for the empirical application of discourse theory in Birmingham, exploring the relationship between two taken-for-granted governing discourses: renaissance and size. It shows how actors were motivated to reiterate and protect discourses from dislocation with development of the empty signifier of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’. The thesis traces the credibility and emergence of flourishing neighbourhoods and contributes to a research agenda around hegemonic policy analysis.

Dedicated to my Dad, Arnold.

*1951-2005*

Curiosity is genetic.

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‘Gradually, the idea catches on. People in and around government speak of a “growing realisation, “ an “increasing feeling,” a “lot of talk in the air, “ and “coming to a conclusion.” After some degree of diffusion, there seems to be a take-off point: many people are discussing the proposal or idea. At that point, knowledgeable people refer to a “widespread feeling,” ...“by now it is orthodox thinking” (Kingdon 1995: 140).

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

‘War on terror’, ‘hardworking families’, ‘climate change’, ‘binge drinking’ are all examples of ideas that have been adopted and then taken-for-granted. This thesis asks the question ‘why do certain ideas catch on in public policy’? It does so by applying discourse theory to understand how policy actors go about governing a British city.

Jacobsen’s article ‘much ado about ideas’ (1995) is one of several to acknowledge the turn towards ideas in public policy analysis (Campbell 2002; Blyth 1997; Yee 1996). The ideational turn of the 1980s and 1990s was a challenge to the predominant rational and stagist models of public policy that previously relegated the role of ideas. For example, Kingdon’s policy streams challenges the orthodoxy of box and arrow models (1984), and Reich seeks to challenge the view that ideas are subordinate to interests (1988). Yet, two decades later, the rationalist accounts continue to dominate, and do so guided by Weber’s oft quoted statement on the debate of ideas:

‘Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest’ (Weber 1915: 280).

Here Weber argues that ideas might change the direction of policy, but ultimately it is ‘interests’ that govern human conduct. Ideational accounts disagree: ‘ideas based approaches involve the claim that they constitute reality, making history a contest of ideas rather than interests’ (John 1998: 487). They claim there are several ways in which ideas matter: they can be resources for cooperation; give legitimacy to policy action by giving it a coherent identity; frame how actors understand their world; they

can be catalysts for change and also inhibit change (Braun 1999). Perhaps most importantly, in altering perception of the policy situation, they can radically restructure the interests of actors. However, what remains absent is a lack of understanding of why one idea comes to be accepted over another (Campbell 2002) and the lack of a selection mechanism to explain it (Gofas 2001: 13). That is to say, if ideas do play such an important role, there is a lack of a satisfactory theory of why one is selected, chosen and then dominates over others.

Asking the question of ‘why ideas catch on’ exposes deeper divisions in ideational understandings. Questions arise around the unit of analysis: what is an idea? To what extent are ideas fundamental to policy change? How far are ideas responsible for the formation and cohesion of groups or coalitions? Furthermore, if it is ideas rather than interests that drive human behaviour, how do ideas structure actor motivation and in what circumstances are actors able to exercise agency over the ideas that structure their world? Overall, I argue there is a lack of a comprehensive theory of ideas that can rival the parsimony of predominant accounts of policy analysis. This thesis explores as guiding themes these challenges of ideational units of analysis, change, cohesion, motivation and agency.

The thesis begins by exploring how different mainstream approaches currently understand these questions, this includes consideration of the interpretative turn in policy analysis which then leads on to explore the contribution of discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

Discourse theory argues that all social practice is meaningful and furthermore that all meaning is contingent, relational, historic and context specific (Howarth 2005). Through this lens, ideas in public policy can be understood both as discourses, established systems of meaning, and elements within these systems of meaning.

However, for the purposes of the overarching question of this thesis, an idea that has ‘caught on’ or has become predominant is both a discourse that has become ‘taken-for-granted’ and an element that represents all of the various different ideas within that discourse; the whole ‘chain’ of meaning, also known as a *general equivalent*. Whilst this offers a framework for understanding the role of ideas, the question remains of why a particular discourse becomes taken-for-granted or why one element of the discourse becomes the representative for all other elements. Scholars of discourse theory have recently attempted to theorise these conditions and the processes, but it remains a conceptual work in progress (Howson 2005) and one that would benefit from empirical enquiry (Torfing 2005). Although discourse theory is being increasingly applied to questions of public policy, most of this work has previously centred on social movements rather than cases of policy making, governance and the taken-for-granted.

The approach I adopt in this thesis is to understand public policy making as a series of governing discourses upon which the identities of governing actors depend and through which they make sense of their environment and develop public policies. It is these conditions that make ideas ‘possible’ and in this thesis I develop the means to understand such conditions. My case develops a thick description of urban governance to uncover taken-for-granted discourse. My approach is a problematisation rather than an evaluation of failure or performance of policy.

The case study is of the City of Birmingham. I focused on *what* actors operating at the city wide level took for granted and agreed upon, *where* there was consensus and then explored *how* they told me about equivalences, differences and fantasies.

Through this process I identify two taken-for-granted governing discourses: ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Size’ to study further. The case study then understands the relationship between these two discourses. I note the predominance of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ as an example of an idea that has ‘caught on’ and my approach aims to understand why the idea of flourishing neighbourhoods caught on and the implications of this.

The layout of the thesis is as follows: In Chapter 2 I revisit the ideational turn in public policy and explore how ideational, rational, institutional and interpretative accounts of public policy explain the role of ideas and how they catch on. I conclude that none offer a comprehensive account, however note the value of interpreting ideas as units of meaning. In Chapter 3 I make the case for discourse theory to understand hegemonic ideas in public policy, I explore its key arguments and logics and conclude that it offers a potentially comprehensive account of ideas as demands and discourses, but empirically is underdeveloped. In Chapter 4 I seek to resolve this empirical deficit in discourse theory by developing a framework to explore taken-for-granted governing discourses and the ideas embedded in these discourses. I explain how I developed a qualitative case study of strategic governing in Birmingham drawing upon a corpus of interview transcripts and local documentation.

Chapter 5 is the first of three case study chapters and sets out the example of two taken-for-granted governing discourses, those of *renaissance* and *size*. I use previous published accounts, newspaper archives and interview transcripts to understand the precarious relationship between the two governing discourses. In Chapter 6 I focus on the strategies actors employ to maintain the hegemony of discourse, through the exploration of how senior elites in Birmingham responded to

national demands of local government modernisation and neighbourhood renewal and how they developed a policy of decentralisation which was later implemented in April 2004 as a result of the ideas discussed in this thesis. In the final case study chapter, I explore the rise of the idea of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods,’ how this began as a specific aim of neighbourhood activists and became a core priority of the City Council and other organisations in the space of two years. I explore how City Council actors employed flourishing neighbourhoods as an ‘empty signifier’ to defend the dislocation of governing discourses and how other actors in the city sought to redefine its meaning. Chapter 8 summarises the argument, returns to questions of ideas and outlines how this approach to studying public policy ideas opens up a field of hegemonic policy analysis.

## CHAPTER 2. POLICY IDEAS

How does the wider literature explain why a particular policy idea catches on? Furthermore what do I mean by ‘catching on’ or for that matter an ‘idea’? This chapter addresses such questions by critically reviewing the attempts of writers to theorise and conceptualise ideas in public policy. My starting point is what is widely acknowledged as the ‘ideational turn’ in public policy (Blyth 1997, 2004; Schmidt and Radaelli 2004; Campbell 2002; Hay and Wincott 1998; Gofas 2001; Heffernan 2002; Finlayson 2004b; Stone 1996). I define the ideational turn as an explicit concern to incorporate, or give primacy to, the role of ideas in explanations of public policy.

My review through this ideational turn, from ideational, rational-ideational, frame-institutional and advocacy through to interpretive, narrative, metaphor and policy discourse accounts, demonstrates how these literatures place emphasis on the role of ideas in policy. Furthermore, in the process of exploring how they explain the emergence or success of ideas, important questions are raised regarding the unit of analysis (what is an idea), the power of ideas, the role of ideas in coalition formation and when, where and how actors matter in forging and fostering these ideas.

The ideational turn includes a disparate set of theories, models and frameworks that share a rejection of parsimonious neat box and arrow or stage models of policy (e.g. Easton 1965, see Parsons 1995 for examples). In addition, they also reject the game-like predictive models of rational choice which downplay, or adopt a reductionist approach to, the role of ideas. This neglect by rational choice models highlights a weakness in their ability to explain the role of ideas. Some go further to



suggest ideas play a primary function above most commonly understood models based on ‘interests’ or ‘institutions’.

This chapter is structured in three sections. The first outlines ideational approaches where ideas are primary. Much of this work came from political science in the 1980s (e.g. Reich 1988a; Moore 1988, Kingdon 1984) where work was offered as a critique of rational and/or stages heuristic public policy frameworks. Here I explore how different authors discuss the virus-like qualities of ideas and how this can explain their widespread diffusion and prominence. The second section then considers the mainstream approaches to understanding policy and how they, with the hindsight of the 1980s ideational accounts, explain the role of ideas *alongside* rather than *instead of* their favoured models. Here I explore the work of rational choice academics who understand ideas as beliefs and also frame based accounts that seek to explain the relationship between ideas and institutions. In the third section, I divert from the mainstream to explore the recent emphasis on interpretation in policy analysis and how post-positivist or constructive accounts understand ideas as metaphors, narratives and storylines underpinned by theories in use, traditions and discourses. This chapter concludes that collectively this review sparks further insight into how ideas catch on and generates further questions.

## **2.1 Ideational accounts of policy ideas**

‘In our revised philosophy of policy making, ideas about what is good for society occupy a more prominent position.’ (Reich 1988a: 3-4)

The basic premise for Reich’s edited collection ‘The Power of Public Ideas’ (Reich 1988a) is to argue that ideas are more than just smokescreens for institutions or the personal interests that are *really* ‘animating and guiding action’ (Moore 1988:

71). The ideational project found in the book is not only about raising the importance of ideas but also suggesting how ideational frameworks can explain policy as well as, or better than, the prevailing rational actor models that downplay the role of ideas. Peter John notes, 'in the strong sense, ideas-based approaches involve the claim that they constitute reality, making history a contest of ideas rather than interests' (John 2003: 487). In addition to the primacy of ideas, ideationalists, such as Reich and Moore, contend that rational and institutional models overlook the importance of debating values and the persuasiveness of normative visions:

'For all its virtues, the prevailing view of policymaking ignores other important values. In particular, it disregards the role of ideas about what is good for society and the importance of debating the relative merits of such ideas. It thus tends to overlook the way such normative visions shape what people want and expect from their government, their fellow citizens and themselves' (Reich 1988a: 3).

Furthermore, policy ideationalists argue that prevailing models are limited to being explanatory devices where the nature of the policy problem is contested, the range of solutions are unknown, sources of responsibility are ambiguous and understanding of the policy situation is narrow. As Reich suggests, more often than not policy is contested, ill-defined, ambiguous, and misunderstood and therefore there is a need for alternative models sensitive to the role of ideas, as it is ideas that enable individuals to make sense of complexity.

'The responsibility of policy analysts is not only to choose the best means of achieving a given objective. It is also to offer alternative ways of understanding public problems and possible solutions, and thus to expose underlying norms to critical examination' (Reich 1988b: 6).

The ideational critique argues rational and institutional frameworks disregard the importance of democratic deliberation in how it can reframe the (supposedly pre-existing) interests of actors.

A key challenge for ideational accounts is how they are drawn into trying to match the epistemological mainstream for cause and effect of ideas. For Moore, the power of an idea is revealed when it becomes dominant: ideas, like spotlights, simultaneously illuminate and animate particular parts of the world and leave other parts in the shadows (1988). Moore argues: ‘When ideas become dominant in policy debates, when norm mobilizes private actions on behalf of public purposes and suppresses other possible approaches, ideas demonstrate their power to provide a context for public debate and action’ (1988: 75). It is this concern for the power of ideas that initially drove the ideational turn. It raises questions. Namely, if ideas yield this much power in the policy process, where do such ideas come from, can they be owned or forged by individual agency? Moore, unsure whether ideas can be ‘harnessed’ in this way offers tentative suggestions:

‘It is quite possible that ideas cannot be self-consciously produced and used to guide public action. It is almost certain that they cannot be produced single-handedly by an individual without reference to the existing institutional context. Yet it appears that some self-consciously developed and promoted ideas eventually produce significant effects on public policy. This is perhaps most evident in the context of defining an organisational strategy, where specific individuals – the organizational leaders – are expected to produce an idea that can motivate, direct, and explain their organization’s purposes’ (Moore 1988: 80).

This approach acknowledges that there are times where agents seem to carve out space to introduce and guide a particular idea which in turn shapes interests, suggested in rational accounts. This is a strong observation, but Moore’s assessment is a description rather than a framework for understanding. One of the most prominent ideational models on offer to this end would be the policy windows analysis of John Kingdon for providing an understanding for why, on some occasions, actors appear to ‘self consciously develop and promote ideas’, ideationalists advocating a ‘policy windows’ approach would stress the operation of policy

entrepreneurs: people with status, connections and persistence (1995:180-181) who successfully 'couple' policy solutions to emerging problems and the political climate during a 'window of opportunity' (Kingdon 1995: 174).

### **Ideas on agendas**

Kingdon's (1984; 1993; 1995) policy streams and windows framework is based on the modified *garbage can* model of Cohen, March and Olsen (Cohen et al 1972). In setting out his model, Kingdon is less preoccupied with the prevailing 'rational' models than Reich et al, and instead problematises the neat parsimonious 'input-throughput-output' stage models, or stages heuristic, that dominated models, frameworks and theories of policy making (see Parsons 1995 for examples and John 1998: Ch.2 for critique). Kingdon argues 'events do not proceed neatly in stages, steps, or phases. Instead, independent streams that flow through the system all at once, each with a life of its own and equal with one another, become coupled when a window opens' (Kingdon 1995: 205). In addition, although less concerned with rational accounts he states that his model:

'Certainly does not look like comprehensive, rational decision making. People do not set about to solve problems here. More often, solutions search for problems. People work on problems only when a particular combination of problem, solution and participants in a choice situation makes it possible' (Kingdon 1995:86).

Kingdon's starting point for understanding policy ideas is the decision making *agenda* as a unit of analysis and is therefore to understand why certain agendas are accepted at a particular point. Accordingly, the policy process is understood as three streams: a problem stream, a policy stream and a political stream. I will consult each in turn. Regarding first the problem stream, Lindblom previously argued 'one man's solution is another man's problem'(1980: 15). In response Kingdon draws the distinction

between conditions and problems. For him, conditions become problems when they are perceived as such due to value judgements, that is, a sense of inequity in how conditions are categorised (Kingdon 1995: 110). The problem stream, then, is a continual process of *conditions* becoming perceived as *problems*.

Where Kingdon most explicitly considers policy ideas is in his second analytical stream: the policy stream. The policy stream consists of policy communities advocating particular policy ideas. There are no ‘new’ ideas in Kingdon’s framework, instead they interact in a ‘policy primeval soup, [where] quite a range of ideas is possible and is considered to some extent’ (Kingdon 1995: 131). Kingdon illustrates his model extensively through the voices of his interview respondents and their use of metaphor and humour. So for one of his respondents it is a case of maintaining a gun ‘loaded’ with ideas ready to shoot when the time comes (1995: 183), another respondent argues ideas are like perennials that lie dormant and then flower again (1995: 141); or ideas are nothing new ‘we are resurrecting old dead dogs, sprucing them up, and then floating them up to the top’ (1995: 173). Although context matters for Kingdon, there are certain ideas that have an advantage over others. The three survival qualities he suggests are ‘technical feasibility’ (‘worked out’ and ‘ready to go’), compatibility with prevailing values, and capacity to be appreciative of future constraints (1995: 131).

Finally, the third stream in the model is the political stream. Kingdon purposefully defines the political stream narrowly to encompass the machinery of government rather than politics in its wider sense. He is quite explicit about what constitutes the distinct ‘political’ stream although does not offer as much explanation for why it is the way it is. So the political stream includes government, organised political forces, pressure groups, elites, but also ‘the national mood’ defined as the

climate of the country, public opinion and broad social movements, thereby going beyond machinery of government. Kingdon sees these latter, softer, factors as important and often missing in most models. He argues changes in these softer political factors result in the adoption of ideas, for example the ‘smaller government mood’ set up Regan’s budget to be a success (1995: 164).

I will now explore how the three streams combine to produce a window of opportunity. A shift in politics or emergence of a problem will result in a window opening. In this window of opportunity the three streams converge, as policy entrepreneurs articulate or ‘couple’ particular policy solutions to solve the emerging problem that will be accepted by the current political climate. Change is therefore understood as a process of strategically placed entrepreneurs (engaged in coupling), the availability of ideas (policy stream), accepting political context (politics stream) and a rationale for change (problem). Kingdon argues that none of the streams can in themselves place an item high on the decision making agenda, rather it depends on coupling: ‘The window may be open for a short time, but if the coupling is not made quickly, the window closes’ (Kingdon 1995:178). The policy entrepreneur’s role is therefore central to the model, however the underlying motivation is unclear. The closest Kingdon comes to outlining their drive is this reference to ‘pursuit of personal purposes’:

‘During the pursuit of their personal purposes, entrepreneurs perform the function for the system of coupling the previously separate streams. They hook solutions to problems, proposals to political momentum, and political events to policy problems’ (Kingdon 1995: 182).

He goes on:

‘Without the presence of an entrepreneur, the linking of the streams may not take place. Good ideas lie fallow for lack of an advocate. Problems are unsolved for lack of a solution. Political events are not capitalized on for lack of inventive and developed proposals’ (Kingdon 1995: 182).

Finally, in his discussion Kingdon refers to how ideas can ‘snowball’ through a select number of people on ‘the grapevine’ as one of his respondents claimed: ‘If you have a new idea, you can enter that idea into the grapevine. If it has anything going for it, it will spread’ (1995: 140). He makes reference with this sense of an idea ‘taking off’ as being akin to Thomas Schelling’s (1978) ‘tipping’ model where an idea of a few is diffused rapidly to where it becomes ‘commonplace’ (Kingdon 1995: 140). Since then, other ideationalists have considered this further by linking these tipping models to the suggestion that ideas operate like policy viruses.

### **Ideas as policy viruses**

To what extent do ideas catch on like ‘viruses’? In 2000, two largely separate works on the role of ideas were published: Richardson (2000) and Gladwell (2000). What unites these accounts of ideas is how they theorise the take up and role of particular ideas as analogous to a virus. However, they come at this analogy from a somewhat different starting point.

Richardson derives his argument out of Kingdon’s suggestion that there is no one fixed point of origin of an idea. Moreover, Kingdon makes explicit on several occasions that trying to establish the ‘source’ of an idea is futile as no ideas are ever ‘new’ ideas. However from his reading of the ideational literature Richardson argues:

‘New ideas have a virus-like quality and have an ability to disrupt existing policy systems, power relationship and policies...exogenous shifts in preferences, influenced by new ideas and knowledge, are rather like viruses present in the atmosphere we breathe’ (Richardson 2000: 1018).

Accordingly, ideas have an important and powerful role in the policy process. For Richardson, policy viruses spread like natural ideas and explain the phenomenon of transnational learning or adoption of new policies. Here he is arguing policy viruses will on occasion result in the formation of new policy frames. He argues

viruses present a challenge and a series of strategic options for existing policy communities: either to accept the force of exogenous change, attempt to adapt or 'mutate' the virus or mutate themselves (Richardson 2000: 1019). Richardson's reference to viruses posits a seductive metaphor for analysis but it does not pretend to offer a comprehensive framework akin to Kingdon.

Conversely, Gladwell's thesis on the virus like qualities of ideas comes out of a very different place to Richardson. In defining his project, the similarities are plain. He argues his Tipping Point book is:

'The biography of an idea, and the idea is very simple. It is that the best way to understand the emergence of...mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviours spread just like viruses do' (Gladwell 2000: 7).

If Richardson's thesis regards the prominence of an idea as a virus, Gladwell's tipping point model uses the analogy to explain the sudden widespread diffusion and adoption of an idea. On the surface, Gladwell's bold argument is persuasive but it is also highly selective in its choice of examples and previous studies within business administration, social psychology, advertising and the media. If Kingdon's model was a modification of the Garbage-Can model of policy making, Gladwell is indebted to theories of tipping points in 1970s mathematic sociology, that when something is perfectly balanced, only a small change is necessary for it to tip in a particular direction. Whilst the relevance of Gladwell's examples are largely confined to business and media executives, he argues his model is applicable to public policy, for example: transforming the image of a neighbourhood or understanding why people start smoking or commit crime. Links with the public policy ideational literature are implicit throughout the book (Gladwell 2000, see Shapiro 2003 for example of application).



Gladwell's opening question is: 'How does a thirty-dollar pair of shoes go from a handful of downtown Manhattan hipsters and designers to every mall in America in the space of two years?' (Gladwell 2000:5). This sets up his first case study of the renaissance of Hush Puppies shoes amongst initially the fashion trend spotters and then into the mainstream. His point is that an idea such as the demand for Hush Puppies catches on much like a virus epidemic. Based on how epidemics occur, ideas catch on because of: 'one, contagiousness; two the fact that little causes can have big effects; and three that change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment' (Gladwell 2000:9).

Gladwell's explanation for achieving this 'tipping point' in emergence of an idea to epidemic levels is based on three rules: 'The law of the few, the stickiness factor, the power of context' (Gladwell 2000: 29). By law of the few, he argues there are certain 'exceptional people' who are capable of and responsible for starting epidemics. They are either 'Mavens', 'Connectors' or 'Salesmen':

'In a social epidemic, Mavens are data banks. They provide the message. Connectors are social glue: they spread it. But there is also a select group of people – Salesmen – with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing...they are critical to the tipping of word-of-mouth epidemics' (Gladwell 2000:70).

There are considerable parallels here with theories of public policy. In policy, Mavens provide a brokering role, sharing what they know. Connectors and Salesmen are the advocates familiar in other models. The stickiness factor is less about those who broker and advocate an idea, but, returning to virus analogy, is about the contagiousness of the idea: 'Stickiness means that a message makes an impact. You can't get it out of your head. It sticks to your memory' (Gladwell 2000: 24-25).

Rather than parsimonious stagiest or rational selection models, the ideational accounts explored above are attempts at breaking out of the usual public policy mould

in order to address questions of ideas, beliefs, values and politics in policy making. Yet in doing so they are open to criticism from the predominant models they reject. I will now address these concerns and explore how mainstream models of policy analysis can integrate ideational concerns without departing from their favoured primacy for interests or institutions.

## ***2.2 Hybrid accounts of policy ideas***

For public policy accounts structured by rational interest, institutions, and combined models, ideational accounts raise interesting questions, but such questions cannot be tackled through existing approaches. It follows then that in this next section I explore how the ideational turn affected mainstream models. Here I use the catch-all label of ‘hybrid’ as one that encapsulates the ethic of incorporating ideas into rational, institutional and advocacy models of public policy.

### **Rational ideas accounts**

‘Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest’ (Weber 1915: 280).

If the ideationalist accounts saw mainstream policy analysis of ideas as the work of rationalists, these rationalists were beginning to soften to ideas. The intrigue around ideas in the 1990s was marked by an attempt of rational choice theorists to provide an account of ideas as more than the by-products of multiple equilibrium. For these post-ideational turn rationalists, the ‘others:’ the ‘ideationalists,’ were the ‘reflectivists’ who wanted to explain with ideas but could not prove causality as they desired. The quote from Weber above states ideas determine direction but it is interests that govern conduct. In the literature this quote serves to anchor the

epistemological position of rational accounts. The collection of work that epitomises the post-ideational rational account of ideas in public policy is Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane's 1993 edited book: *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Goldstein and Keohane 1993a). In part, these ideationally sensitive rationalists were quietly accepting the argument that ideas are important, but reserve the right to maintain that interests ultimately explain action and theorise public policy.

These ideational-rationalists are governed by a strict and routine set of principles and rules that explicate their position which argues individuals have a capacity to act as social agents (John 1998: 118-119, see also Ward 1995). Rationalists consider that human beings have purposive preferences prior to the social world that they are capable of choosing. Action is thereby understood as actors acting in self-interest to maximise personal utility. Actors express their preferences as goals, gather information on what is available to achieve these goals and make choices accordingly. Therefore for ideational-rationalists, ideas will always have a secondary role. That is, they will not govern action but will play a part in focusing actors' attention on the choices available to them.

To begin with a definition, ideational-rational accounts define ideas as shared beliefs about the nature of the world. These can be moral or factual, as Goldstein and Keohane state:

'We focus on the impact of particular beliefs – shared by large numbers of people – about the nature of their worlds that have implications for human action. Such beliefs range from general moral principles to agreement on specific application of scientific knowledge. When we refer to ideas...we refer to such beliefs' (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b: 7)

Goldstein and Keohane suggest three types of belief operating at different levels. At the most abstract or fundamental level, ideas are world views, these are the universe of possibilities, codes of what *is*. The second type are principled beliefs that

stem from world views but provide a moral code specifying what is right and wrong. The third kind of ideas are causal beliefs, these are beliefs about causality, cause and effect. Goldstein and Keohane argue that once causal beliefs are accepted by policy makers they can have profound impacts.

How these beliefs interact can be highlighted in the following hypothetical example: a patient is told their years of smoking has caused a serious condition that requires surgery (causal belief), and the patient may be told that their chances of recovery would be greatly enhanced by paying to have the operation privately rather than waiting on the National Health Service (causal belief). However the worldview belief of the patient may be diametrically opposed to a private health system as part of a fundamental set of principles (worldview, perhaps socialism), which in turn are translated into principled beliefs that suggest it is 'wrong' to 'go private' and therefore see the patient rejecting the causal belief. In this example, beliefs feature at several points in this decision making process to reject private health care. A rational actor model might suggest that a quick recovery is in the patient's interests, and therefore 'going private' is the rational choice. However, Goldstein and Keohane argue that on some occasions actors will make rational choices based on their ideas as principled beliefs grounded in worldviews rather than causal beliefs.

Much of the rationalist account is about modelling the rational choices that actors make in their pursuit for maximising utility and fulfilling their interests. However, choices are not always clear cut, particularly at times of radical change or uncertainty (Reich 1988b: 3). The role of ideas as roadmaps suggests they guide actors in their choices where the rational choice is unclear. At such times rationality gives way to ideas:

‘Depressions, wars, the decline of a political party, and the overthrow of a government may all cause ideas to become important because all constitute exogenous shocks that undermine the existing order. At such moments rational shifts in the political agenda may occur because of the common acceptance of some new normative or causal set of beliefs...the uncertainties that confront political actors can lead to reliance on beliefs as guides to action even if those ideas do not lead to benefits for society at large’ (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b: 17).

For Goldstein and Keohane it is not acceptable to simply say ideas are present and therefore they matter. For them it is imperative to provide evidence and show causality: ‘We must also provide evidence about the conditions under which causal connections exist between ideas and policy outcomes’ (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b: 11). In starting this process they do not claim to offer a comprehensive theory of this causality, but they do suggest three areas or ‘causal pathways’ where ideas matter in relation to rationally interested actors in the policy process these are: roadmaps, focal points and legacies.

The first pathway is how ideas can serve as roadmaps. For them a key role of ideas is about guiding actors towards their preferences, that in times of uncertainty ideas guide and focus attention down a particular path and simultaneously obscure others. Where their model becomes problematic is the question of why ideas only affect choices and not rationality itself. This is a core insurmountable criticism of these models.

The second guiding role for ideas according to Goldstein and Keohane considers ideas as focal points, or as they call it, ‘coalitional glue’ (1993b:12) that

‘the key role played by ideas is to alleviate coordination problems arising from the absence of unique equilibrium solutions. Ideas can serve as focal points, as solutions to problems associated with incomplete contracting, or as means to counteract problems of collective action’ (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b: 17-18).

The third and final role of ideas is as lasting institutional legacies (not dissimilar from traditions of Bevir and Rhodes 2003, discussed later below), that:

‘Ideas have a lasting influence on politics through their incorporation into the terms of political debate...the impact of ideas may be prolonged for decades or even generations’ (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b: 20).

Of course, unlike most discussion of ideas, Goldstein and Keohane are forthcoming with a discussion of what drives human action. The added value of a rational account is that it can say that driving action is the pursuit of fulfilling rational preferences.

Interest or rational based accounts of policy are predominant in public policy. Scholars are drawn to the explanatory and predictive nature of the models – particularly in suggesting how to improve the outcomes of policy. In considering ideas, the likes of Goldstein and Keohane are attempting to account for the messiness that game-like models have trouble explaining. Addressing questions such as: where do values fit within these neat models? When do basic fundamental normative frames play a role in the choices actors make? In a question of how new ideas become adopted – this suggests a requirement to understand how worldview ideas affect principled and casual beliefs. Goldstein and Keohane are not alone in suggesting worldviews underpin beliefs – however the discussion of how they operate and change is further developed in institutional and frame accounts of public policy. It is to these accounts I now turn.

### **Frames, paradigms and institutions**

In frame accounts, policy ideas come to be embedded into institutionalised frameworks rather than remaining as free floating viruses or the expressions of human interest. Depending on the conceptualisation, such frames are named belief systems, paradigms and référentiels (Surel 2000). The importance of such frames is that they

filter or structure what *is* (cognitive role) expressed as ‘world views’ that which articulate conditions as problems. Furthermore the frames also embed normative aspirations of what *ought* to be. For Bhatia and Coleman these normative elements drive 'problem definition, the specification of a causal relationship and the identification of problem ownership' (2003: 717). Where there is a mismatch between problem and aspiration, frames alert actors to the need to make a policy prescription to bridge the gap between *is* and *ought*. For example for Campbell (1998), ideas feature prominently in four areas of a policy frame. First, they operate in the background, shaping and restricting what is thought about a situation or policy, similarly, and second, they also express public sentiment for what ought to be. Ideas also operate in two ways in the foreground, first as programmes or policy proposals and second ideas are used to communicate or frame the solution for the public. This latter role of ideas is about coupling the proposed solution to the perceived deficiency (Campbell 1998: 398).

For policy frame theorists, key questions are how such cognitive normative frames are forged, how they are structured and how they change. Surel defines these ‘cognitive normative frames’ as:

'coherent systems of normative and cognitive elements which define, in a given field, world views, mechanisms of identity formation, principles of actions, as well as methodological prescriptions and practices for actors subscribing to the same frame' (Surel 2000: 496).

One of the most recognised frame models in the literature is Peter A. Hall’s paradigms (1989; 1993). Hall’s conceptual starting point was Charles Anderson’s (1978) observation that ‘policies are made within some system of ideas and standards which is comprehensible and plausible to the actors involved’ (Anderson 1978: 23, cited in Hall 1993: 293). To understand this ‘system of ideas and standards’ Hall

adopts the concept of ‘paradigm’ from Kuhn’s (1970) notion of *scientific* paradigms. For Hall these *policy* paradigms structure how actors understand the situation, delimit what is possible, suggest what instruments are feasible or best suited to the problem and allow policy actors to understand their role in the process. As this chapter is addressing how ideas catch on, this immediately raises questions of how change occurs within these institutional structures. In response, Hall’s framework is distinguished as belonging to a *new institutionalism* in that it is better able to explain how change comes about compared with institutional models. However this is questionable as new institutionalism has a bias towards stability (John 1998: 53).

For Hall, policy paradigm change can be of first, second or third order. First and second order changes take place continually during times of ‘normal policy making’ (Hall 1993: 279). Change of this order occurs within the constraints of the prevailing paradigm. First order change is about routine decision-making normally associated with the policy process. Second order change, Hall suggests, might go beyond normal action, perhaps with the development of a new policy instrument. Conversely, third order change is radical and analogous to what Kuhn previously referred to as ‘paradigm shift.’ Hall suggests a number of interrelated features:

‘The movement from one paradigm to another that characterises third order change is likely to involve the accumulation of anomalies, experimentation with new forms of policy, and policy failures that precipitate a shift in the locus of authority over policy and initiate a wider contest between competing paradigms...It will end only when the supporters of a new paradigm secure positions of authority over policy making and are able to rearrange the organization and standard operating procedures of the policy process so as to institutionalize the new paradigm’ (Hall 1993: 280-281).

Therefore third order change is about the suspension of ‘normal policy making’ due to the inability of an existing frame to accommodate accumulated ‘anomalies’. Similarly, Baugmanter and Jones (1993) refer to this as punctuated



equilibrium. During times where there is a suspension of normal policy making, or the equilibrium is punctuated, actors will seek to influence the formation of the new paradigm. Coming back to John Campbell (2002), ideas would play a key role in this rearrangement of operating procedures. For Lowndes (2005), applying a frame based institutionalism to examples of local governance, concurs. However she argues institutional change takes place remembering previous repertoires whilst borrowing from others (Lowndes 2005: 299-300). This begs the question of when change can be explained as first and second order and when it occurs at the magnitude of third order radical paradigm shift. There are further questions of the degree of agency enjoyed by actors within these three orders of change. Responses to this can be found in a further frame based account: the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1989, 1993, 1996) and a focus on belief systems.

### **Belief systems and advocacy**

The framing of ideas in belief systems should be seen in parallel to the conception of policy paradigms, however there are differences. Belief systems, the frames underlying the Advocacy Coalition Framework, are sets of beliefs organised in a hierarchical tripartite structure with 'higher/broader levels constraining more specific beliefs'. Belief systems are divided up into *deep core*, *policy core* and *secondary aspects*. The deep core beliefs consist of basic ontological (theory of reality) and normative beliefs. These beliefs are not above theory or beyond change but are fully fixed, and radical change of these basic values, around for example personal liberty or social equality, remain highly unlikely.

It is this deep core of beliefs that in turn affects the secondary context specific 'policy core'. Such policy cores are more limited in their scope, particular to certain policy sub-systems and subject to change, unlike the deep core. Beyond this, a third

layer of beliefs are specific programmatic or instrumental ideas. These are continually subject to change and are grounded not in institutions, but are the policy core of what Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith call an ‘advocacy coalition’.

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith argue understanding belief systems hierarchically in this way explains the formation of advocacy coalitions as: ‘actors from a wide variety of institutions which share policy core beliefs and coordinate their behaviour in a variety of ways’ (1996: 130). They suggest that a sub-system around a particular policy will typically have between one to four advocacy coalitions, each consisting of actors that share a set of normative and causal beliefs and engage in coordinated activity overtime. The actors may differ considerably in terms of their personal ‘deep core’ beliefs but will share a common ‘policy core’ (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1996). For proponents of the Advocacy Coalition Framework approach, it is compatibility at the policy level that explains the cohesion of coalitions of journalists, politicians from multiple parties, civil servants and activists who can be found advocating and championing a particular policy initiative.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework approach presents an attractive alternative to frame accounts that overstate the explanatory role of institutions. It accounts for human motivation without relying on institutional analysis. Like rationalists, the Advocacy Coalition Framework suggests human motivation is rooted in some form of interests, however unlike rationalists these interests stem from the instrumental level rather than an innate *a priori* source prior to the social world. Motivation for them is to be found in the deep core of the belief system. Therefore, ideas play an important role, both as worldview beliefs in the deep core and as instruments within policy core and secondary aspects. The stability of the policy core means agents are not completely free to introduce or control ideas in the way Moore

(1988) suggests above. However, agency is present at the ‘secondary aspects’ level. Change an external shock or when a ‘hierarchically superior jurisdiction’ affects their subordinate jurisdictions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1996: 125).

### **Beyond the mainstream**

The previous two sections have set out how post-ideational theories, frames and models of public policy understand the role of ideas. Individually they explain the formation of ideas in different ways. The rational accounts have a place for ideas but only following interests. The ideational accounts reject parsimonious oversimplifications found in prevailing stagiest (input-output, box and arrow) or, for that matter, rational accounts. They are creative in how they make sense of public policy, and their mark in terms of applications (e.g. Kingdon 1995) and market sales (e.g. Gladwell 2000) is tangible. However, they make reference to entities such as ‘worldviews’ and ‘public sentiment’ that are central to their explanation but fall short of a comprehensive account. In response, frame approaches attempt to place some hierarchy on the role of ideas. Ideas occur at both deep core or third order levels which structure cognition and in turn, prescription, through a normative sense of lack.

For some, the answer is to combine these different accounts – ideational, rational and frame so as to benefit from their relative strengths (for example John 1998, Ch.8). Similarly, there is a stronger call than ever for synthesis. For example Hay’s recent claim that rational choice accounts are not theories as often suggested but heuristics and potentially valuable supplements to analysis (Hay 2004). Maybe so, but there remain deeper ontological and epistemological question marks over any attempt to synthesise in order to further understand the emergence of policy ideas.

These models above all share an ontological belief in truth and epistemological determination to find it. For example rationalist accounts highlight

the explanatory shortcomings of ideational models to score points. Ideational accounts try and respond by ‘proving’ that ideas have objective power. Even the Advocacy Coalition Framework, sensitive to how ideas can be rooted in belief system, makes the case that it meets the criteria to be crowned a ‘scientific theory’ with clearly defined terms, two causal drivers, falsifiable hypotheses and a generalisable application (see Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 2003). What these studies have in common is a positivist outlook on policy ideas. Although the discussion above of frame accounts, of cognitive and normative frames furthers the debate forward, it begs the question of whether public policy ideas should be understood in this way. In the next section I explore a further ‘turn’ in public policy since that of ideas in the 1980s and 1990s, that is, the ‘interpretative turn’ in policy analysis.

### ***2.3 Interpretive accounts of policy ideas***

‘As a culture, we were aware of the seals and the walruses on top of the ice, but we didn’t know what they were doing underneath...’ (cited in Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006:v).

‘We are concerned with embodied and articulated interpretations – planners’ and policy analysts’ claims actually made, spoken or written – as offers seeking to shape an audience’s understanding of a practical problem’ (Fischer and Forester 1993: 5).

Questions of ideas can be informed by the interpretative turn in the policy and political sciences. A recent conference ‘call for papers’ summarises the approach:

‘Influenced by the ‘interpretative turn’ in the social sciences during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interpretative policy analytic approaches draw on a broad spectrum of philosophical and analytic inquiries, among them phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, and ethnomethodology, offering discourse, rhetoric, frame, fact-value, category, metaphor, and other analytic methods as alternatives to more positivistically-informed analytic tools such as survey research’ (Hajer and Yanow 2006: 1).

This is a broad and complex list that is both intriguing, and quite possibly off-putting (see Gasper 2007) for new students of this interpretive approach of policy analysis. In what is the third section of this chapter I will explore the most prominent approaches under the interpretive policy umbrella, however a number of edited volumes are useful for tracking the evolution of the interpretive turn in policy analysis from the argumentative turn (Fischer and Forester 1993); more recently *Deliberative Policy Analysis* (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003); and *Interpretation and Method* (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006) and a review of key authors in Colebatch (2004). It is not a complete departure from mainstream policy science, for example, many of the frame theorists predisposed to cognitive and normative frames would currently locate themselves as post-positivists or interpretative policy analysts. It is also a diverse field. Below I outline distinguishing frameworks under the banner of interpretativism, how they seek to understand public policy and how they might frame questions of how an idea catches on.

Yanow's (1996) persuasive argument is that policy analysis should recognise that humans are essentially meaning making creatures:

'Humans make meanings; interpret the meanings created by others; communicate their meanings to, and share them with, others. We act; we have intentions about our actions; we interpret others' action. We make sense of the world: we are meaning making creatures. Our social institutions, our policies, our agencies are human creations, not objects independent of us' (Yanow 1996: 5).

The basic epistemological premise that underpins all interpretative accounts is both to understand the policy process as the interaction of interpretations and a preoccupation with developing methods to interpret those interpretations. Some go further with emphasis on systems of meaning in the form of discourse, I will explore this later

below. I will first explore some of the most widely acknowledged manifestations of meaning: narrative and metaphor and how these fit with questions of policy ideas.

### **Narratives and traditions**

Central to the interpretative turn in policy analysis is an increasing interest in narrative (Feldman 2004; Kaplan 1993; Sullivan 2007; R. Atkinson 2002; Llewellyn 2001; Dodge et al 2005, see Ospina and Dodge 2005 for review). However, narrative approaches are not comprehensive theories in themselves but more units of analysis for broader frameworks. The anthropological roots of this group of narrative oriented policy scholars means they have a reluctance to impose structural expectations or start out with theories and deductions. Bevir and Rhodes (2003) argue, for example, narrative is to the social sciences, what theory is to the natural sciences. That said, in the two approaches to policy analysis through narrative reviewed below: Ospina and Dodge, and Bevir and Rhodes, the role of narrative is articulated in different ways.

This interpretative form of policy analysis assumes narratives as a process of representation that takes place in human discourse. The co-production of narratives through storytelling, and interpretation of that storytelling, is a means to reveal how actors understand their world and convey meaning. Furthermore narrative enquiry reveals taken-for-granted assumptions where the focus is less on the content, but more importantly is on analysing why actors choose to recount particular narratives.

Ospina and Dodge define narratives as ‘accounts of characters and selective events occurring over time, with a beginning, a middle and an end’ (2005: 145). For them, policy narratives should be understood as retrospective interpretations of a sequence of events from a ‘certain point of view’. Their value for policy research is how they, according to Ospina and Dodge, reveal human intention and construct identity. They position their interest in narratives as counter to positivist ‘behaviour’

oriented work where analysts predict and explain behaviour, generalising and identifying causality. They place narrative epistemologically, as understanding intention and action rather than predicting behaviour. Drawing on Shank (2002) this is not a case of using a magnifying glass but rather interpreting from within the world in question ‘bridged by conversation’ (Ospina and Dodge 2005: 146).

The review of a narrative turn asserted by Ospina and Dodge in public administration is also evident in political science, most notable is the recent project of Bevir and Rhodes (2003a; Bevir 2006; see McAnulla 2004; Hay 2004b; and Dowding 2004 for critique). Bevir and Rhodes identify their ‘interpretative’ work as grounded in a post-foundational epistemology and as about political analysis of beliefs to provide insight into the behaviour of individuals (2004: 131). Their project sets about recovering people’s stories and telling stories about these stories (2004: 134). They suggest the need for two modes of inquiry: understanding and explanation:

‘Understanding needs an ethnographic form of inquiry: we have to read practices, actions, texts, interviews and speeches to recover other people’s stories. Explanation needs a historical form of inquiry: we have to locate their stories within their wider webs of belief, and these webs of belief against the background of traditions they modify in response to specific dilemmas. In our analysis...we merge these two modes of inquiry reading a wide range of texts in relation to traditions and dilemmas’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2004: 135).

For Bevir and Rhodes then, narratives reveal important units of analysis of ‘tradition’ and ‘dilemma’ which lend a framework to understanding a policy context. Their starting point for analysis is to determine the various traditions in a given context. The analyst identifies traditions surrounding the phenomenon, in their case British governance, Bevir and Rhodes pinpointed four traditions: Tory, Liberal, Whig and Socialist. These traditions function much like any other cognitive normative frame (as suggested above by Surel 2000), like any other ‘theory in use’ or ideology these traditions express narratives on a given subject.

There are important questions here for policy ideas – as in this account ideas become the expressions of *traditions*. Traditions are defined as ‘a set of understandings someone receives during socialisation...a set of inherited beliefs’ (Bevir et al 2003:6). Bevir argues that tradition is the ‘social heritage’ that ‘comes to individuals who, through their agency, can adjust and transform this heritage even as they pass it on to others’ (Bevir et al 2003: 8). The agency of individuals can be understood at points where dilemmas facilitate new beliefs to be accepted: ‘A dilemma here arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and so forces a reconsideration of these existing beliefs or practices and associated tradition’ (Bevir et al 2003: 10, drawing on Bevir 1999).

The following quote summarises Bevir and Rhodes’ account of policy change and why an idea catches on as an interplay between actors’ beliefs and perceived dilemmas:

‘To hold on to a new idea, people must develop their existing beliefs in order to make room for it. The new idea will open ways of adjusting and close down others. People have to hook it to their existing beliefs, and their existing beliefs will present some opportunities and not others. People can integrate a new belief into their existing beliefs only by relating themes in it to themes already present in their beliefs. Change thus involves a pushing and pulling of a dilemma and a tradition to bring them together’ (Bevir et al 2003:12).

This approach of Bevir and Rhodes shows how policy narrative enquiry can be a broader project attempting to popularise and mainstream interpretation, bridging philosophy and political analysis. It assumes action is rooted in traditions and dilemmas and is expressed through narratives. Change and the emergence of an idea is not dissimilar to that of many of the other approaches reviewed in this chapter, however what it lacks is to say *why* change occurs, rather than just *how*. To continue



this review of interpretative policy analysis; metaphor, like narrative, is of key concern.

## **Metaphor**

For interpretative policy analysts, metaphors offer ‘new insights into the situations they describe’ (Yanow 1999: 43, see also van Hulst 2004, 2007). Organisational metaphors are ‘the juxtaposition of two superficially unlike elements’ (Yanow 1999: 42). Therefore they have a focus and a vehicle that carries the meaning. In the simple phrase ‘he is as cold as ice’, the focus is ‘he’ or him, the vehicle to convey how cold he is, is ‘ice’. Policy makers use metaphor explicitly or implicitly in their everyday speech, formal documents, reports, emails, websites and argumentation. They use metaphor to communicate complexity in a simple understandable way. In terms of policy ideas, they provide a vehicle for conveying taken-for-granted assumption and policy prescriptions. For policy analysis, isolating a commonly used metaphor and exploring it further gives insight into both the cognitive and normative/prescriptive intentions of policy actors. Yanow, a keen advocate of metaphor analysis argues ‘uncovering the metaphoric roots of a policy or agency language and actors is one way of discovering the architecture of the policy argument’ (1999: 43).

Yanow demonstrates the process of metaphor analysis through an example from her study of Israeli community centres (1999). Her initial interviews and documentary analysis flagged up a common comparison of community centres as supermarkets. Once a metaphor has been identified in this way there are three further stages. The first is to decipher the meaning of the vehicle (supermarket) within the respondent’s frame of reference, that is tracing back when this was first widely used and then listing the characteristics of the vehicle - supermarkets in Israel during that period. The second stage is to then compare the characteristics of the *focus*

(community centres) and the *vehicle* (supermarket). Third it is then possible to explore contrasting cases for the vehicle (open air markets or corner shops) in order to better understand how for policy actors thinking of community centres in such a way, in turn shapes their view of community centres. The characteristics derived from the *vehicle* can then become research questions for analysis of the *focus*.

In terms of questions of ideas, this example of Yanow's metaphor study raises new issues. Ideationalists might argue the supermarket ethos in community centre management is an idea 'whose time has come', or 'caught on'. However this form of metaphor analysis goes beyond reducing 'supermarket' to being the idea, but instead it is understood as the vehicle which in turn reveals further meanings and raise new questions. In that sense, interpretative policy analysts do not take ideas at face value as fully formed entities but make a point of separating out 'idea' into vehicles and focus, or moreover object, symbol, and interpretation. In the case above, the object of focus is community centres, however they are being articulated as equivalent to supermarkets (metaphor or symbol); and the challenge for policy analysis is to make sense of how this vehicle or symbol is being interpreted. This highlights a paradox in Kingdon's work is that he cites his respondent's use of metaphor extensively but does not acknowledge a separation between meanings in focus and meanings of the vehicle. Instead, the metaphors he cites are more often about how his respondents understand the role of ideas – as bullets in loaded guns, perennial flowers waiting to reappear, or ingredients in soup. The focus on streams, I argue, suggests ideas are fully formed entities awaiting a window of opportunity and thereby overlooks how ideas themselves are interpreted overtime.

Having sufficiently sketched the interpretative focus on narrative and metaphor, I will now explore how interpretative researchers often understand systems

or frames of meaning, not as institutions, belief systems or paradigms, but in the form of discourse.

### **Policy discourse**

Discourse, in terms of interpretative policy analysis, has parallels with cognitive and normative frames (Surel 2000, above) as a structural ensemble of ideas, beliefs, and categories through which policy is mediated. However, there are several types of discourse policy analysis (see Torfing 2005: 5-9 for review) each with their own distinctive theoretical underpinnings (for example Fischer 2003; Hajer 1993, 1995, 2003; Howarth and Torfing 2005; Mathur 2005; Schmidt and Radaeilli 2004). My discussion of discourse includes only those that Torfing would consider second or third generation approaches to discourse. In the first generation approach, discourse is defined in a 'narrow linguistic sense of a textual unit larger than a sentence, and focuses on the semantic aspects of spoken and written text' (Torfing 2005: 6). Instead all of the discussion of discourse here is as an alternative to a cognitive normative frame, a system of meaning through which actors make sense of their world. Rather than restricted to 'spoken and written language,' the second generation (e.g. Critical Discourse Analysis, Fairclough 1995) is 'extended to a wider set of social practices' (Torfing 2005: 6) and the third generation goes further to cover 'all social phenomena' (Torfing 2005: 8).

Discourse is something of a loaded concept for scholars as it is often interpreted as having a structuralist legacy that links it to Foucault (1971). Accordingly, scholars who wish to privilege the role of agency in policy formation, such as Bevir and Rhodes above, deliberately avoid categorising the systems or frames of meaning in their project as 'discourse' and prefer tradition (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). It is useful at this point in the chapter, having explored frames of

paradigm and belief system, to explore the frame of discourse and how it is deployed in interpretative analysis of public policy. A more extensive discussion of theories of discourse can be found in the next chapter, but for now I will explore the approaches to discourse explicitly linked with interpretative policy analysis.

To begin, the discursive institutionalism of Schmidt and Radaelli (e.g. 2004), although less widely acknowledged as a form of discursive policy analysis, offers a bridge from the discussion so far. In their definition of discourse, Schmidt and Radaelli distinguish between the content and the usage of discourse in policy:

‘Discourse we define in terms of its content, as a set of policy ideas and values, and in terms of its usage, as a process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication’ (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 184).

They choose the concept over categories such as language, narrative or communication because discourse encompasses all of these (2004: 193). Schmidt and Radaelli’s version of policy discourse is posited as a fourth variant of New Institutionalism (compared to rational, historical and sociological). Therefore they place themselves as a further frame account of policy. Discourses, like frames, are open to change, they shape how actors perceive policy problems and legacies which in turn influence their preferences and ‘thereby, enhancing their political institutional capacity to change’ (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 188). For most institutionalist or agency centred accounts of public policy this is problematic, as it overlooks a debate regarding how institutions change, and the role for agents. Instead, Schmidt and Radaelli argue that their discourse institutionalism integrates this dichotomy, as discourse is a utility for both:

‘Discourse is central because it assists in the attempt to integrate structure and agency and thus to explain the dynamics of change. Discourse is fundamental both in giving shape to new institutional structures as a set of ideas about new rules, values and practices, and as a resource used by entrepreneurial actors to

produce and legitimate those ideas, as a process of interaction focused on policy formulation and communication' (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004: 192)

The argument that ideas structure institutions is familiar, as too is the argument that ideas are a resource or a tool for policy entrepreneurs. The difference here is how they bring in the notion of discourse. For Schmidt and Radaelli, discourse is important as it serves a dual purpose: it 'represents both the policy ideas that speaks to the soundness and appropriateness of policy programmes and the interactive processes of policy formulation and communication that serve to generate and disseminate those policy ideas' (2004: 193). This all provides a good introduction to discourse as a bridge between New Institutionalism and theories of policy discourse, however it does not offer a comprehensive account that would convince a new institutionalist to reject a frame based account and turn to discourse.

### **Policy discourse analysis**

Maarten Hajer's approach to policy discourse approach is an alternative to the discourse institutionalism of Schmidt and Radaelli. Like them, Hajer developed his discourse analysis conscious of policy frame approaches. In Hajer's case it was the Advocacy Coalition Framework which was used as an explanation for coalitions between diverse actors within a policy sub-system. In his 1995 critique of Sabatier's approach he takes issue with three aspects. First that the ontology of Sabatier is based on the individual rather than relational. Second he rejects that *a priori* beliefs should be the discursive cement for coalitions as the Advocacy Coalition Framework proposes, and third he rejects the Advocacy Coalition Framework rationalist understanding of policy change (Hajer 1995: 69-72). That said, there are considerable similarities with the Advocacy Coalition Framework and Hajer's approach as they both explain the role of ideas in coalition formation. However, crucially for Hajer,

because the cohesive cement is ‘discursive’ and not necessarily value based, the discourse coalition framework can go further.

To begin, Hajer defines *discourse* as ‘an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena’ (1993: 45). Furthermore, a *discourse coalition* is ‘an ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors that utter those story lines, and the practices that conform to these story lines, all organised around a discourse’ (Hajer 1993: 47). Therefore story lines are the key unit of analysis for understanding Hajer’s policy discourse analytic. Story lines are condensed manifestations of public debate, for example: acid rain, climate change, war on terror, where elements from a range of discourses are combined into a relatively coherent whole. The arguments couched within a story line will differ but will be held together by a sufficient degree of what Hajer terms ‘discursive affinity’. Discourses are continually formulated around emerging policy issues, and as they are formulated actors articulating a particular discourse will produce story lines. Story lines are important as they are the ‘medium through which actors try to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternative social arrangements’ (Hajer 1993: 47). Armed with their story lines, these discourse coalitions will then seek to dominate a particular field of debate. For Hajer, a discourse coalition is dominant when central actors are persuaded by the rhetorical power of a new discourse, which is then reflected in the institutional practices of that political domain (1993: 48). More recently Hajer refers to the importance of story lines to provide actors with references, overcome fragmentation and achieve ‘discursive closure’:

‘Storylines are narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding. Story-lines are essential

political devices that allow the overcoming of fragmentation and the achievement of discursive closure' (Hajer 1995: 62).

This discursive closure, or the success of a coalition achieving the necessary dominant position, is referred to by Hajer as the 'struggle for discursive hegemony in which actors try to secure support for their definition of reality' (1995: 59). It is about reducing the complex arguments and discussion into an accepted and simple story line. At a practical level this storyline is 'a visual representation or a catchy one-liner' (Hajer 1995: 59). In addition, in more recent work, he further defines what he means by story lines: 'as crisp generative statements that bring together previously unrelated elements of reality' (Hajer 2003: 104). Such story lines can carry metaphors that convey understanding through comparison. Hajer refers to them as vehicles for the 'discursive reduction of complexity' which allow people from diverse backgrounds, with different expertise, to communicate over complex issues. The story lines allow people to place themselves or their piece of knowledge into the 'larger jigsaw of policy debate' (Hajer 2003: 104).

Policy ideas, in the broadest sense, then, play a role in three places in Hajer's policy discourse framework. First, ideas can be seen as *discourse* in themselves as resultant of an emerging policy issue, discourses are ideational responses by actors operating within discourse. Second ideas feature too as *elements* of policy discourse alongside other concepts and categories. Third, manifested in story lines, ideas are the *products* of discourse in pursuit of discursive hegemony or closure. As a result, explanations for why an idea as discourse or story line might catch on, vary accordingly. An idea as discourse will 'catch on' or succeed when it achieves discursive hegemony over a policy issue. Conversely, an idea as story line will catch on when it is able to accommodate the broadest range of arguments, meanings and complexity around a particular issue and at the same time remain 'catchy' and 'crisp'.

It is important to retain this conception of idea as both collections of demands or and element that binds others together.

Concluding this exploration of interpretative policy analysis, there are key differences beneath what is a broad umbrella. The categories; the primary units of analysis, differ between story lines, narratives and metaphor, as do broader frames such as discourse or tradition. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the two policy discourse approaches demonstrates how a category such as 'discourse' cannot be judged at face value.

Hajer offers a comprehensive theory of the policy process, whereas for Schmidt and Radaelli (2004) it is an extension of new institutionalism. The narrative and metaphor based analysis offer methods for interpreting policy but at the same time lack a comprehensive model by which to understand policy change and why ideas catch on. Coming from a different direction, Bevir and Rhodes attempt to go further by developing a framework based on beliefs grounded in traditions and affected by dilemmas. However they choose to limit their framework in the process, with the category of tradition rather than discourse. Unlike Hajer, Bevir and Rhodes are unable to say what constitutes a tradition, or how and in what ways traditions change. In a discourse framework these traditions would not be distinct from discourses but would be sediment discourses.

Overall, however, there are more similarities than differences in the interpretive policy project. Equivalences include: a broad rejection of rational accounts, a post positivist ontology, a stress on the importance of meaning both analytically and generatively, a strong value of the importance of context both in place and time, innovation in with methods (such as ethnography) and finally a commitment to understanding and questioning public policy. Collectively they move



beyond mainstream accounts and offer valuable insight into the role and emergence of ideas.

### **Conclusion:**

The question that sparked this review was ‘why do ideas catch on?’ This question is found elsewhere in the literature but with differing emphasis. For example, Campbell suggests that little attention has been paid by writers to how the ‘character of policy programmes *per se* affects the chances that one will be adopted over another’ (2002: 29). In other words, whether the inherent character of a programmatic idea affects its selection. Above, I have reviewed how writers have debated the ‘stickiness’ factor (Gladwell 2000) or the crisp-like (Hajer 2003) or virus-like (Richardson 2000) quality of an idea. In another incarnation of the core question, Gofas suggests that in most accounts of ideas there is a distinct ‘lack of a selective mechanism’ that explains why one idea is selected over another (2001: 13). Put in a similar way, Blyth suggests ‘The elite game may tell us how the ideas get from the blackboard to the party, but not how and why certain ideas come to be accepted over others’ (1997: 237). Here Blyth is noting the relationships between academia and decision makers conjoined by their paradigm affinities, but his puzzle is the ‘mechanism of translation from academic debate to popular consciousness’ that ‘needs to be spelled out’ (Blyth 1997: 237). In responding to this challenge I have been using a catch all of why do ideas ‘catch on’. However on closer assessment of how others phrase this question, of ideas being adopted, selected, accepted, the question is less precise.

The ability to define the question of an idea ‘catching on’ is dependent on defining what is a policy or political ‘idea’. Several attempts at a policy typology of ideas have been suggested (for example Braun 1999; Campbell 2002). However, ideas range from the particular programmes of action to operating principles perhaps

within deeper worldviews. It is suggested these ideas as programmes or principles then catch on, either because they are benign jigsaw pieces that fit or have affinity with the particular contextual conditions, or conversely because others see them as context altering, shock causing, invasive ideas that reorder the policy stratosphere. This chapter has travelled through a series of accounts, many of which share a common approach that ideas affect, or are grounded in, some kind of web or constellation of ideas and principles, be they: institution, paradigm, deep core, tradition, or discourse. In addition these frameworks suggest a role for agents at particular times in the process and how these constellations frame their cognition and in turn affect their normative prescription.

What is clear from the review is that there is no one single model or framework that comprehensively and satisfactorily responds to the question of ideas. I do not think that combining these into some form of synthetic model is the answer. Importantly, each of these models stems from different ontological starting points. There is a clear difference in the work of the positivist rational account of ideas in Goldstein and Keohane, in contrast to the projects of Hajer or Bevir and Rhodes. Rather, the response to this problem is to say that individually, each of the models reviewed is lacking, but taken collectively, they generate important and pertinent questions for the role of ideas in public policy.

The first question is of unit of analysis, that is: what is the basic unit of analysis in an idea. The discussion of metaphors above brought this into focus. It demonstrated that 'ideas' can be objects *and* symbols *and* interpretations. Comprehensive frameworks, such as Kingdon's (1984) policy streams are greatly undermined by this distinction, as in such frameworks ideas are treated as fully

formed entities throughout their passage from floating in a policy primeval soup to becoming widely adopted.

The second question is flagged by the different assertions in virus accounts of ideas, Gladwell (2000) explains ideas catching on widely in epidemic proportions, whereas Richardson (2000) focuses on an idea challenging and possibly destabilising existing orders. In addition, accounts in this review discussed the possibilities of exogenous shocks suspending normal politics (Lowndes 2005) and the possibility of paradigm shifts. The second question of ideas then, is to what extent are ideas involved in this process of change. Importantly, this is not a question of causation but one of cognition. For a paradigm, or worldview to be destabilised or in crisis, it requires actors to perceive such a crisis and then act accordingly. This second question of ideas is to ask what role ideas play in the process of crisis cognition.

The third question is of the role of ideas in cohesion of actors. An important factor in the accounts covered in this chapter has been to ask how actors share common values and beliefs as an ideational explanation for group formation and cohesion. Most explicitly this can be found in the Advocacy Coalition Framework where coalitions form around shared policy core beliefs or in the policy discourse framework, shared policy storylines. The relationship to the overall question, is how do ideas forge and foster coalitions?

Finally, the fourth question is to ask where and when do agents matter in the process of an idea catching on. Early in this chapter I quoted Moore (1988), suggesting at times actors can perhaps self-consciously produce ideas which then have effects on public policy. Structural accounts of policy would view this suggestion that actors could stand free of their cognitive normative frames – be they

traditions, paradigms or discourses that constitute them and control the production of ideas in this way as deeply problematic.

It is the core question of how an idea catches on and the supplementary questions of unit of analysis, capacity, cohesion and agency developed out of this chapter that drive the remainder of this thesis. In the next chapter I reserve the questions of ideas and the notion of discourse but disregard the category of idea as the basic unit of analysis. I introduce a comprehensive theory of discourse developed from Laclau and Mouffe (1985) with a clear ontological and epistemological foundation. I explore how discourse theory can provide a position from which to make sense of what are often competing and overlapping policy analytics and at the same time come closer to understanding complex questions of policy ideas.

## CHAPTER 3: DISCOURSE THEORY AND EMPTY SIGNIFIERS

‘Post-structuralist discourse theory has gained a self-perpetuating momentum. It is here to stay’ (Torfing 2005: 5).

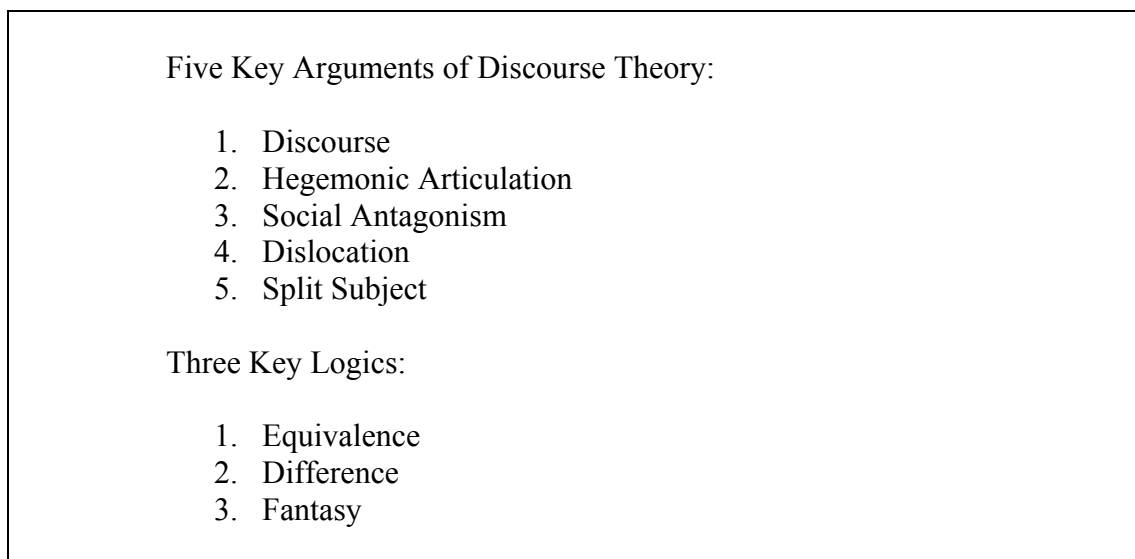
The role of this chapter is to outline the basic concepts of discourse theory, explore how these concepts speak to the questions of ideas and examine what they add to public policy analysis. It has three sections. The first section outlines the five key arguments and three key logics of discourse theory and concludes by addressing the main and supplementary questions developed in the previous chapter. The second section of this chapter focuses on the role of the ‘empty signifier’. It highlights the role of empty signifiers both as a valuable category for understanding policy ideas but also acknowledges this as a conceptual work in progress. The third section then takes stock of debates surrounding the empirical application of discourse theory and empty signifiers in public policy and other studies. The chapter concludes that policy ideas are best understood as both discourse and general equivalent demands within discourse, but remains underdeveloped as a model of policy analysis.

### **3.1 Discourse theory**

In 1985 Laclau and Mouffe published their seminal book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which developed a post-Marxist project that retained the category of hegemony and social antagonism without the class based reductionism and economic determinism of structural Marxism. The book has since grown into a poststructuralist

theory of discourse (hereon ‘discourse theory’) located in and around Essex University (hence sometimes referred to as the ‘Essex School’, see Laclau’s Foreword in Howarth 2000 et al; also Townshend 2003). Below I will outline the five key arguments this approach articulated (Torfing 2000; 2005) and three key logics (summarised in figure 3.1 below).

**Figure 3.1 Key Arguments and Logics of Discourse Theory**



### **Key arguments of discourse theory**

***Key argument 1, Discourse: ‘all forms of social practice take place against a background of historically specific discourses’ (Torfing 2005: 14)***

Discourse theory argues that all public policy takes place within systems of discourse. Discourses are symbolic schemes and social orders that include ‘all practices and meanings shaped by a community of social actors’ (Howarth 2000a: 5). This conception of discourse goes beyond a narrower definition of discourse as ‘text’ (see Hansen 2006 for debate) and promotes a wider understanding of discourse as systems of meaning. However, an important distinction for discourse theory is the assertion that although there is material reality, there is no such thing as an ‘objective’ truth

(after Rorty 1980) or meaning beyond discourse (Foucault 1970). In short, there is nothing outside of discourse.

‘Whatever we say or think, or do is conditioned by a more or less sedimented discourse which is constantly modified and transformed by what we are saying, thinking, doing’ (Torfing 2005: 14).

There are three illuminating points in this quote above from Torfing: firstly it is important to consider this assumption that everything is conditioned by discourse. Some writers, such as Schmidt and Radaelli as outlined in the previous chapter, suggest discourse matters sometimes, and sometimes it does not (2004:186). In discourse theory, this is not the case. Where something is said to be outside of discourse or non-discourse, on further examination it is from another differential discourse order. Because every aspect of the social world has meaning, discourse theory argues that meaning is only possible through discourse. The challenge for discourse analysts is therefore to understand how these discourses operate around a particular policy area. Secondly, the next assumption to draw from this quote is ‘sedimented discourse’ which describes a set of elements that are linked *equivalentially* into a chain and *differentially* to elements excluded from the chain. Discourse is the result of articulation: ‘the structured totality resulting from articulatory practice’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105). I will discuss the importance of articulatory practice in more detail below. The third point is the notion of constant modification and transformation. Discourses are never fully fixed or fully formed entities - they are continually modifying and continually liable to radical alteration (Howarth 2000: 122; Laclau 1983: 24).

In the case of public policy, discourses are revealed in many of the categories discussed in the previous chapter – as narratives, rhetorical strategies, organisational metaphors, traditions, collections of storylines, and cognitive normative frames.

Applying discourse theory can be interpretative in methods but ultimately focuses on exploring the conditions for possibility that make a particular discourse possible, to understand how and why disparate elements are conjoined in the ways they are.

In a recent clarification of discourse theory Laclau suggests the basic units of analysis that constitute elements of a discourse are ‘demands’ (Laclau 2005a). For Laclau, demands are the manifestation of a grievance resulting from an unfulfilled request. Understanding discourse from the position of demands explains how new discourses or chains of equivalence come about when a series of demands from different discursive origins are articulated as equivalent. Laclau illustrates with an example:

If, for instance, the group of people in that area who have been frustrated in their request for better transportation find that their neighbours are equally unsatisfied in their claims at the levels of security, water supply, housing, schooling, etc, some kind of solidarity will arise between them all: all will share the fact that their demands remain unsatisfied. That is, the demands share a negative dimension beyond their positive differential nature’ (Laclau 2005b: 4).

Laclau’s assertion here is that all demands within a discourse, or equivalential chain, have both a particular dimension (in this example: security, water, housing) but also a relational-equivalential dimension that relates each demand to a broader set of demands. I will go on to explore how demands can be related in this way below. To begin, discourse requires some form of articulation. Such articulation is never politically neutral but instead part of a wider hegemonic strategy. To understand this process I need to introduce the second key argument that underpins discourse theory: hegemonic articulation.

***Key argument 2, Hegemonic Articulation: ‘Discourse is constructed in and through hegemonic struggles that aim to establish a political and moral-intellectual leadership through the articulation of meaning and identity’ (Torfing 2005: 15)***



Hegemony refers to the establishment of a moral and intellectual leadership system of meaning, and the articulation of this system of meaning, or hegemonic articulation, is central to understanding discourse theory (From Gramsci 1971). For Laclau and Mouffe, articulation is ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice’ (1985: 105). Hegemonic articulation then, is a ‘forging of a political and moral-intellectual leadership involving the articulation of a variety of ideological elements into a common political project that modifies the identity of the political forces behind it’ (Torfing 2000: 12). Three core logics of discourse theory come into play here: *equivalence*, *difference* and *fantasy*. Actors are engaged in drawing equivalence between demands but also articulating a frontier that defines the limits of their project. In practice, hegemony is revealed by a seeming consensus or by categories being taken-for-granted, accepted or unquestioned.

As equivalences are grounded in discourses, the aim of hegemonic actors is to articulate equivalence as fully fixed. Actors engage in series of hegemonic projects. The motivation should not be conflated with rational actors fulfilling interests, but instead actors whose identity is reliant on the discourse, and the incompleteness of the discourse forces the actor to construct an ‘illusory full identity through acts of identification’ (Torfing 2004: 27). In that sense, actors, are strategic rather than rational. But why is the project always incomplete? Surely it is possible to fully fix a discourse sometimes? Not so, and this introduces the third key argument of discourse theory: social antagonism.

***Key argument 3, Social Antagonism: ‘The hegemonic articulation of meaning and identity is intrinsically linked to the construction of social antagonism, which involves the exclusion of a threatening Otherness that stabilises the discursive system while, at the same time, preventing its ultimate closure’ (Torfing 2005: 15).***

The process of identification within discourse is based on constituting an ‘otherness,’ a constitutive outside that shares no common measure with the demands of a discourse (Laclau 1990: 17). This otherness both stabilises the discourse and simultaneously prevents ‘ultimate closure’. This is understood in discourse theory as ‘social antagonism’. The antagonistic ‘other,’ as it is often known, is importantly a threat rather than just different. Difference can be accommodated and will always be present in a discourse, but threats are outside the discourse and at the same time stabilising and threatening the discursive equivalence. This means that with any hegemonic project there will always be at least one counter hegemonic project or contingent event containing demands that cannot be accommodated. Because of this there will always be social antagonism. The continual threat to discourse means there is always a chance this discourse could become dislocated. This links to the theory of change for discourse theory and the fourth key argument: dislocation.

***Key argument 4, Dislocation: ‘A stable hegemonic discourse becomes dislocated when it is confronted by new events it cannot explain, represent, or in other ways domesticate’ (Torfing 2005: 16).***

No matter how stable or ‘sedimented’ a discourse, it is always vulnerable to dislocation. As I described above, any discourse will continually face challenges from counter hegemonic demands (from rival discourses) and demands resulting from unanticipated contingencies. Some of the frameworks discussed in the previous chapter processes similar to dislocation. Jeremy Richardson, for example, discusses the destabilising affects when a policy community are unable to integrate a virus-like idea (2000: 1019). Similarly, Goldstein and Keohane described how the normal system can be disrupted following events of a magnitude of exogenous shocks:

‘Depressions, wars, the decline of a political party and the other throw of government may all cause ideas to become important because all constitute

exogenous shocks that undermine the existing order' (Goldstein and Keohane 1993b: 17).

Finally, in a similar vein, Peter Hall (1993) understands the dissolution of a institutionalised paradigm and the formation of a new institutional form as a process of third order change. Such change is caused by the inability of an existing paradigm to accommodate anomalies. In discourse theory this process is recognised but understood as a crisis of identification. For actors, identity is constituted within a particular discourse, therefore dislocation of this system of meaning is the worst possible scenario. It is a traumatic process and their position in the social world is thrown into doubt.

However, beyond traumatic, dislocatory events can also be productive: 'If on the one hand they threaten identities, on the other, they are the foundation on which new identities are constituted' (Laclau 1990: 36, cited in Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 13). Dislocation where the symbolic order is completely or partially disrupted is an opportunity for new discursive forms. Arguably, during periods of dislocated policy making, the role of agency is accentuated. The process mobilises agents to articulate a new discursive order, and meanings become up-for-grabs. It may be that the new formation closely resembles much of the previous formation. Lowndes (2005) concept of institutional remembering, mentioned in the previous chapter, has parallels, however importantly new frontiers will include some demands and exclude others. Here the *logic of equivalence* works like glue cohering actors and projects, whilst the *logic of difference* works like a knife marking out who and what is 'us' and who and what is 'them'. In recent work, these conditions of on the one hand *normal* and on the other as *dislocated* are distinguished by Laclau as *the Social* and *the Political* (Laclau 2005a). Actor motivation is to establish an identity within the social

and then to act strategically to prevent it slipping into the political where meanings and equivalences are openly questioned. The process of maintaining a successful hegemonic project is one of articulation of equivalences to achieve reiteration of discourse. It is preferable to understand discourses over time as *reiterated* rather than *maintained* as this takes into account the forever modifying nature of, and the ever present threat to, all discourses, regardless of how sedimented.

***Key argument 5, Split Subject: ‘The dislocation of the discursive structure means that the subject always emerges as a split subject that might attempt to reconstruct a full identity through acts of identification’ (Torfing 2005: 16).***

In this post-structuralist account of discourse, agents (individuals or collections of individuals) are engaged in the fruitless pursuit of a complete identity. Their goal is to achieve an unthreatened and fully-fledged identity. As I have suggested, agents will act strategically by hegemonising the terrain which they inhabit through hegemonic projects, they will articulate equivalences, and identify and highlight enemies and threats. Identity is based on social antagonism, on the identity of an ‘other,’ and, as a result there will always be a threat and the possibility of dislocation. Therefore, agents are always ‘split’ subjects in that they cannot and will not ever achieve their goal of fullness. This is referred to as a failed identity; they have neither complete structural identities nor a complete lack of identity. However, this does not mean that agents do not try; it is this continual attempt to obtain a complete identity that underpins human behaviour within discourse:

‘Even if the full closure of the social is not realisable in any actual society, the idea of closure and fullness still functions as an impossible ideal. Societies are thus organised and centred on the basis of such impossible ideals’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 8).

This pursuit of a fully-fledged identity results in actors projecting ‘completeness’ and masking over the gaps. A fully-fledged identity entails being certain who the enemy is and therefore interpellating, that is hailing or giving identity to, a certain enemy.

There are three key logics that come into play in the impossible quest for a full identity. The first two I have already mentioned: *the logic of difference* to demarcate us from them, to mark out the frontiers of the discourse and the *logic of equivalence* to articulate sameness between ‘us’ (e.g. as democrats, hardworking tax payers, neighbours) or sameness between a series of disparate ‘others’ (e.g. terrorists, politicians, hoodies). The third key logic is the *logic of fantasy* or the articulation of a fantasmatic fullness (Stavrakakis 1999). This is about symbolising a complete and desirable fullness and certainty, devoid of any threat. However because there is always a threat and the wholeness is missing, this logic aims to map over this ‘lack’ through a fantasmatic logic. Much of this can be found in Lacan’s (1982) discussion of difference between reality and the ‘Real’. Reality is what agents perceive as the current state of affairs and the Real is what ought to be. Lack is therefore the gap between is and ought, or reality and the Real. The fantasmatic logic is about symbolising the lack and alluding to fullness.

Some key questions emerge out of this. How do you maintain a fantasmatic fullness, a sense of completeness or the threat of an enemy? How do you guard against dislocation from counter-hegemonic projects so as to prevent the event of earth shattering dislocation? How do you forge a coalition of actors around a particular project to do this? In response, Laclau has suggested that the role of one of the many demands in a chain of equivalence is for it to ‘step in’ to represent the whole chain, or to begin ‘representing the totality’ (Laclau 2000). The distinctiveness of this representative demand is how it embodies what is equivalent between a series of

different demands. But importantly the demand remains particular as well as equivalent. Laclau gives the example of 'gold' as being widely acknowledged as symbolic of value, but which does not cease to be a commodity. Gold is an example of simultaneously being both particular and equivalent of the whole chain. This is known in discourse theory as a 'general equivalent' (Laclau 2000: 302). As the chain expands the general equivalent may become an empty signifier. The empty signifier is a reflection of the new found stability enjoyed by the chain. I will go on to argue in the following sections that empty signifiers and general equivalents are central to understanding ideas in public policy.

Discourse theory suggests that empty signifiers play a key role in articulating a sense of completeness and of maintaining a common identity of other. It is also suggested that an empty signifier can embody a utopian ideal. In the reiteration or expansion of a hegemonic project, empty signifiers provide an equivalential focus for new demands to be added to the chain. It is important to explore how scholars interested in the role of general equivalents and empty signifiers suggest how they relate to practical examples of public policy. I will explore examples and further questions of empty signifiers in the next section.

To summarise the chapter so far, in this opening section I have introduced the five key arguments and three key logics of discourse theory. The social and the political world is understood through the interface of discourses that are hegemonically articulated by agents seeking an illusive full identity. Discourse theory argues structuration, or the establishment of a fully fixed structure, is impossible because of social antagonism, and therefore discourses, no matter how sedimented, are vulnerable to dislocation, which would result in the complete or partial breakdown of identity and reordering of meaning. Actors strategically engage

logics to stave off dislocation. Logics of difference mark out them and us, logics of equivalence draw on similarities and logics of fantasy appeal to a completeness or wholeness yet to come. General equivalents becoming empty signifiers to assist in this role. Before going any further, I think it is useful to recall the questions of ideas suggested in the previous chapter and explore how these are understood by the five key arguments and three key logics of discourse theory outlined above.

### **Discourse and questions of ideas**

In addition to introducing the core thesis question of why ideas catch on, the previous chapter generated four supplementary questions regarding ideas. The first supplementary question was of unit of analysis. The discussion of interpretation in the previous chapter brought out how ideas can both have a substantive and symbolic dimension. This consideration problematises the possibility of a ‘soup of ideas’ floating around and awaiting a window of opportunity (Kingdon 1984). Instead, it is important is to ask how actors articulate ideas and their meaning. It is more favourable to understand ideas as demands and chains of demands. The task instead becomes a need to make sense of how actors articulate demands into particular constellations and how this frames the debate and subsequent action. However, also in the previous chapter, ideas were presented as collections of beliefs organised into belief systems, frames or world views. The comparator unit of analysis here is discourse, as a chain of demands. Ideas should therefore be understood as demands *and* discourse.

The second question of ideas is about policy change and the role of ideas in this change. Discourse theory understands change as either about dislocation or modification to prevent dislocation. Dislocation occurs when demands cannot be domesticated into a discourse. In that sense, policy ideationalists would understand

these demands to be ideas that provide an external shock (Hall 1993: 280, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). However policy ideationalists might also recognise a role for ideas in the continued reiteration of discourse in a role of maintaining a focus for identification. That is, a sufficiently equivalent demand (empty signifier) that aids the process of masking over the differences between demands and alluding to a fullness in order to stabilise the hegemonic discourse. Policy ideationalists might identify such an empty signifier as an idea ‘whose time has come’ that has caught on within a particular policy domain (e.g. Gaster and O’Toole 1995). But as I will go on to argue below, the literature remains uncertain of why one demand steps in to become the empty signifier in this way.

The third question of ideas is specifically on cohesion, of the role of ideas in the coalition between actors or groups of actors. In the previous chapter I noted how Hajer understands discourse coalitions as ‘an ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors that utter those story lines, and the practices that conform to those story lines’ (1993: 47). In a similar vein, discourse theory understands cohesion through the logic of equivalence. Discourse theory is therefore able to go further than to say these story lines share a ‘discursive affinity;’ rather that through a process of identification these demands share a common equivalence.

The fourth question of ideas examines how, and at what point, agents have a conscious capacity to act. Rationalist accounts argue that actors will make choices that maximise their self-interested preferences (Ward 1995). Conversely, discourse theory is structuralist in that agents cannot operate outside of their discursive constraints. Even during the process of dislocation of a particular policy domain, actors will have switched to start identifying with another discourse to frame signification. That said it follows that actors have the greatest autonomy during



uncertain ‘political’ times rather than calmer times in the *Social*. Equivalences are only possible if actors are present to articulate those equivalences. More work is needed to understand the capacity of agents to act in times of normal politics. Empirically, the policy analysis focus becomes the role of policy entrepreneurs. In discourse theory these are often referred to as *organic intellectuals*, who employ rhetorical strategies to argue and persuade others of their equivalences, differences and fantasies and how they manipulate the meaning of empty signifiers in this pursuit.

In all four of these questions, empty signifiers are said to play a key role. In protecting against dislocation, in cohering groups and in being articulated as part of rhetorical strategies. Overall, from here on, the focus is less on why do ideas catch on, but rather: why certain demands become the general equivalent for a chain and then become successful empty signifiers?

In the next section I will explore what is currently understood about the role of empty signifiers in preparation for the third section which will discuss the possibilities for empty signifiers and discourse theory in policy analysis.

### **3.2 Empty signifiers**

The empty signifier is a concept that is central to discourse theory but also utilised in other disciplines across the social sciences. As a result, many different definitions and applications abound. Because of a fragmentation in the wider literature there is a risk of empty signifier becoming a catchall category term for all things undefined, seemingly meaningless and vague. To begin to address and clarify what I mean by an empty signifier, I will outline its origins and how Laclau came to develop the concept, with examples of how an empty signifier manifests in public policy research. Additionally, I will assess how the literature reflects the emergence

of an empty signifier in response to the central question of this thesis of how ideas catch on.

### **Empty signifiers, 1<sup>st</sup> generation of literature**

Laclau's discussion of the empty signifier was first set out in the mid 1990s with the essay later published in his book 'Emancipation(s)' (Laclau 1996). This quote below is his first attempt to introduce this concept. The empty signifier is a concept to signify what is missing or to patch over what is lacking. Politics is primary as it sees political forces competing to offer their objectives as playing this empty signifier role:

'In a situation of radical disorder, order is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of this absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonise something is exactly to carry out this filling function' (Laclau 1996: 53).

What follows here is a brief exploration of why empty signifiers are named so; however I want to emphasise that each time Laclau has developed the concept, the similarities with how others define empty signifiers are severed. However, it remains useful to note these origins.

Laclau's interest in empty signifiers was sparked by Lacan's discussion of Saussure's theory of the sign that the 'sign' is made up of two elements: the signifier (or the *signifiant*) and the signified (or *signifie*) (see Copley 2001: 264-265). The signifier is the symbol, the concept, the entity or the 'mental sound pattern' and the signified is its meaning. It is often expressed pictorially as Sr/Sd. The paradox of the empty signifier is whether a signifier can have no signified or signifieds. This becomes possible because the sense of absence is in itself a signifier. For example community who collectively grieve and mobilise around the absence of particular entity such as an appeal for justice, peace, democracy or freedom brings with it

wholeness. Laclau's interest in signifiers as a unit of analysis prompted other writers to begin to identify empty signifiers in their cases and how they seemed to unite actors around a particular absent fullness. For example Howarth suggested the attempts of the black consciousness movement to articulate black and blackness as an empty signifier in their collective resistance of the apartheid system (Howarth 2000: 175). In the same book, Clohesy (2000) explores discourse around the Provisional IRA and their articulation of nationhood and justice. Their strategies were implicitly 'filling' the empty signifier of justice with 'content'. He argues:

'This theorisation of justice as an empty signifier is important. It is precisely because it is a signifier that it can accommodate so many different interpretations that it must always be understood as empty, or at least, partially empty in that, although its meaning will always be contested, at any time there will always be a dominant discourse that will be controlling and delimiting its meaning' (Clohesy 2000: 72).

It is clear that Clohesy has made the link between demands in Northern Ireland and a theory of discourse as being about the hegemonic articulation of elements into equivalential chains and the role of empty signifiers to aid the (impossible) fixation of these discourses. In this case it is the notion of 'justice' that is used; its meaning is unfixed and therefore a number of different demands can be inscribed. At this point I need to highlight that general equivalents can be either empty signifiers or floating signifiers. Their status depends on whether the conditions are stable (normal or 'the social') or relatively unstable ('the political'). General equivalents in the former are empty signifiers where as in the latter they resemble 'floating signifiers'. Floating signifiers are general equivalents that have multiple meanings because actors grounded in multiple discourses are seeking to hegemonise their meaning during a period of dislocation. Therefore in returning to the example above, *justice* could also be a floating signifier because meaning is 'up for grabs' as actors seek to inscribe

projects into newly emerging discursive orders. Therefore, in the empirical application of discourse theory, analysts need to take into account the stability of the discourse before asserting whether an apparent general equivalent is either a floating signifier or an empty signifier.

This early work of Laclau on empty signifiers and the applications made by Howarth, Clohesy and others (see Howarth et al 2000 for further examples) should be understood as a first generation of the development of empty signifiers. This is apparent from the argumentation of Howarth's example of 'Black' where he argues 'the transformation of blackness from a floating signifier into a relatively fixed empty signifier was never fully accomplished' (Howarth 2000b: 175). In this period of development, empty signifiers were initially understood as floating signifiers that become empty signifiers. In ascertaining at what point a floating signifier becomes an empty signifier, Laclau accepts there is probably no clear distinction. Overall, I argue the position of empty signifiers in published work between 1996 and 2000 was a step forward but underdeveloped.

### **Empty signifiers, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of literature**

In an essay on universality in 2000, Laclau's consideration of general equivalents was a step towards a more comprehensive understanding of the role and emergence of empty signifiers in discourse theory. The article marked a departure from a discussion of signifiers to a discussion of demands. The focus became the role of general equivalents that 'step in' from within an emerging chain to provide representation:

'However, the more extended the chain of equivalences, the more the need for a general equivalent representing the chain as a whole. The means of representation are however, only the existing particularities. So one of them has to assume the representation of the chain as a whole. This is a strictly

hegemonic move: the body of one particularity assumes a function of universal representation' (Laclau 2000: 302-303).

Empty signifiers and floating signifiers remain part of this work. Here general equivalents can take the form of either a floating signifier at times of dislocation or they will gradually become an empty signifier of a relatively stable discourse, much in the way that Clohesy's (2000) example above of 'justice' suggests.

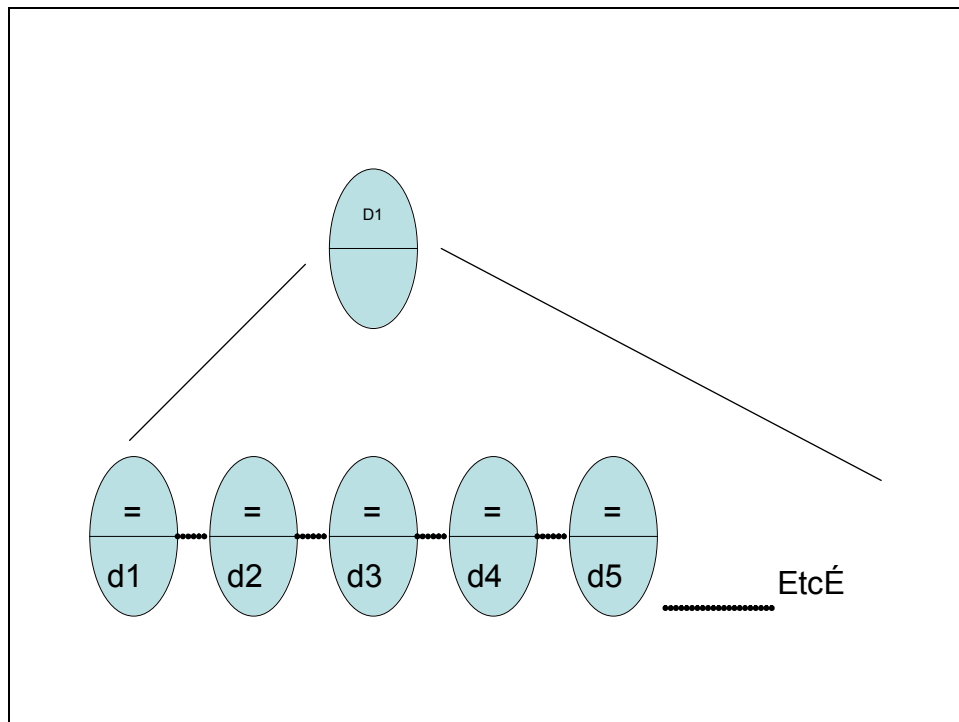
In beginning to outline his theory of populism in 2005, Laclau restates the aims he suggested in his 2000 work on general equivalents:

'One difference, without ceasing to be a particular difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. In this way, its body is split between the particularity which it still is and the more universal signification of which it is the bearer. This operation is...hegemony. And given that this embodied totality or universality is...an impossible object, the hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an empty signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness' (Laclau 2005a: 70-71)

That is to say, one demand in a chain begins to represent the 'totality' that is the (impossible) ambition or aspiration of a discourse. This demand becomes split between its initial particularity and the totality which it represents. When expressed in a diagram as in Figure 3.2 below, Laclau depicts this split demand as appearing twice, both as part of the chain and above the chain representing its overall aspiration. This aspiration of hegemony is an unachievable fullness but the success of a hegemonic project is dependent on the emergence of a demand to embody this desired impossibility.

The role of the empty signifier is therefore to make the most of this problem of 'impossibility' and instead symbolise fullness or completeness. It requires an empty signifier 'to signify and to withdraw its signifiatory function at the same time' (Stäheli 2003: 8)

**Figure 3.2 A Chain of Equivalence**



The purpose is for the empty signifier to in a sense ‘signify the absent’ (Ellsworth 2004: 45). Howarth and Stavrakakis argue that although full closure is never realisable, the idea of closure still functions aided by empty signifiers:

‘Even if the full closure of the social is not realisable in any actual society, the idea of closure and fullness still functions as an (impossible) ideal. Societies are thus organised and centred on the basis of such (impossible) ideals’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 8).

### **Examples of empty signifiers**

The concept of the empty signifier exists as a category beyond Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, and scholars were applying it before Laclau integrated it into his work (for example Walker 1989). Any search of previously published examples of empty signifier will yield a broad and intriguing list. A prominent example is ‘democracy,’ that can mean everything and nothing. The need for democracy is a

point of agreement we can all unite around (Ellsworth 2002; 2003). This example is of limited use as it suggests attributing the status of empty signifier without regard for the discursive context that constitutes it. In other words, it is important to remember democracy could be an empty signifier in one context but not another. Other published examples of empty signifiers include ‘women’ (Jarbi 2004), ‘Race’ (Foster 2000), Green (Day 2004), Class (Crane 2006), Community (Reyes 2005), Truth (Chouliaraki 2005), Morality (Lackey 2005), human rights (Goellnicht 2000). There are also technical terms which have come to proliferate in a certain fields, for example ‘Network’ (Jessop 2000) or ‘Management’ (Harding 2005),.

At this point in the chapter, there are three reasons for focusing on alternative examples of empty signifiers. First, because readers familiar with the concept of empty signifier need to be able to place where their understanding of the concept fits with Laclau. The ways in which the empty signifier is now used outside of discourse theory has followed an alternative path to Laclau’s logic of equivalence and general equivalents. The examples above either draw on theories of structural linguistics or in some cases have no discernable ontological reference. In the latter case the tendency is to employ the empty signifier as a synonym for what is vague or slippery. Secondly the empty signifier has a specific meaning for discourse theory. Although it remains a conceptual work in progress, it is a distinctive and useful category, ripe for empirical application and advancement.

A third reason to outline other examples of empty signifiers is precisely because of the lack of examples from discourse theory. It is one thing to give examples to illustrate how a category can simultaneously sustain different meanings, for instance Day’s (2004) example of ‘green’ (below), but it is another to work

through a specific policy case of how an empty signifier emerges and operates within governance.

‘Green...manages, with apparent ease, to refer to political groupings oriented to parliamentary reform (Green Party), underground movements that carry out direct action against the destruction of the environment and in defence of non-human beings (Green Warriors), and niche-marketed products in the capitalist marketplace (Green Detergent). The result of all of this overtime is that most of us are not at all sure what it means to ‘be Green’ (Day 2004: 726)

Although Day’s hypothetical example of green as an empty signifier is helpful, what is lacking in discourse theory are comprehensive well developed studies of empty signifiers and how they emerge and operate. The plethora of examples above from the wider discourse community are no substitute as they focus on universal concepts and have no need to understand the importance of context. In public policy research this is a primary concern. That said, there are some examples both within and outside discourse theory of empty signifiers that embody concepts/identities particular to a policy context. It is this kind of empty signifier that should be further explored within a discourse theoretic perspective;; for example: the ‘blue and yellow Islam’ in Swedish multicultural policy (Carlbon 2006), the symbol of the Mexican folk hero Jesus Malverde (Price 2005), NHS charging (Froud et al 1998) and Sustainable Development (Gonzalez-Gavino 2005). There are also examples of how individuals can embody empty signifiers: Princess Diana (Simons 1997) or Elvis (Rodman 1994) which may be of interest to scholars exploring the role of personality in the policy process. They are defined as empty signifiers in the sense they have been purposefully emptied through additional equivalences being drawn.

These examples show how a range of actors and demands can be attached to symbols and in the process meanings can be blurred. I argue this overlooks the fantasy element: of an empty signifier alluding to a fantasy fullness. Not all of those



the examples above do this. Clohesy's example of Provisional IRA *justice* is one that does; as is *freedom to fly*, that came out of Griggs and Howarth's recent work on airport governance (Griggs and Howarth 2006). Perhaps also 'Europe' (Makarychev 2005) has a fantasy element for those who demand that their national governments are accepted into the European Union. Finally, in their use of discourse theory to understand different 'third way' governing parties, Bastow and Martin show how 'community' symbolises a presence yet to come and blurs demands in the process:

'Discourses of community function by their symbolisation of a presence yet to come. That way, the differentiated components of this community are abstractly related as their individual gripes and issues are symbolically blurred into a generalised claim to sameness' (Bastow and Martin 2003: 42).

I now turn to the final part of this discussion of empty signifiers to explore what the current literature says of the process of how an empty signifier catches on and why one particular demand will become an empty signifier over all others. It is a reflection of the relatively recent integration of empty signifiers into discourse theory, that there is as yet relatively little written on these processes.

### **The process of becoming**

Empty signifiers begin as demands. As I discussed above, general equivalents will be 'split' by a negation in the sense that there will be some form of 'other' that prevents its full realisation. If other demands share the same negation they will form a chain of equivalence (Laclau 2000: 302). As actors articulate yet more demands and expand the chain, it will reach a point where a 'general equivalent' is required to represent the chain. As Laclau suggests:

'The more extended the chain of equivalences, the more the need for a general equivalent representing the chain as a whole. The means of representation are, however, only the existing particularities. So one of them has to assume the representation of the chain as a whole. This is a strictly

hegemonic move: the body of one particularity assumes a function of universal representation' (Laclau 2000: 302-303).

In other words, as the number of the demands articulated into the chain increases, the greater the need for a demand from within the chain to represent the overall shared purpose of the various different demands. Crucially Laclau, and others, argue that this 'general equivalent' does not come from outside of the chain but from within the chain ('only the existing particularities').

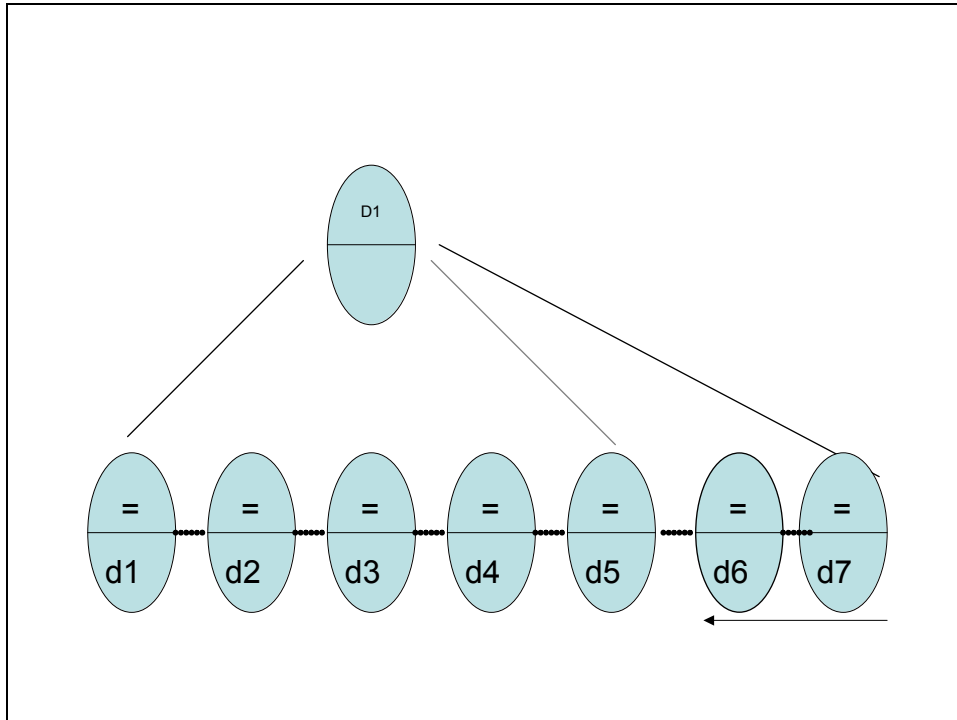
The empty signifier is a general equivalent for an established, long and growing chain of equivalence. In the example of Figure 3.3 below, the chain of demands (d1 to d5) and the general equivalent (D1) seen in the previous diagram (Figure 3.2) have been joined by further demands (d6 and d7). As each demand joins and expands the chain, the general equivalent (D1) becomes less particular and increasingly universal. The empty signifier results from an expanding chain of demands. 'The more extended this chain, the less its general equivalent will be attached to any particularist meaning' (Laclau 2000: 304). An indication of when this transition occurs is at the point at which demands are no longer articulated by what negates the demand but rather a new appeal to the leadership capacity of an empty signifier. As Laclau states below:

'Empty signifiers...can only [become] so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content. At the limit, this process reaches a point where the homogenising function is carried out by a pure name: the name of the leader' (Laclau 2005b: 7)

The key phrase to pick out of this quote is 'at the limit'. This limit is where the initial reason for forming, a shared negation, is superseded by a symbolic attachment to an empty signifier. The chain may have started out in response to a single act, for instance the attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001, but the general equivalent, e.g. the War on Terror, is such that other demands and appeals can be

added. The empty signifier is revealed once it becomes the primary reason for the chain.

**Figure 3.3 Adding Demands to the Chain of Equivalence**



To summarise, the literature since 1996 suggests that the emergence of an empty signifier begins as (1) a demand that shares an association through a shared negation with other demands that (2) steps in to be a general equivalent for the chain that then (3) over time severs much (but not all) of its particularity to lead and symbolise the discourse. The next question relevant to this thesis is why one demand becomes the empty signifier over others.

### **Understanding why that one?**

Understanding why one demand is selected above another is pertinent to the overarching question for the previous section of why one idea over any other. Early

discourse theory literature began by exploring the quality of the demand (a need for emptiness) and then moved to discussing the conditions required for an empty signifier to emerge and the importance of credibility.

To what extent can it be argued a demand will catch on if it is sufficiently empty? Howarth and Stavarakakis suggested that ‘emptiness’ is ‘an essential quality’ and an important condition of possibility for...hegemonic success’ (2000: 9). Their suggestion was supported by Clohesy’s example of ‘justice’ as an empty signifier. Clohesy asserts that in his case: ‘strategies were performing the role of ‘filling the void’, of providing the empty signifier of justice with an intelligible and positive content’ (Clohesy 2000: 74). The reason why justice came to function as a general equivalent according to Clohesy, was ‘because it is a signifier that can accommodate so many different interpretations that it must always be understood as empty or, at least, partially empty’ (Clohesy 2000: 74). Howarth and Stavarakakis suggest that the empty signifier ‘justice’ succeeded over others because diverse groups were able to confer dissimilar meanings because of its ‘emptiness’. I am concerned that limiting the discussion to whether or not a demand is ‘empty’ or not is both partial and unhelpful. It is partial in that several demands in a chain could be said to be empty therefore does not explain why one over another. It is unhelpful as it helps reinforce the sense that empty signifiers are so called because they are ‘empty’.

More recently, in addressing the question of conditions required for the production of empty signifiers, Griggs and Howarth pick up on a notion of credibility. Following this, I think it is more helpful to focus on the ‘credibility’ rather than the ‘emptiness’ of demands.

‘Three important theoretical conditions have to be satisfied for the emergence and functioning of empty signifiers. These are the availability of potential signifiers that can be articulated by competing hegemonic projects; their

credibility as means of representation and interpellation [hailing]; and the presence of strategically placed agents who can transform these floating ideas into empty signifiers... (Griggs and Howarth 2001: 103).

Here, Griggs and Howarth suggest three conditions are necessary: availability, credibility and agency. These they derive from Howarth's earlier work that 'certain discourses need to be 'available' and credible' if movements and political agents are to emerge and construct new social orders' (Howarth 2000a: 122) and Laclau's discussion of credibility in his 1990 book *New Revolutions* (Laclau 1990: 66). I agree with Griggs and Howarth that all three are necessary, however how much each of these matter depends on whether or not the emergence of a demand takes place at a time of dislocation. The focus on *availability* suggests again that any demand that becomes a general equivalent and then a empty signifier will originate from within the chain and not beyond it. The presence of agents to articulate equivalences is essential but ultimately they are operating within systems of meaning; within discourse. In a period of relative stability (or *the Social*) the decision to foster a particular demand will be based on its perceived credibility. In such times, the presence of agents is less important, whereas credibility is most important of the three conditions suggested by Griggs and Howarth.

For a demand to be a credible equivalent it must be possible to inscribe on it equivalences, differences and symbolise a fantasy fullness. There are clues in an earlier discussion from Laclau where he discusses the acceptance of certain discourses over others as being where credibility is based on the principles of existing order and the degree to which it has been dislocated:

'Not...any discourse putting itself forward as the embodiment of fullness will be accepted. The acceptance of a discourse depends on its credibility, and this will not be granted if its proposals clash with the basic principles informing the organization of a group. But it is important to point out that the more the objective organisation of that group has been dislocated the more those 'basic principles' will have been shattered' (Laclau 1990: 66).

So here Laclau is stating that the embodiment of fullness is important, but ultimately it rests on a credibility given meaning by existing principles. But if those principles have been shattered or suspended by a radical dislocation then credibility matters less. Put another way, in times of *the Social* (calm, normal politics), credibility matters greatly, whereas at times of *the Political* (dislocation) it is the role of actors whose agency is heightened during such periods and their ability to identify and foster 'demands' that draw equivalences, articulate difference and promise or refer to a fantasy fullness. It might be that such a demand would not have been possible under the previous discursive order but dislocation opens up these opportunities.

I am conscious that the discussion of why one demand catches on over another has lacked empirical examples pertinent to public policy. This is precisely the point of Griggs and Howarth, that: 'careful empirical investigation is needed to determine how and why any particular signifier can and does perform this role' (Griggs and Howarth 2001: 103). In the next and concluding section I explore the current situation and the suggestion of the empirical application of discourse theory in policy research and how this might further understanding of empty signifiers in the process.

### **3.3 Empirical challenges for discourse theory**

'Post-structuralist discourse theory is a young, open, and unfinished research programme and there is still a lot of work to be done before it can claim to constitute a fully fledged paradigm with a distinctive set of theoretical concepts, research strategies, and methods' (Torfing 2005: 3)

'While this theoretical approach fully endorses contemporary critiques of positivist, behaviouralist and essentialist paradigms, it is not content to remain at a purely theoretical level' (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000: 1).

The key messages from these two opening quotes above are that discourse theory continues to be a work in progress and that further development is required to explore

how it can be empirically applied and developed. This final section explores the current situation for the empirical application of discourse theory and provides suggestions for how this could and should be further developed. For discourse theory this is an ‘ontic challenge’ in that ‘There is still a gap between some of the abstract ontological concepts and the need for concepts dealing with the ontic [practical] level’ (Torfing 2000: 14, see also Howarth 2000a). In other words, how do discourses, chains of equivalence, logics of difference, demands and empty signifiers manifest in public policy? What areas of policy or political situations are suited to a discourse theoretic approach? And, how might further empirical application of discourse theory enhance understanding of empty signifiers and the initial questions of how ideas catch on in public policy?

### **The ontic challenge**

The categories of discourse theory remain a work in progress. In his foreword to one of the first edited collections of applied discourse theory, Laclau states:

‘The...discourse-theoretic approach is not a closed system which has already defined all its rules and categories, but an open-ended programme of research whose contours and aims are still very much in the making. A number of the discursive dimensions that have progressively emerged as important are still not sufficiently developed’ (Laclau, Foreword to Howarth et al 2000: xi).

Since the publication of that book in 2000, a number of other edited collections, books and articles have sought to develop the empirical application of discourse theory (e.g. Howarth and Torfing 2005). Topics include the black consciousness movement, airport protests, Northern Ireland, discourses of New Labour and food policy. What is also apparent is that discourse theory can be potentially applied to anything from studying trans-national discourses on globalisation to understanding the impacts of a dislocation of an extramarital affair and motivations for divorce. It

can be applied from the global to the personal, because the basic unit of analysis is a demand and discourse theory understands how actors articulate those demands in order to attain an (impossible) identity. However, for this thesis my starting point was the production of ideas that come to matter in decisions of public policy. I am interested in how discourse theory can speak to the public policy literatures reviewed in Chapter 2 out of an ideational turn in policy making.

Compared with other established policy discourse approaches, particularly Hajer's story lines and discourse coalitions, discourse theory has not yet achieved such conceptual parsimony. However, as I argued above, these are not comprehensive theoretical accounts in the same way as discourse theory. The benchmark in terms of empirical application of a comprehensive model is perhaps set by either policy streams (Kingdon 1984) or Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) in how these models can be applied to policy contexts to understand change. Perhaps it is not possible for discourse theory to be faithfully adapted to application in this way, or moreover desirable (Howarth 2005). However there is an opportunity to both advance understanding of concepts whilst asking new questions and providing fresh analysis of public policy in the process.

In advancing discourse theory empirically, there is a need to consider topic selection. Jacob Torfing argues against contentment with applying discourse to the usual topics of gender, ethnicity and social movements. The result is that this kind of selection serves to sediment a hierarchy of soft and hard topics, where 'hard topics' of public administration or policy analysis remain the preserve of conventional objectivist and rationalist theory (Torfing 2005: 25). He calls on policy analysts to critically and carefully apply discourse in order to 'deconstruct' this 'hierarchy between hard and soft issues in political science' (2005:25).



A second and linked point is about the starting point for analysis being either antagonism or consensus. When the starting point for political analysis is drawn to understand antagonism, discourse theory is used to make sense of how rival coalitions of actors articulate their demands, foster a general equivalent, mask over their internal differences and draw lines of inclusion and exclusion. Unsurprisingly, discourse theory lends itself to these social movement topics very well, for example (Griggs and Howarth 2000). When the political analysis begins with consensus it is a problematisation of what is probably being taken-for-granted by either actors within a particular policy context/case, or by an unquestioned agreement in the literature. It is a problematisation because the social antagonism present in all identification has been suppressed by hegemony, and discourse theory offers a way in to understand how that consensus came about. These second consensus based applications of discourse theory (e.g. Hansen and Sørensen 2005) are less well developed, which is unfortunate as discourse theory has a great deal to say on these matters. For example, for those scholars drawn to Steven Lukes' third face of power where latent forms of power are the most insidious (Lukes 1974, 2003), discourse theory potentially offers a way in, without having to rely on an interest or behaviouralist accounts. Furthermore in the fields of public administration, urban planning and public policy, much of the discussion is about making sense of a shift to a networked form of governance and implications for decision making and democracy. Here there is a potential for discourse theory to speak to debates around governance. The work has already begun (Howarth and Torfing 2005) but this is an underdeveloped emerging field.

One of the most underdeveloped areas of discourse theory is the interplay between demands, general equivalents and empty signifiers. As Howson rightly argues, 'This phase of the emergence and development of the general

equivalent...from the chain of equivalence...remains a conceptual work-in-progress' (Howson 2005: 11). A key point of development is how to identify and isolate an empty signifier for study. Perhaps empirically they reveal themselves as widely acknowledged metaphors or like Hajer's storylines, as 'catchy one liners' (1995: 59) or 'crisp generative statements' (Hajer 2003: 104). But whilst scholars develop empirical applications of discourse theory, there is a risk that the category is undermined by those awaiting answers. For example in this quote Bevir asks for clarification of what kind of signifiers (or demands) become empty signifiers:

The concept of an empty signifier appears...to cover either all of our signifiers or none of them, and as such I can not see how it picks out a particular type of signifier that acts as a vehicle of change. I welcome poststructuralist studies of the way power operates to place practical limits upon us... (Bevir 2002: 24-25).

This process of understanding empty signifiers is further held back by the way in which empty signifiers are defined in different groups of literature. There are at least four groups. The first are beginning to apply empty signifiers following the recent demand based work of Laclau (2000; 2005a; 2005b; e.g. Griggs and Howarth 2006, Thomassen 2005). A second small group of literature remains in circulation based on earlier work of Laclau and addresses categories of nodal points and *point de caption* (Reyes 2005; Stäheli 2003; Ellsworth 2002; Prentoulis 2001). A third group use empty signifiers as described by Lacan and an analysis truer to Saussure's theory of the sign (e.g. Haliern 2000). Finally the fourth, and probably the largest group, are writers who use empty signifiers as synonyms for multiple, vague and/or slippery meanings (e.g. Khuttel 2001; Langland 2002). The problem with this final group is that the concept of the empty signifier is applied independently of whether there is an ontological foundation from either structural linguistics or discourse theory. This

only serves to muddy the message to academics working within either of those ontological starting points.

In addition to understanding how empty signifiers catch on, I suggest there are a number of remaining puzzles and misconceptions surrounding empty signifiers that need to be settled through empirical application. First is to ask do empty signifiers have no content and are they literally empty? (Bevir 2002: 24). Second, to what extent are empty signifiers metaphorical voids ready to be filled by meaning? Third, if empty signifiers are filled by some content, is it ambiguous content that different actors can use it to their particular projects? (Bevir 2002: 25). Fourth, can any signifier (or demand) be an empty signifier? Fifth, and finally, if a signifier began life as a particular signifier does it completely lose the content it once had? For discourse theory none of these questions pose a serious challenge, however, these questions need to be acknowledged because they remain in circulation in the wider literature either implicitly or explicitly as questions for clarification. I will attend to these questions for clarification through the remainder of the thesis.

## ***Conclusion***

In this chapter I have argued that discourse theory offers a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the emergence and role of public policy ideas. It draws widely from political philosophy to bring in key arguments of discourse and hegemonic articulation. It offers a theory of change through social antagonism and dislocation, and a theory of motivation by understanding agents as split subjects seeking a full and fixed identity. Three important logics explain the process of hegemonising this full and fixed identity and the formation of discourse in equivalence, difference and fantasy. Agents are understood to draw equivalences between entities into chains of equivalence, and logics of difference enable them to

mark out frontiers of 'us' and 'them'. Finally agents seek and foster general equivalents that symbolise the fantasy fullness, which, overtime, become empty signifiers. The formation of discourses in this way begins with a shared sense of negation, but once an empty signifier is established, action is focused on this rather than the motivation to cohere in the first place.

General equivalents and empty signifiers offer an attractive handle on understanding policy. As general equivalents for discourse they are central to the maintenance (or successful reiteration) of a hegemonic project. They sustain the institutions of public policy. They assist in dictating what is to be accepted by a hegemonic project and what is to be considered different (adversary) or an enemy (antagonist) of the project. This is important because public policy is contingent, an existing hegemonic project will be faced by new ideas, people, and identities which could be considered 'undecidables' as there is no precedent for whether they are to be accepted or rejected. Empty signifiers help focus discourse in order to make decisions between these undecidables. Therefore it is essential for policy analysis to understand how such empty signifiers come about.

Figure 3.3 below reminds how discourse theory helps respond to questions of ideas, but also these questions of ideas help to refocus attention to the inconsistencies in discourse theory that require further clarification. There is much work to be done to advance the empirical understanding of empty signifiers and applied discourse theory.

**Figure 3.3 Discourse Theory in Response to Questions of Ideas**

<b>Ideational Turn</b>	<b>Discourse Theory</b>
<p><b><i>Unit of Analysis:</i></b></p> <p>Ideas: suggestion, belief, trend, thought</p> <p>Systems of ideas: belief systems, cognitive normative frames, paradigms, worldviews</p>	<p>Demand General equivalent demand/empty signifier</p> <p>Discourse</p>
<p><b><i>Role of ideas in change?</i></b></p> <p>Third order change</p>	<p>Dislocation</p> <p>Reiteration</p>
<p><b><i>Cohesion?</i></b></p> <p>Advocacy Coalition</p> <p>Story lines and discourse affinity</p>	<p>Logics of difference and equivalence</p> <p>General equivalents/Empty signifiers</p>
<p><b><i>Agency?</i></b></p> <p>Purposive self interested?</p> <p>Ideas free floating viruses</p>	<p>Structured by discourse but agency heightened in periods of dislocation</p> <p>Motivated to rectify failed identity</p>
<p><b><i>Why Ideas Catch On?</i></b></p> <p>Window of opportunity</p> <p>Stickiness, crispness,</p> <p>Maverns, brokers and salesmen</p>	<p>Conditions: credible equivalents and presence of actors</p> <p>Process: demand steps into become general equivalent and becomes empty signifier</p>

The most advanced examples are in studies exploring overt antagonism and social movements, but there is a need to problematise established hegemonic projects and examine how empty signifiers catch on and their role in sustaining hegemony. The starting point should be to identify a consensus in governance, and identify the hegemonic discourse and the empty signifiers. It should be about asking questions such as how do actors within normal unquestionable policy situations maintain a sense of wholeness and expand their projects? How in the 21st century do you transform ideas into empty signifiers and govern? How does an empty signifier catch on in governance?

In the next chapter I respond to these challenges by first developing a qualitative case study of urban governance and exploring the function and formation of empty signifiers within this governance. My case is on strategic level decision making in the British city of Birmingham over 4 years, with reference to the previous two decades. The focus is on strategic policy making rather than on any policy sector or discipline, in order to ascertain what governing discourses of Birmingham abound and how these sustain policy identities in the City for politicians, city council officers and other governance actors.

## **CHAPTER 4: METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

This chapter sets out my analytical framework for an empirical application of discourse theory to understand why ideas catch on. The challenge I set myself in the previous chapter was to empirically explore the emergence of empty signifiers in public policy. I want to demonstrate how applying discourse theory in this way will contribute to both the development of discourse theory and to respond to questions of ideas. The first section introduces my analytical framework which considers identities, programmes and governing discourses. The focus is on how general equivalents come to function within these governing discourses. The second section then outlines the data required to empirically apply this framework to a case of public policy. It suggests a case study of taken-for-granted governing discourses operating in urban governance. Third I outline the methods I used to construct this data and fourth approaches to analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of my hegemonic policy analysis approach.

### ***4.1 Analytical framework***

This analytical framework is offered as a means to bridge the philosophically grounded discourse theory and public policy analysis. Its starting position is to accept that all meaning is grounded in discursive identity and therefore all public policy programmes, governance identities and the frames that structure public policy are discourses. Following the discussion in previous chapters, my position is to say no identity grounded in discourse is ever fully fixed no matter how sedimented.

Furthermore, public policy is deeply political and this vulnerability of discourse offers political opportunity to reinforce particular discursive combinations. Therefore, rather than suggest a familiar framework with institutions, frames, actors, policies or ideas, my framework focuses on three varieties of discourse in public policy: identity, governing and programmatic. I will begin this section by outlining what I mean by each and emphasising the importance of understanding how governing discourses are forged and in turn how they foster general equivalents. Finally, I will then turn to discuss what kinds of data are required to support the empirical application of discourse theory.

### **Identity and governing discourses**

There are three varieties of discourse that are important to my analysis of public policy ideas: identity, governing and programmatic. First there are identity discourses that constitute anything from spatial identities, job titles, leadership positions, categories, sectors or organisations. These are constantly modifying and occasionally dislocating, but are relatively sedimented discourses, successfully reiterated over time. These identities could range from a political party to a city, an organisation or an individual. Second there are governing discourses that seek to hegemonise a policy context. Such discourses will manifest empirically through collective appeals to general equivalents or in rhetoric espousing logics of difference, equivalence and fantasy. Importantly, I start with the assumption that governing discourses operate at different levels: at a micro and meso level within a policy sector or coalition of actors, or at a larger degree of abstraction, as grand governing discourses cutting across identity discourses. (Alveson and Karreman 2000). These discourses are frames by which problems are identified, legitimised and politics inscribed. They are relatively



fixed over time and require continual reiteration to respond to counter-hegemonic and contingent demands. Additionally, a third variety of discourse important to my analysis are programmatic discourses, or policies. These are discrete chains of demands articulated by a governing identity for a specific public purpose.

In order to understand the emergence of general equivalents in this framework I am less preoccupied with evaluating the implication or impact of policy and more with the conditions that gave ground to such policies. In other words, I am interested in the conditions of *possibility*. Therefore although my approach is about establishing an awareness of identity discourses and programme discourses, my primary focus is on understanding governing discourses. My key concern is with the production of general equivalents to forge these discourses and the role of strategically placed actors, whose identity is constituted within these discourses, and how they sustain and advance these projects over time.

### **Data requirements**

There are four requirements of the empirical data I need to explore governing discourses, they are data that allow for deconstruction; genealogy, capture use of rhetoric and are finally firsthand access to primary data. I will define further what I mean by each of these concepts.

First, I require that the data are sufficiently rich to allow for deconstruction.

‘A deconstructive reading of a phenomenon involves a critical analysis of how it has been presented, studied, and analysed in the existing research and theoretical literature (Denzin 1989: 51). It draws from previous work from Heidegger (1982) and Derrida (1981). Denzin suggests it has the following four characteristics: laying bare prior conceptions in terms of observations and definitions. It involves a critical interpretation of those taken-for-granted definitions and observations. It also

critically examines any underlying theoretical models of human action that underpin the taken for granted assumptions of the phenomenon. Finally, it presents preconceptions and biases that surround existing understanding of the phenomenon in question. Deconstruction is therefore central to understanding taken-for-granted governing discourses.

A second requirement for data in my study is that which informs genealogy of governing discourses and their general equivalents. Genealogy is a form of historical analysis popularised by the later work of Foucault (1971). My genealogical approach traces the relationships between discourse over time and problematises existing historical accounts. Therefore I require not only data that covers the current situation but also access to actors involved in the past, and to documentary archives.

A third requirement of the data is that which captures the richness of rhetoric. In my application of discourse theory, the use of rhetoric by actors is an important manifestation of articulating equivalence, difference and fantasy. Rhetoric is often downplayed in social and political analysis rejecting its importance as synonymous with 'spin' or in the dualism 'rhetoric and reality'. Instead, I see how actors articulate and interpret certain rhetorical forms as central to the reiteration of governing and programmatic discourses. For example, the work of Skinner (2002) around the notion of 'rhetorical redescription' illustrates how actors can change the dominant meaning of units of rhetoric and flags the importance for this application of discourse theory. It follows therefore that this application requires full transcripts of speech rather than being able to rely on notes or selective transcriptions. It also emphasises the use of electronic search and retrieval software to scan my corpus of texts.

For primary data I require access to speak to actors, to question and probe to expose taken-for-granted assumptions about identities, governing discourses and

programmes. Such an approach also requires access to documents both for public consumption and ‘backstage’ (see Hajer 2005). The limited resources of this project prevent a longitudinal study sufficient to track general equivalents firsthand over a decade or more (as Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1996 suggest), therefore I require access to media accounts and files of policy actors.

## **4.2 Research design and methods**

The chapter will now move to set out my methods for applying discourse theory to questions of public policy ideas. In the previous section I stated my interest in deconstructing taken-for-granted governing discourses and tracing the emergence of general equivalents of these governing discourses. As discussed above, this requires accessible data that captures rhetoric and is amenable to deconstructive and genealogical enquiry. In the subsections that follow below I suggest a qualitative case study of urban governance. The first subsection explores the justification for case studies as a method and introduces my chosen city of Birmingham. The second and third subsections then outline the qualitative methods to capture incidence of equivalence, difference and fantasy: interviews, documents and observation.

### **Case study**

‘Case studies allow the researcher to ‘soak and poke’ their research subjects...to see if what is observed fits within the theoretical paradigm (John 2005 :8, drawing on Fenno 1973)

This study applied discourse theory to a case study of strategic policy making in Birmingham. There are several reasons why I chose to conduct a case study and furthermore, a case study of a city. Case studies are now firmly established as research strategies (Yin 1994, Stake 1995), and previous misunderstandings about

case studies being limited to generating hypotheses rather than theory building have been all but settled (Flyvbjerg 2006).

The first reason for a case study is access: I was able to speak to a wide range of decision makers, including party leaders and chief executive officers. The case also allowed me to have regular access to speak to actors involved and to their documents.

The second reason is that cities are sites that house governing discourses, they are places of governance, they have taken-for-granted procedures, norms, relationships, tensions and political contestations.

Given the limited resources of a single authored PhD study, a single city case is ideal (Stake 1995). It is ideal because the boundaries between general equivalents and governing discourses are unclear and case studies enable researchers to investigate these ambiguities within a real-life context (Yin 1994: 13).

There are also a number of precedents for developing political theory through a whole-city case study. The most famous of which include: Dahl's (1961) study of New Haven, Hunter's (1953) study of Chicago and later in regime theory, Stone's (1989) study of Atlanta over 40 years and Elkin's (1987) study of Dallas. Closer to home is Saunders' (1980) study of Croydon and Newton's (1976) study of Birmingham. They are case studies of governing rather than specific policies. For example, Newton's comprehensive study of Birmingham focuses on exploring the institutional composition of different groups and their democratic perspectives. Whereas for Stone the case of Atlanta is used to show how diverse coalitions of actors are forged around particular regimes. However it is important to note that the data generated in these examples would not necessarily support my requirements of deconstruction and rhetoric. I require a comprehensive qualitative case of governing,

therefore Flyvbjerg's (2001) study of the Danish city of Aalborg is more appropriate for my purposes, his focus was on what he called the 'concrete, little things'. Following Nietzsche, his approach suggests that the discreet and insignificant 'when closely examined, would reveal itself to be pregnant with paradigms, metaphors, and general significance (Flyvbjerg 2006: 238). He added: 'I was generally relieved when, eventually, the strategy of focusing on minutiae proved to be worth the effort' (Flyvbjerg 2006: 238).

Overall, the case study of a city gives me access to decision-making elites engaged in the reiteration of a defined governing discourse. The city as a sedimented discourse, demarcates a discernable history and set of identities in which to study.

I should also say something about why an English city in the early 2000s was an attractive prospect for a case study. Much has been written about the increasing centralisation of English local government, with claims in the literature centralised state control and as England one of the most centralised local government systems (Wilson and Game 2002). At the same time the then New Labour government suggested a modernisation of local government, a programme of neighbourhood renewal and an urban renaissance (Imrie and Raco 2003; R. Atkinson 2003; Stewart 2003). The early 2000s was a time of asking councils to review their democratic process, introduce executive structures, work in partnership and collaboratively define a vision for the future. Despite the centralisation, cities remain distinct from one another as systems of discourse with certain traditions and theories in use. The interest then is in understanding how actors within an English city mediate (Jobert 2000: 4) the demands of central government around performance, modernisation and democratic renewal, whilst reiterating governing discourses upon which their

discursive identities rely. In sum, in the early 2000s English cities were ripe for applying discourse theory.

## **Birmingham**

Birmingham is physically the largest unitary local authority in England and widely acknowledged as England's 'second city' outside of the capital London. I chose to focus my analysis on Birmingham primarily for three reasons. First because it is typical, second because it is atypical and third because of accessibility.

Newton chose to base his study of local government institutions in Birmingham because it was a typical example. I agree to a point, in terms of government, politics, parties, pressure groups, officer structures and tales of industrial past, unemployment and recovery, Birmingham is a comparable example with other large English cities such as Manchester, Sheffield, Bristol, Leeds, Newcastle or Liverpool. In addition Birmingham, like these other 'core cities' are acknowledged as the city region capitals, as centres of employment, retail and leisure. However, generalisation of my findings from one case to another is not a concern, instead the focus here is to develop approaches for applying discourse theory and understanding the role of how ideas (or general equivalents) catch on in the process.

Therefore there are several reasons why I chose Birmingham for its atypical characteristics: size, diversity, youth and reputation of its elites. With a population of one million it is the largest unitary authority in England (some say probably Europe) with notably higher population than Leeds or Manchester (although the surrounding city-region conurbations are comparable, Manchester's borders are tightly drawn). This includes a major centre of commerce and multi-million pound leisure developments, a diverse multicultural population and some of Britain's poorest, most deprived, communities. As a result Birmingham has a plethora of charities,

regeneration projects, voluntary and community groups and these are multiplied as a result. Birmingham also has a reputation for publicising its achievements and of significant individuals. From the leadership of Joseph Chamberlain who was credited with leading the 'best governed city in the world' in the late 1800s, to a hundred years earlier when members of the influential Lunar Society of industrialists and intellectuals, including Mathew Boulton, Joseph Priestley and James Watt were prominent in Birmingham (Uglow 2002).

Third, Birmingham was not only a viable case because it was typical and atypical, but also because it was accessible. During my fieldwork I was able to live in the city and had the supervisory support of the Birmingham based Institute of Local Government Studies, whose current and previous researchers had excellent connections with, and knowledge of, the city and its governing practices.

I realise it is important to introduce the case of Birmingham. It is common for a PhD thesis to have a separate chapter that paints an institutional picture of the city case study with facts and figures. Whilst I acknowledge this is useful, it is also problematic. It is problematic because these accounts are in part based on predominant discourses that suggest what to say and what to exclude. It is precisely these taken-for-granted accounts that are the starting point for this study. Therefore Chapter 5 is offered as a means to introduce Birmingham with a focus on two predominant discourses of size and renaissance. That said, it is important to provide some sort of institutional sketch during my period of enquiry (2003) particularly for those readers who are unfamiliar with Birmingham.

In 2003 Birmingham was a unitary local authority of 117 councillors and approximately 50,000 local government employees serving a population of one million, divided up into 39 electoral wards at the local level and nationally into eleven

parliamentary constituencies. The Birmingham I encountered had three principal universities and an international airport located just outside its borders. Geographically it lay at the heart of the English West Midlands. The majority party was Labour, who had maintained overall control of the City Council since 1984 with three different council leaders during that period; Dick Knowles 1984 to 1993, Theresa Stewart 1993 to 1999 and Albert Bore 1999 to 2004. The voluntary and community sectors were represented at the strategic level by a number of umbrella organisations, four stood out: Birmingham Voluntary Services Council, Birmingham Race Action Partnership, Birmingham Community Empowerment Network and Birmingham Association of Neighbourhood Forums. Various networked institutional forms or ‘partnerships’ were also notable in Birmingham including a Local Strategic Partnership named the City Strategic Partnership (CSP), in addition to what became known as the ‘Family of Partnerships’ (twelve thematic partnerships operating at a citywide level). In terms of media coverage, the city had two daily newspapers, the broadsheet ‘Birmingham Post,’ and the tabloid ‘Birmingham Evening Mail’. It is the actors that operate as part of this city level governance that were the focus for this case.

My fieldwork in Birmingham began in Summer 2003 and had two phases: the first focusing on identifying discourses and the second on tracing general equivalents. The first phase of interviews focused on establishing taken-for-granted identities, governing discourses and policy programmes. These initial interviews were conducted between October 2003 and March 2004. The second wave of research was then to focus on these governing discourses and to understand their articulation over time, with the use of historical interviews with former councillors and officers, and analysis of newspaper and documentary archives. Initially I focused on discourses of



decentralisation, modernisation, renaissance and size. However later came to focus on the relationship between renaissance and size and the general equivalent of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’. I conducted the second wave interviews between October 2004 and February 2005, with some follow up interviews between September 2005 and March 2006. A full list of interviewees can be found in Appendix B. I will now set out in more detail how I used interviews, documents and observation to generate the data for my case of Birmingham.

## **Interviews**

‘interviews are particularly well suited for studying people’s understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world’ (Kvale 1996: 105).

However,

‘There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed...Individuals are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1998b).

In the first phase of interviews I interviewed 25 policy actors over a five month period (October 2003-March 2004) with an aim to understanding governance in Birmingham. How I selected interviewees is detailed later below. My interviews were structured around a conversation about the revision of the Community Strategy (CSP 2002a). This was a starting point to explore taken-for-granted discourses. Many of the City Council officers I spoke to had been part of the revision of this document, however it was more than a document, as it was supposed to focus the strategic policy of localities and arrive at a broad consensus about what the area should be like in 10-15 years time (ODPM 2001: 70, see LGA 2001).

I conducted the interviews with a list of themes, rather than questions. All interviews were recorded onto mini-disc. Some interviewees were clearly used to this format, others less so. There are clear advantages to this form of encounter. To cite Marshall and Rossman: interviews are a ‘useful way to get large amounts of data quickly...Immediate follow-up and clarification are possible...interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings people hold in their everyday activities’ (Marshall and Rossman 1995: 80-1). During the process of interviewing a connection is made with the policy actor through this form of face-to-face interviewing. I believe that interviews are sufficient to encounter governance and to begin to understand how policy actors made sense of their world.

There are limitations to interviewing as a method. Sometimes a subject can be unwilling or uncomfortable about discussing issues (Marshall and Rossman 1995: 81). However for my purposes I was often discussing the normal rather than the controversial. Where the conversation did stray to sensitive topics it revealed the discursive frontiers of the argument – what was unsayable or unthinkable. In the main I allowed the interviewee to control the flow and pace of the discussion unless they required further prompting. Language was sometimes a challenge particularly when interviewing politicians and professionals, they would assume knowledge of specific legislation and acronyms which required clarification. At other times, it was wiser to play the role of a naïve researcher as it revealed the established storylines. For example they might say:

“do you know the history of the relationship between us and them?”

“err, no, not really” –

“okay, well, stop me if I am telling you how to suck eggs...”

Marshall and Rossman cite issues of truth as a further problem of interviewing, that is, what if the interviewees are not telling the truth? (1995: 81, Douglas 1976). However from my perspective, interviewees cannot lie (Hansen and Sørensen 2005: 100) the account they chose to tell (irrespective of truth or fabrication) is the account they want you to know, they are projecting their identity and demands through the stories they tell and the myths they recount. Lying in that respect often reveals more than telling the truth, and importantly it is not a problem for this form of policy analysis.

I will now set out my line of questioning. I was cautious not to have too many predefined questions beforehand. Rubin and Rubin (1995) define three types of question: *main*, *probe* and *follow up*. Main questions are the ‘backbone’ of the interview. They structure the interview, setting the pace and the rhythm of the approach. In the first phase my main questions were around the Community Strategy, how was it created, who was involved, their role, their relationship and their view on Community Strategies in general. In the course of this it was sometimes necessary to ask the second kind of questions; probing questions that say more, or to move on. Rubin and Rubin note this is often non-verbal and embedded in body language (1995). A third variety of question is the follow up question. The opportunity to ask follow up questions is a clear advantage of qualitative interviewing and what makes interviewing in this form of hegemonic policy analysis essential.

Follow up questions, according to Rubin and Rubin are about exploring partial narratives, unexplained lists and one-sided descriptions of behaviour (1995: 151). However, they stress that these puzzles may not occur to the researcher during the interview, follow up may have to be later. I interviewed some policy actors more than once, enabling me to have the opportunity to explore the same issue from different

angles. Follow up questions in the same interview are a ‘matter of trained curiosity, recognising and pursuing puzzle while exploring emerging themes’ (1995: 153). The ability to make the most of follow-ups comes with practice and with the most skilled rhetorician as an interviewee, these follow-ups may not manifest until the transcription stage (Mishler 1991; Poland 1995). This in itself is a reason for self-transcription to draw out such puzzles when conducting ‘elite’ interviews.

The interview topic list reproduced in Figure 4.1 below is an example of the questions I took to the first wave of interviews in November 2003. The actual interview does not necessarily flow like this, with actors interested in specific topic areas. For example, in one interview I asked a total of 85 separate questions which equated to a total 1500 words in two hours. The respondent spoke ten times that amount, just under 15,000 words in the same period. In addition the response to my questioning varied. For example in one interview, a question on the personal agendas of two colleagues received a 150 word response. I then followed this up with a probing question regarding how the respondent would define their position in relation to these demands, and the response increased to 750 words.

**Figure 4.1 Example of Interview Topic List**

- The background to your and your organisation’s/partnership’s work with, and involvement in the Community Strategy
- The process you experienced in terms of how it was lead, what was asked of you, and the communication process
- Your experiences of the Seminar meeting in April and the working group in May 2003
- How your part of the strategy links in with the broader policy agenda for Birmingham
- Overall, your impressions of the community strategy process and what you would suggest that could be improved or maintained.

In such instances, when a core topic of concern to the respondent is uncovered, it is good to step back and save follow up or prompting questions for later. This brings

into focus the value of this form of enquiry but also the enormity of making sense of a large amount of data, I will return to this later below.

There is more to interviewing than asking questions as they come to you, there are established questioning strategies researchers can draw upon. Although the list below is derived from a book for questionnaire design, the principles carry over to qualitative interviewing (Sudman and Bradburn 1982: 289-304).

- Attitude or opinion questions, general orientation or way of thinking
- Behaviour questions, characteristics of people, things that people have done, things that have happened to them
- Demographic questions, basic classification age, etc
- Probes, how do you mean, in what way, could you explain a little,
- Projective questions: determining indirectly what the actor thinks about something a form of non-threatening question - ‘Do you think people round here would be upset if I asked about their sexual practices’
- Knowledge questions, designed to test knowledge to assess intelligence
- Recall questions, asking about behaviour that occurred in the past.

I will now explain how I sampled my interviewees. Of my initial interviews, some were a result of their role in the production of a new community strategy. This was a diverse group of actors from different city council departments (policy, planning, education, leisure, environment) and voluntary sector (Race Action, Voluntary Services Council, Community Empowerment Network). I contacted every member of the group, and spoke to those that agreed. Not all were willing or available to be involved. A second set of interviewees in this first set were actors I

selected for their position, for example the chief executive and leader of the council, director of the City Strategic Partnership secretariat.

I accept that one of the limitations of speaking to a broad network of actors, albeit diverse, is a danger of excluding other voices, other interpretations. However this set of actors although they knew of one another were far from cohesive. I was interested in the patterns of antagonism between groups, actors, organisations and particularly on the few points of agreement. It was this agreement that reveals hegemonic governing discourses. I accept that there are many other stories, voices and interpretations that were excluded but with the resources available I was able to identify agreement between a diverse group of actors.

This approach does beg the question how many interviews are required? I was guided by Kvale on this matter to ‘interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know’ (1996: 101). I wanted to know what predominant governing discourses were structuring the cognition of governance actors in Birmingham. Having spoken to a broad range of actors and read widely, after 25 interviews I was reaching saturation on certain issues – particularly questions of decentralisation (utmost in people’s minds at my time of enquiry), of Birmingham’s external image and of relationships between the City Council and other organisations. These were enough. It was not necessary to reach saturation on every theme. However to see these patterns it required me to stop: to stop interviewing and start reading and reflecting. As Kvale suggests many previous studies ‘would have profited from having fewer interviews in the study, and taking more time to prepare the interviews and analyse them’ (Kvale 1996: 103).

There were also ethical issues to consider before I embarked on this kind of interview based enquiry: consent, confidentiality and consequences (Kvale 1996 153-

157). Informed consent, involves briefing and debriefing interviewees of the purpose of the interview. Much of this was dealt with in the initial letter or email and the opening conversation. On no occasion was I asked for the transcript to be ‘approved’ by my interviewees. Confidentiality is an issue (see Glesne and Peshkin 1992), particularly as the interviews were tape recorded. I was careful to ask permission to record all interviews, and confirmed that although quotes would be used there would be no direct attribution of interviewees in the thesis. In the following case study chapters all quotes from interviews have been anonymised. They have been referenced to a random unique interview number, a simple identity descriptor and the year of interview, e.g. *I32, Councillor 2005*. There were occasions where interviewees would say ‘don’t quote me on this’ or would wait until after the formal part of the interview to tell me about a scandal or a past event. However, because of the purpose of my interviews the story or scandal was not the unit of analysis, I found more useful to understand why they thought it important to tell me about it and how it revealed discursive frontiers. Finally, Kvale cites the consequences that might lead from the interview, particularly where an interview might evoke negative emotions in the interviewee, however because of my topic area, I see it as highly unlikely my interviews induced such a response.

### **Documents and observation**

Although interviews were a primary means of encountering Birmingham’s governing discourses, governance documents also played a valuable role. This study drew on over 200 locally published and unpublished papers. The documents directly cited are integrated alphabetically in the reference list. A full list of the documents I consulted for this project are listed thematically in a separate list of *Birmingham documents* in Appendix A. Below I discuss six varieties of documents: published accounts,

archived documents, current policy documents, agendas/proceedings, newspapers and field notes.

The documents were useful in different ways. Media accounts provided direct quotes to cross reference with interviews. However, I also had to be aware that many of these articles contained highly politicised analysis of issues in my case study. I was careful to ensure where possible it was my interviews that guided my analysis in the first instance, using locally produced documents to clarify rather than shape my analysis.

### **1. Published Accounts**

Previous accounts of Birmingham assist in articulating and stabilising governing discourse. I was drawn to how planners and regeneration writers had understood redevelopment in the last two decades: (Barber 2001; 2006; Beazley et al 1997; Collinge and Hall 1997); a comprehensive case study of the politics of Birmingham (Newton 1976) and economic policy (Martin and Pearce 1992) The role of the voluntary sector (Davies 1987); Decentralisation (Sullivan 2000); and assessments of Birmingham's global city policy (Henry and Passmore 2000; Hubbard 1996; 2001; Loftman 1990; Loftman and Nevin 1992; 1998).

### **2. Archived documents**

As part of the interviewing process, interviewees were often forthcoming with photocopied documents from their previous involvement in Birmingham's governance. One councillor gave me access to his vast archive of papers over 15 years of involvement as a member of the ruling Labour group. These documents included unpublished minutes and agendas, private memos to and from the Council Leader, briefing papers, draft versions of strategies, letters from campaign groups and



newspaper clippings. These documents give insight into how political elites communicated before the introduction of email, and reference points for thinking on particular initiatives and policies.

### **3. Current policy documents**

Throughout the case interviewees gave me documents to read in advance of the interview, they were downloadable as electronic files, or could be photocopied from the Central Library Archive. During the course of my fieldwork, I assembled a broad corpus of electronic and printed documents. I am also indebted to a policy officer who interpreted my call for ‘any’ documents literally and sent me large numbers of drafts of working papers and copies of private emails between him and his colleagues in other departments. He saw this as a complement to the interview with him to help to understand his role and how policies are created in Birmingham.

A second group of current policy documents which I needed to be aware of stemmed out of European, national and regional policy agendas. It is easy to assume that a new national policy initiative fundamentally changes all work locally. It does not always. Often actors have to redefine their activities and their identity in the light of this new national policy. For example if in my analysis actors spoke of ‘addressing Whitehall modernisation agenda’ it was important I understood the policies driving this agenda from Whitehall.

### **4. Agendas and proceedings**

A great deal of what happens in Birmingham is not intended for public consumption. Partnerships meet without publishing minutes of discussion, attendance or decision. Agendas are unknown in this form of governance. There is however, a tremendous

amount of data available. In addition to collecting minutes and agendas from organisations where possible, I made a conscious effort to archive an electronic set of Full Council Minutes between 2001-2004. These Minutes outline attendance and the agenda and include verbatim transcriptions of debates between elected members on key decisions. For insight into previous meetings on specific policies I made use of the paper-based archives in Central Library dating back several decades.

## **5. Newspapers**

The newspaper archive Lexis Nexis allowed me to conduct keyword searches for both of the Birmingham daily newspapers (Birmingham Post and Birmingham Evening Mail) back to 1985. It is possible to track stories related to specific individuals, such as every story featuring a particular councillor in the Birmingham Post and Mail between 1985-2004, specific policy initiatives or spatial identities or appeals to specific ideas. It provides date references to the stories actors tell. However this is not for the purposes of ‘triangulation’. Sudman and Bradburn (1982) raise the notion of ‘telescoping’ where interviewees misremember a date in their answer. Triangulation would be about using the newspaper archive *Lexis Nexis* to verify or ‘correct’ the date. Conversely a genealogical approach asks questions of why one or a group of actors remember it in this order that goes against the historical archives. It is also possible to use the Newspaper databases to explore equivalences to see how key policy concepts are defined and what other concepts are drawn as equivalent.

## **6. Field notes**

In the early stages of my research I engaged in a series of carefully documented observations in a range of settings. To explore the role of elected members I visited

full city council meetings, a district committee meeting and ward meetings in seven different kinds of neighbourhood (in relation to political representation, affluence and location). In order to see how the city conducted citywide consultation, I attended a strategic planning event for the future of the city's transport. I was also keen to understand how voluntary and community groups interacted with the broader governance of the city. This included attending two meetings exploring the voluntary sector's involvement with a local campaign against mobile phone masts and observing how a neighbourhood forum responded to a speech from Birmingham's chief executive. This amount of observation was enough to provide some clarification to the issues raised in documents, meeting and speech transcripts and other accounts without becoming unable to transfer the weight of my focus between policy, time and theory. I now turn to show how I identified discourses and traced general equivalents.

### **4.3 Analysis**

This third section outlines my analytical approach to deriving discourses, identifying and tracing general equivalents. First, I outline my approach to data management and how I used the computer programme NVIVO to aid the process of coding, storing and making connections between codes as a systematic approach. Second, I show how I used this to identify the discourse of identity and two key governing discourses of renaissance and size. Third, I show how I chose to focus on 'flourishing neighbourhoods' as an example of a general equivalent, my justification for this and some of the methods used to trace its origins.

## **Data management**

A qualitative study of urban governance of this kind yields a large amount of data, in response to this I endeavoured to manage my transcripts and documents electronically. Drawing on previous studies (Fielding and Lee 1998, Weitzman and Miles 1995; Gahan and Hannbel 1998; Gibbs 2001). NVIVO goes beyond the possibilities of search software that retrieves incidences of text. It is a text based manager for all electronic files. It can be used to code, and retrieve codes, in the documents (Bazeley and Richards 2000). Furthermore, NVIVO has the capabilities for code based discourse building to make connections between codes. There are clear advantages of using this software as all electronic data is located in a single place and allows quick access to what are large amounts of data. The sophistication of the coding schemes would not be possible if everything was paper based (Robson 2002). However, there are limitations. Robson argues the software imposes particular approaches to coding which shape how the data is analysed. There are a number of coding formats in NVIVO but there is a tendency towards a making a hierarchy or family tree of codes – with parent, child and sibling codes. Robson also notes the time it takes to become proficient on the programme, however in the case of a PhD project over a period of years it is worth the effort. Qualitative coding software also requires coding be done on screen. In the main, I did not find this problematic and occasionally printed documents if they were particularly dense or complex. Overall however, having both a paper corpus and an electronic corpus is a challenge. The bulk of my corpus was electronic. Rather than scan in all the paper based data, I scanned what I judged the most important, coded this electronically and then used these codes to structure how I understood the remaining paper documents. It was not

ideal, but I was invaluable in developing understanding of governance in Birmingham.

### **Identifying discourses**

My analysis came to focus on two prevalent governing discourses operating across the city, these were: a renaissance discourse and a size discourse. Renaissance was particularly taken-for-granted as ‘real’ in Birmingham. My genealogical analysis of this discourse showed an interesting relationship with discourses of size. At my time of enquiry, it seemed that the relationship with demands of size lacked the overt antagonism evident in documents and interviews with actors who could recall the 1980s and early 1990s. For example in November 2002 and May 2003 the policy on decentralisation was approved with no opposition from local councillors. My focus became to identify the general equivalent that operated at the interface between these discourses and what role it played in stabilising or aiding the advancement of the hegemonic discourse of renaissance. In the following final section of this chapter I explore the next steps in my analysis of discourse in Birmingham to identify and trace a general equivalent and examine how it came to function as an empty signifier at the interface between renaissance and size.

I will now show I analysed transcripts and documents to determine governing discourses. To be clear, I understand analysis to be a continual process during fieldwork, writing up interview notes, transcribing, follow up interviews and drafting chapters. The challenge for determining governing discourses is therefore in maintaining an overview of the data. The interview data existed in two forms: as electronic audio files and as verbatim written text.

‘Once the interview transcriptions are made, they tend to be regarded as *the* solid empirical data in the interview project. The transcripts are, however, not

the rock-bottom data of interview research, they are artificial constructions from an oral to a written mode of communication' (Kvale 1996: 163).

Building on this, Kvale argues that transcripts are decontextualised conversations that emphasize and omit.

Transcripts are decontextualised conversations, they are abstractions, as topographical maps are abstractions from the original landscape from which they are derived. Maps emphasize some aspects of the countryside and omit others' (Kvale 1996: 165).

Therefore the challenge was how to maintain the context in my 'maps' as I came to review past transcripts months after the interview. One way of contextualising transcripts is not to transcribe at all, and instead to analyse the interview data in its audio form. There is a growing interest on the merits of retaining the audio record as a supplement or doing away with the need to transcribe at all (see Cartwright 2006). However, because of my heavy dependency on written documents it was preferable to integrate my transcripts and interview notes into my NVIVO corpus. I began by 'free coding' everything that suggested appeals to equivalence, difference or fantasy. I highlighted appeals to identity, use of metaphor, stories, reticence, and antagonism. From the early transcripts this resulted in over 150 codes. I then used the NVIVO coding software to construct 'tree-codes' where I placed the free codes into what the programme calls 'parent-child-sibling' relationships. These enabled me to place some harder edges on what began as messy and spaghetti-like.

I was conscious throughout the initial analysis and first wave interviews that this structured coding would result in a disconnection from the emotion and emphasis of the interviews. In response I supplemented my interview transcriptions by detailing follow up questions such as how comfortable the interviewee was about being recorded, who brought the interview to a close, what topics came up after the tape was switched off. More important was to listen back to the recording as I coded.

I also carried my interviews around as MP3 files allowing for review of certain interviews before a follow up interview or to listen back to a quote as I was writing up a case study chapter. Quite often I sped up the interview to the speed that I would naturally read. Not only did it allow me to review several transcripts in a single sitting but also helped establish the overall tone and character of the interview. These process of reflections, time stretching, self transcription, accessible and regular replay, sped-up reading/listening and systematic electronic management of data brought colour and texture to the coding process otherwise missing when arriving 'cold' to the data.

As I reported above I began to focus on a number of possible case study governing discourses that prevailed amongst the community of actors I interviewed during the first phase. The discussion largely centred on the issues of modernisation, transformation, potential of decentralising governance, the importance of neighbourhoods, localising decision making and the problems and benefits of being a such a comparatively large city. In amongst all of these governing discourses, renaissance stood out as a predominant taken-for-granted discourse with a defined narrative; that the city had been transformed and this transformation was an ongoing concern. The second predominant narrative was around Birmingham's size. In arguing why they thought there was a problem, or in setting out what was unique about Birmingham, many interview respondents suggested it was because of size. My analysis became increasingly focused on the ongoing project of renaissance and its relationship with size over time, with 'bigness' being either an impediment or a help, Chapter 5 below sets out these two governing discourses in greater detail. The next task was then to identify a general equivalent that featured in tracing the articulation of renaissance and size over time.

## **Identifying the general equivalent flourishing neighbourhoods**

In coming to understand the interaction between governing discourses of renaissance and size, I came to single out the role of the general equivalent of flourishing neighbourhoods. I was interested in a rhetorically discrete general equivalent that included the empty signifier qualities of equivalence, difference and, importantly, fantasy. My interest became in examining how ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ assisted in the successful reiteration of renaissance and size discourses. At no point in this thesis do I argue that flourishing neighbourhoods is the only or most important general equivalent in the governing discourses of Birmingham. However, I am prepared to argue it was a predominant demand during my period of enquiry, it stood out as a viable general equivalent for a number of reasons:

- It featured in 22 of my 25 first wave interviews.
- It featured in many of the high profile policy documents from the city council and also the documentation and websites of voluntary and statutory organisations
- It featured in the verbatim transcripts of council proceedings
- It featured in over 100 newspaper articles between 2001-2003
- It had multiple meanings
- 

Below in figure 4.2 I have studied published and spoken incidences of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ and noted the associated meanings of what they consider a ‘flourishing neighbourhood’. The exercise reveals that during 2003, of the articles and transcripts analysed, actors in Birmingham defined a flourishing neighbourhood with a combination of at least 76 different meanings. In some examples, applications draw on other policy ideas that have found national currency including social capital, well-



being and civic pride. Others draw on universally positive sentiments including generosity, pride, safety, vibrant. Others are more specific to individuals or organisations, for example in 2003 the Birmingham Library Services argued access to library services is a key element of a flourishing neighbourhood. The Birmingham Race Action Partnership argued flourishing neighbourhoods are places with no racial barriers and cohesive communities and Birmingham College stated that flourishing neighbourhoods contain people who participate in further education. There was seemingly considerable variation in how actors in 2003 defined a flourishing neighbourhood. Yet, the flourishing neighbourhoods agenda appealed to actors on partnership boards and members of Birmingham's executive cabinet alike.

This exercise shows not only divergent meanings but shared meanings. For although there was great variation in how a flourishing neighbourhood was defined, there was also a considerable amount of repetition by key political actors and agencies all united by rhetoric. For example one councillor, then the cabinet member for housing, and the Birmingham Race Action Partnership, both separately chose to define flourishing neighbourhoods as spaces of 'community cohesion'. In further examples, several actors defined a flourishing neighbourhood as a place of 'economic prosperity', these included the Council Leader whilst addressing a conference on race relations, and also within the text of a job advertisement. Birmingham Friends of the Earth and the MP Keith Hill, then Minister for Planning, both used 'investment in suburbs' during 2003 whilst praising Birmingham's flourishing neighbourhood approach. Similarly the definition of 'places where people want to live' was mentioned by the Birmingham Post, Sandra Jenkinson, the cabinet member for housing, the chief executive of Birmingham City Council Lin Homer; and in a draft of the Second Community Strategy from the City Strategic Partnership.

Some of these were passed down through memos to council officers and repeated again and again by leading politicians. This is then recycled through public discourse via policy documents and newspaper articles, this process is particularly interesting during interviews, where responses are immediate and less formulated. For example in one interview the cabinet member in question defined a flourishing neighbourhood with almost identical wording of that of her chief executive in a recent speech. A particularly striking element of this exercise is the range of actors defining flourishing neighbourhoods. It is clear the majority were either councillors or council employees. However there are also definitions from members of Friends of the Earth, MPs, numerous local and national newspaper journalists, faith leaders, community activists, voluntary sector managers, voluntary sector agencies, private consultancies and education bodies.

The multiple meanings of flourishing neighbourhoods trigger a further step to explore of whether this general equivalent is functioning as either a floating signifier during a period of dislocation where the meaning is up for grabs, or whether flourishing neighbourhoods by 2003-2004 had become an empty signifier for governing discourses in Birmingham. An empty signifier on to which a bewildering array of meanings and intentions could be inscribed and where the particularistic meaning of flourishing neighbourhoods had been almost severed under the weight of an expanding chain of equivalence. I turn now to the final phase of my fieldwork that set about understanding why, how and when flourishing neighbourhoods became a general equivalent for governance in Birmingham.

**Figure 4.2 Flourishing neighbourhoods constitute places where<sup>1</sup>...**

Able to manage change	Community Leadership	Happy to bring up children	Low crime	Residents Matter
Accessible jobs	Communities taking charge	Harmony	Low Unemployment	Residents fulfil/Realise potential
Active Citizenship	Compassion	High Educational achievement	Meaningful involvement of citizens	Responsive Services
Active communities	Confident about life	Home, seen as	A “My Constituency Culture”	Safe
Affirmation	Decent homes	Hopeful about the future		Sense of Pride
Attractive	Devolved Power	Human beings flourish	Neighbourhood Management	Belonging
Benefits Everyone	Dignity			Social Capital
Better Services	Distinctive	Independent	No racial barriers	Skills Developed and utilised
Better to <i>live</i>	Economic Prosperity/prosperous	Innovation of the city centre, draws on	Open structures for involvement	Say in the future
Care about the environment	Elderly Feel Safe	Invigoration from the city centre	Participation	Sustainable Communities
Civic Pride	Equality of life chances	Interconnected Services	Participation in further education	Thriving Community
Civic society	Feel safe	Investment in suburbs	People take an interest	Trust
Citizen led community planning	Flourishing shopping centres		Pride in their environment	Vibrant
Clean	Forgiveness	Involved in decision making	Proud to live	Well managed services
Choose to stay	Generous/Generosity	Library Services	Quality Housing	Want to live
Choose to live		Live and Work in safety	Racial Equality	Want to work
Collaborative Services	Happy most of the time	Local Voice	Real Involvement	Want to invest
Community Cohesion		Localisation	Residents Have a say	Well Being
Community groups work together		Locally responsible for services		

<sup>1</sup> Full reference to each of these flourishing neighbourhood ‘qualities’ can be found in Appendix C below

In tracing the emergence of flourishing neighbourhoods as a general equivalent, my analysis began by exploring the scope of flourishing neighbourhoods both spatially and temporally. I found the following:

- It did not feature in any previous published studies of Birmingham I had read
- It did not feature in my archived documents from the 1980s and 1990s
- It did not feature in any newspaper articles before 2001 (based on searches in Lexis Nexis).
- It is largely exclusive to Birmingham, with little strategic application of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ outside of city literature (Based on Internet searches).

Temporally, the finding of no articles mentioning flourishing neighbourhoods published before 2001 derived from the newspaper a database, Lexis Nexis, provides a useful time dimension. Spatially, the absence of flourishing neighbourhoods outside of Birmingham is also useful. It presents the opportunity to trace the use of flourishing neighbourhoods in and around its first mention in the press in 2001 to the multiple meanings in 2003. The process of flourishing neighbourhoods becoming a general equivalent and then empty signifier is set out in more detail in Chapter 7. In beginning to conclude this chapter I point out the key limitations of my approach.

#### ***4.4 Limitations and research design***

In 2003, Hajer and Wagenaar published an edited collection entitled ‘Deliberative Policy Analysis’. This form of policy analysis included a broad range of scholars interested in the role of discourse to understand deliberative practices in networked forms of governance. The approach I have outlined above differs from deliberative policy analysis in that it focuses not on deliberation and consensus, but draws on

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory on hegemony and conditions of possibility. Policy analysis in this vein starts with the identification of taken-for-granted hegemonic practice and then involves a deconstruction of these equivalences to reveal general equivalents, before performing a genealogy of how and why these general equivalents came to be. But what are the limits of hegemonic policy analysis? What is the extent of my claim?

### **Limitations**

The first point to note is the role of the researcher. In entering into a conversation about governance with governance actors in Birmingham, and then drawing equivalences, I am part of the case. In settling to reify discourses of renaissance and size, I am identifying discourses that have no material form beyond my research, I am engaged in the joint production of this discourse. Nor have I been able to operate from some sort of extra discursive position, for example I lived, shopped, ate and voted in Birmingham during my fieldwork. In that sense I was part of the case. I was exposed to highly articulate governance actors with a distinct ability to tell their side of the story. It would be naïve to suggest I was unaffected by their views. A barefoot anthropological approach would be to enter the field and 'step into other people's shoes' to understand the world from their perspective. In contrast to this, I did come to the field with certain assumptions about human motivation and failed identities. My preoccupation from the beginning was establishing the conditions of possibility rather than to evaluate specific policy programmes. Therefore I was interested in where there were striking similarities in how actors from different sectors argued the same point. This focus allowed me to get a unique overview of discourse albeit without being ever 'outside' of it.

On the issue of generalisability, a common criticism of case study research is to say researchers cannot generalise beyond the case. In response I suggest that every city is unique. Birmingham is a good case because it has a rich and diverse set of governance practices which suit empirical enquiry. It is not possible to then generalise or compare with other cities. However, it is possible to take my adaptation of discourse theory to other cities to focus on identifying and deconstructing predominant governing discourses and then isolate and trace general equivalents. This thesis is about developing the application of discourse theory rather than seeking to generalise across cities.

The biggest challenge in exploring the taken-for-granted is that I take so much of it for granted myself, particularly the longer I spend in the field. I have no doubt there is much I missed because of this. However, I think the two governing discourses that I deconstructed as part of my analysis (and lay out in the next chapter) suffice.

I want to make clear I am not offering a benign set of data for the reader to make sense of, as Flyvbjerg suggests:

‘when writing up the case study I demur from the role of the omniscient narrator and summarizer. Instead, I tell the story in its diversity allowing the story to unfold from the many-sided complex and sometimes conflicting stories that the actors in the case have told me...I avoid linking the case with the theories of any one academic specialism (Flyvbjerg 2006: 238)

Flyvbjerg’s approach is to reflect the multi-faceted nature of his case and allow people to interpret it the way but they understand it. This is not my approach or role. In this case I am articulating a certain set of equivalences based on the theoretical framework I outlined above in Chapter 3. My role is to guide the reader through the case and point out equivalences, differences, fantasies and discourses along the way.

## Research design in sum

To summarise, there are five stages to go through to go from identifying a case to understanding the production of empty signifiers (outlined in Figure 4.3 below). First is the identification of governing discourses. This requires an informed immersion into a policy area to understand identity discourses and ask questions about policy programmes. The usual interpretive methods apply: interviews, collecting documents, observation. It is about identifying overdetermination, use of certain rhetoric, suggestion of enemies and is then a careful process of coding to draw out patterns (Chapter 5). Second, is to then trace the histories of these discourses, to understand how they relate to one another over time to better understand their frontiers (also Chapter 5). Third is to explore role of actors in the reiteration of these discourses and the strategies they adopt (Chapter 6). Fourth, there is a need to identify general equivalents of these discourses, both as floating signifiers in dislocation and approaching empty signifiers in calmer times (Chapter 7). Finally, fifth is to then trace the history of these general equivalents to understand how they came to step in for a governing discourse (again, Chapter 7).

**Figure 4.3: Research Process in 5 Stages**

1. Identify governing discourses

Developing thick description of context  
Unstructured interviewing  
Documents and previous published work  
Transcription  
NVIVO coding

2. Trace histories of governing discourses

Online newspaper database search  
Access to library and private document archives  
Semi-structured interviewing

3. Explore strategies of agents in the reiteration of discourse

Analysis of how actors use local press  
Focus on senior political leaders and advisors

4. Identify general equivalent (floating and empty signifiers)

Explore logics of equivalence and difference  
Identify use of metaphor and symbolism in texts  
Explore ideas with multiple meanings  
Explore ideas/demands with shared meanings

5. Trace histories of general equivalents

Newspaper database searches to narrow time period

## **Conclusion**

This research project was all about identifying a policy context (strategic policy making in Birmingham) and then identifying a taken-for-granted governing discourse (renaissance and size) in order to identify a general equivalent (flourishing neighbourhoods) and the process by which it became an empty signifier. There is no textbook chapter for applying discourse theory, although discussions of method are beginning to appear (Glynos and Howarth 2007, Howarth 2005).

This chapter has set out my approach to hegemonic policy analysis. My approach requires a temporal, spatial and political understanding of governing discourses, identities and policies within given context. Governance of a large city provides a delimited context that is both rich in history, politics, social antagonism and use of rhetoric, yet small enough to be accessible and practical considering time and resources available. I chose Birmingham and came to focus on governing discourses of renaissance and size, and the general equivalent of flourishing neighbourhoods. I developed a thick description of governance in Birmingham by carefully building a corpus of interview transcripts, documents and media accounts. I



identified key arguments, tropes, metaphors, stories and antagonisms by electronically coding my data.

The next chapter is the first of three case study chapters. It sets out the predominant governing discourses of renaissance and size and shows how the identities of governance actors are constituted upon the continued and successful reiteration of these discourses. Chapter 6 then explores how governing discourses respond to pressure from changing politics external to Birmingham and how this can potentially reorder the relationship *between* governing discourses. Chapter 7 shows how a general equivalent is born out of a need to stabilise the relationship between renaissance and size in the form of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ and how this over short period of two years is gradually severed from a particularist meaning of ‘neighbourhoods,’ towards reflecting the fantasy aspiration of Birmingham’s renaissance.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCOURSES IN BIRMINGHAM**

Taken-for-granted governing discourses of size and renaissance shaped the identities and actions of governance actors in Birmingham. This is the first of three case study chapters that explores discourses of public policy in Birmingham. This chapter introduces identity, governing and programmatic discourses that were central to strategic policy making in Birmingham during my time of enquiry. After introducing key identity discourses in the first section, this chapter deconstructs how such identities participate in the reiteration of discourses around Birmingham's renaissance and Birmingham's size. I show how the two governing discourses are relational and how the status of the renaissance governing discourse depends on its ability to articulate demands of size in order to sustain its hegemonic position.

### ***5.1 Identity discourses in Birmingham's governance***

Birmingham is real, but it is also a discourse. That is, the Birmingham I encountered during my fieldwork existed in a material form: a collection of buildings, roads, trees and people, but it was a discourse that articulates these entities into the identity of 'Birmingham'. In other words, at the most fundamental level, Birmingham is a discourse. It was previously a series of villages that have since been articulated as a collective identity. The city of Birmingham may seem like a completely fixed entity that has been around forever, however there is continual modification: to belong to an executive county council, or city region, to include the town of Sutton Coalfield in the north or the parish of Frankley in the south. Within this discourse, there are a

plurality of identities that play a role in governing the city. In Birmingham policy actors made particular reference to ‘sectors’, perhaps four: public, private, voluntary and community, although the voluntary sector is sometimes combined with the community sector and sometimes treated as distinct. In Birmingham the public sector can refer to local and central government or be more about the local city council. There is flexibility of meaning in these labels, as these discourses are continually reiterated, but there is also considerable continuity. In Birmingham there are parties who form around political demands who are affiliated to national parties for example Labour and Conservative, but who are not exclusively linked as independent and locally based parties come and go, merge and split. In Birmingham there are organisations of the City Council it has both councillors and paid officials, there are service departments, neighbourhood committees, not for profit voluntary organisations, charities, statutory bodies. There are also hybrid identities or special purpose bodies where for certain needs, representatives from different sectors, organisations that work together in ‘partnerships’ or ‘strategic partnerships’ with or without paid staff and websites. There are also citizens, tenants, active citizens, black and ethnic minority communities, all continually reiterated to fit with current discourses.

My analysis came to incorporate any identity discourses that were engaged in the articulation of citywide policy. At my time of enquiry the City Council was discussing the idea of decentralising power to districts and developing an overarching strategy or master plan (Community Strategy) for the future of the city. Again, it is not these policy developments *per se* that interest me, but the governing discourses that provide the conditions of possibility for such developments. In seeking to uncover these governing discourses, these current programmatic discourses of

decentralisation and community strategy provided a handle, or a way in, to ask open questions of process. They allow me to understand how actors constitute their identity and position in relation to others and to begin to understand what common governing discourses shape their cognition of the surrounding environment and prescription for the work they do.

I encountered countless identity discourses during my fieldwork, but here are four which are important to flag now as they feature at varying points during this, and the following, case study chapters.

- Birmingham Labour group: the local branch of the national Labour party, which was broadly left of centre. This included a mass of often conflicting demands brought together under a common identity that ‘we are not the others’ with particular reference to the local Conservative group.
- The Cabinet: In the context of this case study, the Cabinet were a relatively new coalition following the Local Government Act 2000, comprising of a group of elite (Labour) councillors chosen by the Leader, Albert Bore. In the absence of an institutional memory of cabinet design, Birmingham actors followed the institutional traditions of Westminster. For example: cabinet meetings were held in private and members were expected to adhere to a degree of collective responsibility not expected from members of the wider party.
- The voluntary and community sector: often referred to as a distinct sector by both City Council and Statutory actors in addition to those from a range of voluntary or community organisations. Collectively they were often represented by agents from what were referred to as ‘umbrella organisations’ or belonging to a ‘family of engagement’.

- Neighbourhood activists: a subset of the voluntary and community sector to refer to themselves as ‘neighbourhood activists’. Here again a diffuse range of actors from across the city, united by a common interpretation of the City Council and common normative agenda for autonomy of neighbourhood governance.

I will go on to show in this case study how flourishing neighbourhoods serves to map over the failed identities of these Birmingham identity discourses. To recall from the previous chapter, these identities are failed because they can never be fully fledged or fixed. But to understand on what these identities are based it is important to understand governing discourses at work in Birmingham. During my period of enquiry two were predominant: renaissance and size. It is these governing discourses that form the remainder of this chapter.

## **5.2 Governing discourse of renaissance**

To introduce how I came to understand the renaissance discourse, I will begin with the following quote:

‘It would be commonplace to label Sir Albert Bore as a visionary. In the leader’s panelled room in Birmingham’s council house, you can still sense the presence of Joseph Chamberlain whose election as mayor in 1873 heralded great social reforms in the city. *All Birmingham leaders think big* (Walker 2003, in the Guardian newspaper, my italics)

This newspaper quote articulates a series of equivalences. It refers to Sir Albert Bore, who at the time had been a Birmingham Councillor since 1980 and the Leader of Birmingham City Council since 1999, having previously been Chair of Economic Development and Labour group secretary. The quote also refers to Joseph Chamberlain who became Mayor of Birmingham at the age of 37, over a hundred years before Bore became Council Leader. Referral to Chamberlain often

acknowledges his time in office as resulting in Birmingham becoming the ‘best governed city in the world’. The example crucially introduces a main character in this case study, that is, the political identity of Albert Bore both in his role around economic development for regeneration in the 1980s and 1990s and his precarious position as Leader from 1999 onwards.

In its most readily indefinable form, in the early 2000s, the Birmingham renaissance was articulated in a concise narrative: (1) that Birmingham was once a strong and prosperous city, a pioneer in manufacturing that saw it become a world leader in the automotive industry. (2) By the 1970s and early 1980s a national decline in manufacturing and resultant mass unemployment damaged the wealth and international image of this once great city. However, (3) Birmingham has a long tradition of bold leaders willing to innovate and take risks for the good of the wider city. In the 1980s, urban leaders, following in the footsteps of world regarded civic (e.g. Joseph Chamberlain) and earlier industrial leaders (e.g. Mathew Boulton or James Watt), worked to transform the economic base of the city by encouraging investment from government, Europe and the private sector. (4) These decisions in the 1980s created the blueprint for Birmingham’s recovery and its city centre renaissance. (5) Into the new century, the city continues along this path, applying the same principles to neighbourhoods and communities.

Above I have paraphrased from discussions with Birmingham policy actors during 2003 and 2004, with consideration for the documents they wrote and press interviews they gave. This strong sense of renaissance and its political legacy served as a basis for their political identity. I will go on to argue below that this was not just a narrative of renewal, but a hegemonic discourse of renaissance. That is, a discourse that required continual reiteration to process demands and maintain equivalences and

differences. Below I will set out some of the demands that had been couched within this renaissance discourse by 2003. The salience of renaissance relies on a collective (and selective) remembering of past leaders and their projects. The renaissance discourse, as it is represented here in the early 2000s, ‘sutures’, or stitches together, these political legacies, a sense of threat and more recent symbolic leaders and projects, into a contemporary sense of renaissance. The discourse rests on a logic of ‘we were great’, ‘we have faced tremendous hardship but we have benefited from a tradition of recovery’.

### **Greatness – best governed**

The first strand of the discourse of renaissance is about preserving a sense that since becoming a city at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Birmingham has maintained a status of greatness, serving as an example to cities both in the UK and in the rest of the world. Much of this is based on a reputation for civic leadership, manufacturing innovation and success. As a demand of greatness it preserves a memory of Birmingham before it became great, of the wrongs that civic leaders, such as Joseph Chamberlain successfully corrected. As this quote from Chamberlain suggests:

‘Formerly, [Birmingham] was badly lighted, imperfectly guarded, and only partially drained; there were few public buildings and few important streets...But now, great public edifices not unworthy of the importance of a great midland metropolis have risen on every side. Rookeries and squalid courts have given way to fine streets and open places. The roads are well paved, well kept, well lighted, and well cleansed...Baths and wash-houses are provided at a nominal cost to the users. Free libraries and museums of art are open to all the inhabitants’ (Joseph Chamberlain circa 1920 reflecting on his fifty years on from his first involvement in Birmingham, in Hunt 2004a, see also Hunt 2004b).

This quote from Chamberlain sums up some of the transformation largely attributed to his time in office. As this next quote from the 1950s demonstrates, in order to preserve such a legacy, rhetoric plays an important role.

‘Birmingham was transformed from a badly administered city into what an American observer called the *‘best governed city in the world’*. Social improvements completely altered the appearance of the town...the death rate was lowered, the administrative departments were built up and rendered efficient, and above all the interest of the citizens was captured and their horizons extended. In the process Birmingham not only *transformed itself*, but *set a model* for the nation and even for other communities overseas’ (Briggs 1952: 67, cited from Newton 1976: 1, my italics).

Three important phrases stand out: ‘best governed city in the world’, ‘transformed itself’ and ‘set a model’. I will return to this issue of transformation in due course below. First I am interested in how this sense of Birmingham being the ‘best governed city in the world’ came to aid the continual reiteration of a sense of greatness and the basis for actor identity. The legacy is grounded in an unquestionable success of the former Mayor, Joseph Chamberlain, whose administration saw radical improvements in the social, economic and environmental fabric of Birmingham. My analysis is not to deny or evaluate such claims here, but to highlight the importance of a hegemonic identity of ‘best governed’, reinforced in historical accounts. That is, governing Birmingham today is not only about decisions for the future success of the city and its people, but takes place in the shadow of previous great innovators.

The quote that opened this section regarding Bore, Chamberlain, visionaries and Birmingham leaders thinking big, is one example of how a sense of greatness has been successfully reiterated in recent years. As the Birmingham City Council’s website in 2004 stated:

‘Domestic gas, electricity, the demolition of slums and the creation of Corporation Street were all his ideas, and by the 1890s Birmingham, thanks to Joseph Chamberlain became known as the ‘the best governed City in the World’ (BCC 2004b)



This first renaissance demand of ‘greatness’ seeks to maintain a sense that Birmingham is different. The next quote below illustrates something of how policy actors made appeals to this legacy or tradition of greatness. The quote below was written by a Birmingham policy officer for a newsletter introducing the policy context in Birmingham for a European readership, and is both typical of, and rich with, rhetorical appeals to a renaissance discourse:

“Birmingham: an industrial city reinventing itself for a European future...The city’s leaders recognised that Birmingham must reinvent itself to secure...a viable role in the post industrial era. Vision and partnership: the driving force behind Birmingham’s renaissance, Birmingham has a tradition of vision and thinking big that dates back to its municipal leaders of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. For the last 30 years the city has been guided by a clear vision of the city’s role as a regional capital as a centre of national infrastructure. (Interact Network 2003:1)

Here one sentence stands out: the tradition of thinking big and municipal leadership.

It is to the importance of leadership that I turn next.

## **Leadership**

Linked to this appeal to greatness, is the role of symbolic agents, of great leaders.

The opening quote of this section from Walker drew on the symbolic identity of Joseph Chamberlain. The signifier of ‘best governed city in the world’ articulated not only the city, but the person, as can be seen in this quote from Hunt: ‘Chamberlain’s 1870s administration had turned Birmingham from a rotten borough...into the best-governed city in the world’ (Hunt 2004a). However, beyond Chamberlain there was scope for others to attach their political identity to the signifier of greatness. Through discourse theory this can be understood that out of dislocation, where the greatness is for some reason suspended, there is opportunity for leaders to reorder the terrain and come to be symbolised as bold innovators in regaining Birmingham’s greatness. Such leaders, in their search for personal wholeness, aspired to assume the identity of a

modern-day Chamberlain. This was an identity of somebody who acted to take Birmingham out of the most recent dislocatory crisis and returned it to greatness, for it was greatness that they considered ‘normal’.

Such is the consistency of this leadership identity, that a succession of modern-day Chamberlain’s can be identified, the examples in the 1950s are Alderman Price and Engineer Manzoni and their ‘New Birmingham Project’ (Price 1959). In the 1980s the Chamberlain identity is embodied by chief executive Tom Caulcott and Leader Dick Knowles and their Birmingham renewal project. By 2000 the example becomes Council Leader Albert Bore and Chief Executive Michael Lyons, where the identity is derived from the sense of renaissance and the legacy of the 1980s interventions. What links these three groups together is a shared appeal to Birmingham’s greatness, a reiteration of the tradition of bold innovators and striking similarities in their use of rhetoric to describe the past and the challenges ahead. Such similarities can be understood as a reiteration of a renaissance discourse.

A desire for a Chamberlain identity in its most explicit form can be found in documents of the post-war ‘renewal’ project of Alderman Price and Chief Engineer Herbert Manzoni. In a collection of articles documenting their city centre renewal plans entitled ‘The New Birmingham’ they describe their plans as a record of the ‘dynamic steps now being taken to improve their Birmingham’ and that ‘future inhabitants of this great city will look upon this as one of the most courageous and progressive periods in its history’ (Price 1959: 8). Their task was to modernise Birmingham through new building and planning innovations in the 1950s and 1960s.

In contrast, the 1980s saw a desire to avoid the planning mistakes of the Manzoni era, as the chief executive Tom Caulcott argued ‘the great vision has faded. There is dissatisfaction with tower blocks, with population loss in the inner

areas...people have voted with their feet, to the suburbs and beyond' (Caulcott 1984). In the face of the poor state of Birmingham's economy, city image and high levels of poverty through loss in manufacturing and planning mistakes of the 1950s and 60s, radical action was necessary. Caulcott argued that 'policy, resources, service provision and planning had to discriminate in favour of the inner city' (1984: 7). I will go on to detail their activities further below.

### **Sense of threat**

It is important to acknowledge how the sense of 'threat' to Birmingham's greatness, as articulated by both Price and Manzoni in terms of post-war Birmingham and Caulcott and Knowles regarding the affects of mass deindustrialisation, play an important role in constituting a broader renaissance discourse. I argue that the preservation of a sense of threat and recollection of previous enemies to Birmingham is essential to preserve legacies of greatness and leadership. In that regard acknowledgment of anti-greatness demands are essential to the successful reiteration of renaissance.

The threats to Birmingham's renaissance varied depending on the leadership. For Chamberlain, the threat was the poor civic fabric of Birmingham's governance resulting from the first industrialisation of Birmingham as a city. For Price, it was the damage to the city following World War 2 and 'the obsolete buildings that hung like an out worn collar around the neck of the city' (Manzoni quoted in Price 1959: 4). Fifty years later Knowles and Caulcott unwittingly made use of the same analogy to criticise the 'inner ring road', which had been constructed under Manzoni and Price's leadership. For them it was a 'concrete collar...that had created a massive barrier to the expansion of the city centre' (BCC 2003b: 14-15) another threat for them included the sense of a dislocated city as a result of deindustrialisation. This acknowledged

that a crucial source of greatness other than Birmingham's 'best governed' status had been eroded. The decline in status of Birmingham as a world leader in manufacturing, is outlined in the following quote:

'Manufacturing was without doubt the foundation for Birmingham's early success. The inventiveness and enterprise of the industrialists such as Mathew Boulton and James Watt enabled Birmingham to be the world centre for manufacturing in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. By 1900, 75% of the workforce was employed in manufacturing and the city rapidly became synonymous with...the motor industry (BCC 2003f: 8).

For Albert Bore to assume a Chamberlain identity it required reiterating the sense of renaissance, yet to do so was also to reiterate the rationale for change, as this quote attempts to do:

'I often need to remind people of the problems we faced in the...early 1980s. We lost almost 200,000 manufacturing jobs. Unemployment rose above 20%. We had a city centre that was dying. Birmingham was a place where no one wanted to visit and residents were not proud of. I even knew Brummies who denied their history' (Albert Bore, in BCC 2003f: 1).

Here Bore needs not only to remind people of the past, because it is easy to overlook recent history, but more than this because these problems (and the subsequent intervention) are central to his political identity. Quotes such as this appeal both to a rational analysis of the loss of 200,000 jobs in a city of one million, but also to an emotive metaphorical rhetoric of a city centre that was 'dying' and the image of a desperate city. As one former senior officer remarked:

'When the city is prosperous it does not matter that the rest of the world thinks [Birmingham] is a grim place to come to...earnings were up so that it did not matter that there were these constant jokes about the grimy Midlands' (116, City Manager, 2003).

But for the leadership of Birmingham from the 1980s onwards, as in other cities, city image *did* matter. For leaders at the time it was not only about trying to revive manufacturing or increase welfare for the unemployed, the priority was to broaden the

appeal of Birmingham and reduce its dependence on narrow, precarious markets. This links to the fourth popular demand of renaissance: that of intervention and the symbolic actions to maintain Birmingham's greatness.

### **Symbolic acts**

Key to the salience of the renaissance discourse is to define the problem and justify the solutions. However this involves consciously stitching projects together as part of a broader renaissance project. The renaissance project or 'Birmingham's renaissance' is not simply a project in the 1980s, but a live discourse, requiring continual reiteration in the face of contingent demands. Therefore, in part this analysis draws on economic development documents from the mid 1980s as reference to the sense of a threat and the normative agendas of previous policy makers. But more important is to understand how actors such as Albert Bore, in more recent years, refer to this period and how it constitutes his political identity. An interesting starting point for this is to be found in this quote from an interview with a leading Labour politician in 2004, where he outlines the importance of the Birmingham City Centre Challenge Symposium, held at the former home of Joseph Chamberlain: Highbury Hall. The meeting became commonly known as *Highbury 1* in 1987 (Collinge and Hall 1997).

"Highbury 1 was essentially a response to the economic position that Birmingham found itself in and how you drive the city out of the economic hole that it was in. Of course what Highbury...in terms of the blueprint that it came forward with was very, very successful, that blueprint is still being unfolded today. All of those years afterwards, 16 years afterwards we are still unfolding the Highbury 1 blueprint in terms of city centre regeneration" (132, Councillor, 2005).

Two metaphors stand out in this quote: an economic *hole* (the problem) and the blueprint (the solution). The repetition of 'blueprint' demonstrates how the Highbury 1 event is symbolised as a key turning point, and for regeneration and renaissance. This is not just any kind of hole, not a social hole or a political hole it is a technical

hole; an economic hole. It therefore argues there are only certain technical ways ‘out of the hole’, ways that demand certain skills and such skills only belong to certain actors. The blueprint set down the plan to get out of the hole. Just as the various projects of Chamberlain or Manzoni in previous years were part of a ‘best governed city’ or a ‘new Birmingham’ it is important for the reiteration of a renaissance discourse to articulate a chain of equivalence between previously disparate and diverse demands and objects. I will demonstrate this further below.

Although Highbury 1 has been acknowledged as the event that is credited ‘with the pedestrianisation of the centre, the plans for the inner ring road...the development of the Birmingham City 2000, a private sector umbrella organisation made up of 150 financial and property sector actors who aimed to promote a boosterist ethos’ (Collinge and Hall 1997:114), there was one project that became symbolic of Caulcott’s ‘discrimination in favour of the city centre’ (1984: 2), that is the ICC or International Convention Centre. As with other cities in the early 1980s, political leaders in Birmingham became interested in the importance of building a convention centre to encourage business tourism and future investment. Its importance for our discussion is with regard to how it became labelled as boosterist regeneration for both advocates and adversaries.

“I hope the political historians will perhaps appreciate that we had begun to run agendas in a very integrated way” (132, Councillor, 2005)

By way of introducing some of the many interventions in the name of renaissance and how these can be articulated in a continually renewed chain of equivalence, below in Figure 5.1, is an analysis of newspaper articles referring to ‘Birmingham’s renaissance’.

I explored how projects have been articulated as part of reference to ‘Birmingham’s renaissance’ in local and national newspapers. This exercise not only revealed the range of projects beyond the oft repeated projects of ICC, Bull Ring, Brindley Place, but also introduces a temporal dimension. That is, my analysis revealed no reference to Birmingham’s renaissance in the 1980s, only twelve references in the 1990s but 74 references in the first four years of the 2000s. Uniting these 86 newspaper articles is a rhetorical appeal to a renaissance embodied in city centre projects. This shows how, although the projects had been around since the 1980s, the renaissance label was retrospective. The purpose of many of the articles was to announce a new project or development. Where the articles outline new projects it is first grounded within the wider ‘renaissance’ context and involve listing other planned or existing projects. I argue that the announcement of a new project serves the opportunity not only to publicise the project but an opportunity to rearticulate a discourse of renaissance. Therefore the discourse was continually changing and updating to accommodate contingent and external demands.

In the upper half of the Figure 5.1 ‘D1’ represents the general equivalent of ‘renaissance’. The newspaper articles over this five year period (1993-1998) have included the following projects, events, buildings and plans as contributing to the Birmingham renaissance. This includes regular reference to the canal basin development of ‘Brindley Place’, sculptor Anthony Gormley’s ‘Iron Man’ statue, and the G8 summit and Eurovision Song Contest both hosted by Birmingham in 1998. In the lower half of Figure 5.1, articles for 1999 and 2000 are added to the chain, this includes reference to many of the same projects, such as Brindley Place and the ‘Bull Ring’ shopping centre but also by 2000 a plethora of symbols of renaissance. These include physical projects such as ‘Star City’, ‘Broadway Plaza’ and ‘Millennium

Point' but also memories of US President Bill Clinton 'sipping a pint' by the canal during the G8 summit to transferring council houses to housing association control or the increasing number of late night drinking licenses.

This shows that by 2000 the ease in which journalists, politicians and business actors can link these demands under a signifier of renaissance. It is a reflection on the success of renaissance both as the hegemonic governing discourse grounding and constituting change in the city. Renaissance was also as an empty signifier that assisted in articulating these projects as equivalent, despite their precarious relationship with one another. As each new project is added, the particularist meaning of renaissance, as those who first intended it to be, is severed.

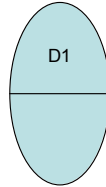
### **Renewed/renaissance**

The fifth demand of note is 'renaissance' itself. In the ideational analysis (e.g. Kingdon 1984, or Gladwell 2000), renaissance would be the 'idea' in focus. Moreover, an ideational analysis might go so far to link the naming of the policy idea with the then current national emphasis on creating an urban renaissance. For instance in 1999 the publication of the Urban Task Force, led by Lord Rogers, was entitled 'Towards an Urban Renaissance (DETR 1999b).' The following year in 2000, the Government published the urban white paper: 'Our Towns and Cities: The Future, Delivering an Urban Renaissance' (DETR 2000b). What distinguishes this application of discourse theory is that this analysis understands renaissance a both in a particularist sense and also as a general equivalent for a broader set of demands. The key difference between the demand of renaissance and others in the chain is in how it expresses unequivocal success, whereas the others are about selective remembering of past legacies. Le Bon (1995) would recognise such renaissance claims as exemplary



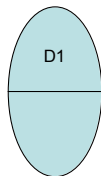
**Figure 5.1 Cumulative reference to ‘Birmingham’s renaissance**

1993-1998



Brindley PlaceÉ International Convention CentreÉ Gas HallÉ Victoria SquareÉ Iron Man SculptureÉ Brindley PlaceÉ International Convention CentreÉ Broad StreetÉ EurovisionÉ Lyons ConventionÉ G8 SummitÉ Martinau GalleriesÉ Area CentralÉ Bull RingÉ National Exhibition CentreÉ Symphony HallÉ Soho House

1993-2000



Brindley PlaceÉ International Convention CentreÉ Gas HallÉ Victoria SquareÉ Iron Man SculptureÉ Brindley PlaceÉ International Convention CentreÉ Broad StreetÉ EurovisionÉ Lyons ConventionÉ G8 SummitÉ Martinau GalleriesÉ Area CentralÉ Bull RingÉ National Exhibition CentreÉ Symphony HallÉ Soho House

É [1999] Brindley PlaceÉ Bull RingÉ National Sealife CentreÉ Crescent TheatreÉ Ikon GalleryÉ Le Petit Blanc RestaurantÉ Canal Side Redevelopment..Bank RestaurantÉ Millenium PointÉ Mass House RedevelopmentÉ Airport to Station People MoverÉ EastsideÉ

É [2000] Brindley PlaceÉ International Convention CentreÉ Victoria SquareÉ Broad StreetÉ G8 SummitÉ Martinau GalleriesÉ Area CentralÉ Bull RingÉ Symphony HallÉ Ikon GalleryÉ Canal Side RedevelopmentÉ Millennium PointÉ Eastside..MailboxÉ National Exhibition CentreÉ Padestrianisation of the City CentreÉ Aston Science ParkÉ Star CityÉ Bill Clinton Sipping a Pint..Paradse CircusÉ Marketing BirminghamÉ Broadway PlazaÉ Town HousesÉ New ApartmentsÉ New OfficesÉ Late Night Drinking LicensesÉ Continental-Style CafÉ BarsÉ SelfidgesÉ Five Ways Leisure ComplexÉ British Airways TerminalÉ Public Private PartnershipsÉ BassÉ Public Investment in ArtÉ Can Do CultureÉ Armani..Malmaison HotelÉ Roof Top ApartmentsÉ Focus Housing Foyer ProjectÉ Midlands MetroÉ Proposed Bristol Relief RoadÉ Moor Street Station for ShoppersÉ Voting Yes to Transfer Council Homes to Housing AssociationsÉ BBC Theme Park ProposalÉ Hightech Jobs.

of rhetorical devices of affirmation, repetition and contagion (cited by Laclau 2005a: 24). For the idea to enter the minds of others it depends not on proof or reasoning, but on concise affirmation, continually repeated so as to embed the idea in our unconscious selves. The repetition is such that actors forget who said it first. Providing the idea is credible, its origins become increasingly irrelevant. Le Bon's thesis was to understand the psychology of crowds, however notions of affirmation and repetition are illustrated well in this quote:

"I 'mean let's get one thing right, Birmingham as a city is a very, very successful city no doubt about that. If anybody tells you otherwise don't believe them, and I am prepared to throw facts and figures at that. The city is doing very well. So the city is very successful the city centre has reinvented itself over the last 20 odd years" (I28, Voluntary Sector Manager, 2004)

This quote comes not from a policy document, tourism document, senior politician or newspaper article, rather it comes from a middle ranking officer working for a local charity. The comment came as part of an interview, where before setting out the problems he affirmed what was unquestionable: Birmingham's success. Perhaps more predictably policy documents and politicians also could be found echoing this notion success, for example:

'Birmingham is justly proud of the regeneration of its city centre, which has provided real economic and social benefits and is fundamental to the new buoyant image that the city now enjoys' (BCC 2002a)

"The decision to build the International Convention Centre, was not something that had received universal acclaim from within the Labour group...But, as everybody now says that is a successful area. People now take their friends and family and it is wonderful. But people have come around to that view" (I32, Councillor, 2005).

These quotes are typical examples of continued and repeated affirmation of renaissance, both in argumentation of an interviewee or in printed documents. This, I argue, provides governance actors with a 'shorthand' for communicating and making

sense of their surroundings, the repeated affirmation of renaissance further sediments this process.

This final quote says something of how this is transferred beyond Birmingham with an example from a report of a visiting policy officer from France, the opening lines of her report after she spent a fortnight in Birmingham read:

“My main goal was to study Birmingham city centre Renaissance strategy as Birmingham has been very successful in changing a run-down dying centre into a lively, healthy centre (Picard 2003: 1)

So far, this chapter has illustrated the hegemony of renaissance for policy actors in and around Birmingham in the early 2000s and has understood how such claims are historically grounded in legacies of greatness, symbolic leaders, sense of threats and symbolic projects; and furthermore, such a project although seemingly complete is ultimately precarious. Renaissance as an empty signifier serves to simulate a complete Birmingham, a ‘great’ ‘successful’ Birmingham, yet such appeals to wholeness require continual maintenance in the form of reiteration.

Before going any further it is important to understand why such a renaissance project is worthy of maintaining. I would concur with Maarten Hajer (2006), that stories make cities stronger. For Birmingham, a story of success and recovery is central to its identity. Such success and recovery is embodied in the symbolic leadership legacy of Joseph Chamberlain in the 1890s. For those seeking to govern Birmingham, it becomes the project to which demands are attached, as I have illustrated with examples of city leaders in the last 50 years. However any such renaissance discourse is exclusionary, it is constituted by what it is not. Therefore it becomes a mode by which to govern, to further particular demands or projects and exclude others. The challenge for strategic actors is both to define the sense of renaissance and to protect it, and thereby their identities, from dislocation. This

chapter turns now to show governing discourses are relational, in the next section I introduce another governing discourse: ‘size,’ and explore the changing relationship with the discourse of renaissance over time.

## **5.2 Birmingham’s discourse of size**

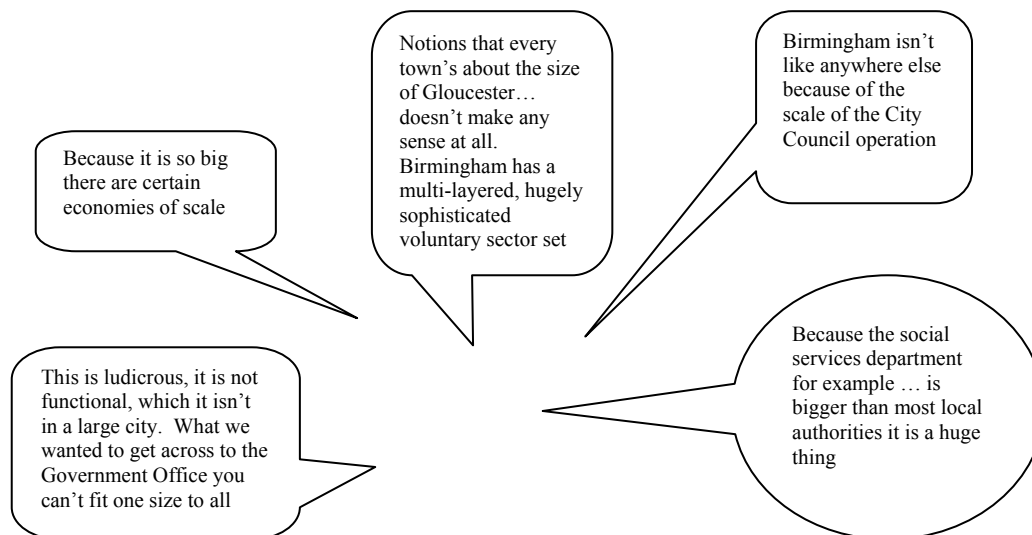
Birmingham is big. ‘Size’ is the second governing discourse explored in this chapter. The discourse of size has grown considerably to accommodate a wide range of demands. Below there are four sets of demands that are relatively distinct sharing a general equivalent of ‘size’. In brief, the first set of demands emphasise that Birmingham is big and different and some would argue has a unique position within British governance which in turn, affects the implications for applicability of national policy. The second set of demands refer specifically to the city council, the impact size has on its organisational culture and its resulting relationship with other agents involved in Birmingham’s governance system. The third set of demands refer to impacts of size on policy performance or effectiveness and whether size is a strength or a hindrance to effective service delivery. The fourth set of demands refer to issues of centralisation and neglect or anonymity of communities and smaller organisations because of size. I will describe each in turn using quotes from interviewees to demonstrate how these demands are articulated in practice.

### **Demands of a big different special case**

The identity of Birmingham being ‘different’ from elsewhere was clearly apparent from interviewees. Many of the extracted quotes in figure 5.1 below, are examples of this sense of a size based identity. The universality of this logic of difference was particularly notable, it cut across political frontiers. The disagreement came not in the

cognitive evaluation but in the normative evaluation of ‘what should be done about it’. To find examples of actors who do not see that Birmingham has a special or different case, is difficult. One example is to be found in Kenneth Newton’s introduction to his 1976 case study of Birmingham politics. He was keen to emphasise the typicality of Birmingham to enable him to make generalisations across local authorities. Newton argued that Birmingham was often assumed different, however in comparison with the national average most statistical traits were similar (or at least not significantly different). Those Characteristics that were ‘statistically’ different were all size related between Birmingham and the national average: in population (1.1m verses 160,000), number of councillors (156 verses 61), local rates generated (£30 million to £4.5 million) the number of council committees (31 compared to 21) and sub-committees (82 compared to 37). Newton used statistics and numbers to argue that Birmingham was ‘significantly’ big. It is publications such as Newton’s that help sediment equivalential chains of demands.

**Figure 5.1: Big Different Special case**



The normative demands of this first size discourse were largely around how the city should be constituted nationally, or more specifically, a unified call for national government to treat Birmingham as special case. These were found in statements, for instance: ‘Birmingham isn’t like anywhere else because of the scale of the City Council operation’ (I35, CSP Member, 2004), a further example articulated a sense of perspective on the claim such as ‘the social services department for example, as a department, is bigger than most local authorities it is a huge thing’ (I24, Councillor, 2004). In terms of normative demands, whilst most local authorities would argue that the government should relax its centralised control of local government (see Wilson and Game 2002), in Birmingham this is framed through a sense of size and the need for concessions: ‘this is ludicrous, it is not functional, which it isn’t in a large city. What we wanted to get across to the Government Office you can’t fit one size to all’ (I39, Councillor, 2004). However, with Central Government policy extending beyond the confines of local government, this argumentation was also notable in the voluntary and community sectors, the example below refers to the specific policy of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding:

“The problem, as with all of the Neighbourhood Renewal stuff, is that the ideas that spark this stuff are all built around... notions that every town’s about the size of Gloucester, the problem is in Birmingham, that doesn’t make any sense at all. Birmingham has a multi-layered, hugely sophisticated voluntary sector set of networks” (I27, VS Manager, 2003)

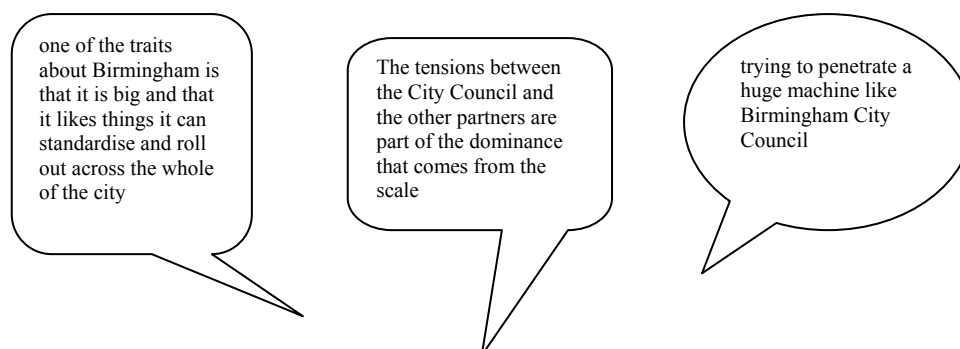
With regard to the renaissance discourse, it was not challenged by such demands of Birmingham as a big-special case. Rather, the renaissance discourse would articulate such demands as a strategy to preserve a tradition of innovation and setting an example to others. In this sense, renaissance and the size demand of ‘big-special’ share the same enemy; that of a creeping centralisation of local government autonomy towards Whitehall. Therefore the two can be found to be sharing rhetoric such as

‘Birmingham has always been a can do city or has a can do culture’ or ‘it makes the most of its machineries’ (I16, City Manager, 2003).

### **Demands surrounding a big city council**

The second set of demands around size, focus specifically on the City Council itself and its symbolic position within Birmingham’s governance. Newton’s (1976) statistical analysis drew on counting numbers of councillors, committees and sub-committees. By the early 2000s with the reduction of committee based decisions, the debate had clearly shifted to the introduction of a local government executive cabinet model and the proliferation of partnership boards delivering public policy. While this might have seen an increase in inter-organisational ‘collaboration’, for interviewees outside of the City Council it reconfirmed the sense of City Council domination in these new institutional forms. Nowhere was this more notable than in the City Strategic Partnership, the Local Strategic Partnership for Birmingham established in 2001.

**Figure 5.2 Big City = Big City Council**



Interviewees were well aware that in other local authority areas, business leaders and key community actors were chairing the LSP. In the case of Birmingham, Albert Bore as leader of the Council established himself as chair of this partnership body. One voluntary sector actor referred to the difficulty of an organisation such as his trying to play a significant role in this process, describing it as the problem of ‘trying to penetrate a huge machine like Birmingham City Council’ (I40, Voluntary Sector Actor, 2003). Another regeneration worker described the view of the City Council as a ‘big brother Council, riding roughshod over its partners’ (I25, Regeneration Worker, 2006). Such tensions between any local authority and other governance organisations may be common in British politics, but my point here is how it is articulated as part of a debate around size. As one non-City Council member of the City Strategic Partnership board argued:

“The tensions between the City Council and other partners, in particular some of the perceptions that the other partners hold of city council...about not wanting to let go, this dominance...comes from the scale. Birmingham isn’t like anywhere else because of the scale of the City Council operation” (I35, CSP member, 2004)

As with the previous set of size demands, the renaissance discourse is congruent with these size demands around the size of the City Council. The renaissance discourse argues it is important to retain a strong accountable City Council to continue to steer the renaissance with future renewal plans. Such demands around problems of dominance do not challenge the renaissance chain. However it does enable non-City Council actors to mobilise a common identity of small us – big them.



## **Demands around being too big to govern**

The third set of demands of size are around Birmingham being too big to manage (represented in Figure 5.3 below). The following quote from a City Council officer was his attempt to paraphrase the judgement of senior politicians around 2001 when they began to revisit old plans to decentralise governance in the city. He, speaking in 'their' voice argued:

“The problem with this council is that is so centralised, it has got such big silos, central departments, that not only is that no good in terms of responding to communities and delivering responsive services on the ground it is also no good in terms of what I am really interested in which is the strategic leadership of the city: developing networks and partnerships with businesses responding quickly to economic opportunities (I12, City Manager, 2004)

Here this respondent is listing a number of deficiencies as a result of a large centralised body. I want to distinguish between services, strategic leadership, network development, economic opportunities and the first deficiency 'responding to communities'. I will address the issue of responding to communities later below. Returning to the other deficiencies listed in this quote, they share a managerial and performance objective. This officer is arguing that although the City's strength in size has given it, amongst other things, 'certain economies of scale' (I29, Councillor, 2004), its centralised unitary structure hinders both service performance at neighbourhood level and space to govern at the 'strategic level'. Here, Birmingham's size is problematic. As figure 5.3 illustrates, this is reflected in the concerns of interviewees, all concerned with the governance of Birmingham in some way: 'you really start thinking how on earth do you govern a place this big?' (I24, Councillor, 2004) 'Birmingham is just too big' (I29, Councillor, 2004), 'I think in a big authority like Birmingham it is probably more difficult than in a small authority' (I23, City Manager, 2003). This discourse of too big is most clearly expressed by the following manager:

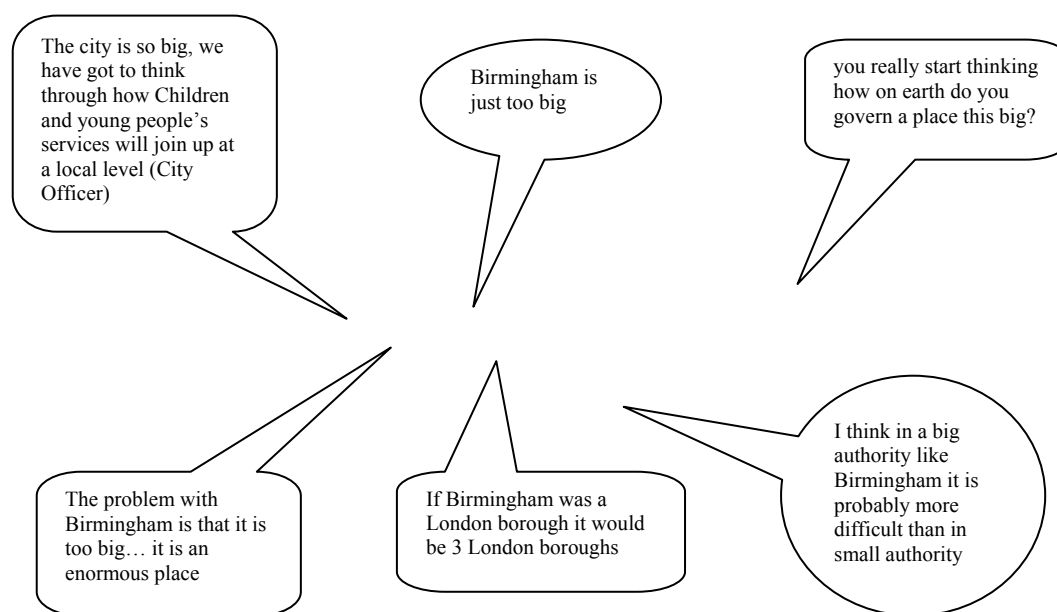
“The problem with Birmingham is that it is too big... it is an enormous place and sometimes action across the city is an impossibility and it needs to be more focused I think on a local basis” (I41, City Manager, 2003)

Among this set of demands are radical proposals to split the City up into two or more local authorities, arguing that effectively governing one million residents with a single unitary City Council is an impossibility. Two interviewees separately cited London as the prime comparator, as one said:

“If Birmingham was a London borough it would be three London boroughs...[previously] there was an issue about dividing it up...a massive furore about it. Because of the notion of “the city of Birmingham” and all the tradition, you really start thinking how on earth do you govern a place this big?” (I24, Councillor, 2004).

This councillor, speaking in 2004, was commenting shortly after the publication of local government performance figures. Birmingham had been rated ‘weak’ with housing and social services being singled out as amongst the poorest standard in England (Audit Commission 2003; see also 2002). The question becomes, how does renaissance accommodate service failure? That is, by retaining a unitary structure, the City may have a track record of city centre achievements but as a structure is failing in terms of the quality of housing and social services. In response it is of interest to this question to explore the arguments of some of the keenest city centre renaissance actors in the 1980s. Most notably, the Labour Council Leader Sir Dick Knowles (between 1984 and 1993) was both a strong protagonist for prestige developments but also for Urban Parish councils. His interest in developing a series of up to 100 urban parishes included commissioning a map of possible places. Back in 1984-5 it was seen as too radical. However, at that time other local authorities across the country were experimenting with decentralised structures (most notably Islington, Tower Hamlets, neighbouring Walsall, (see Burns et al 1994).

**Figure 5.3 Big – Too Big to Govern?**



Birmingham's relationship with decentralisation can be traced back to the 1984 Labour manifesto (Sullivan 2000). Arguably less radical than Walsall or Tower Hamlets, it pledged decentralisation in three areas: localisation of services through the creation of a network of neighbourhood offices, the introduction of Area Sub Committees (covering between three and four wards) and the decentralisation of youth services (see Davies 1987). The manifesto of 1984 described decentralisation as 'a partnership with residents of Birmingham by providing greater accessibility to the services of the city council and by giving residents a greater say in the planning and management of these services' (Birmingham Labour Party 1984). Therefore the twin aims were about access and influence for the people of Birmingham. It was also clearly linked with the ethos of the Birmingham Labour party, of the left, that this was a socialist ideal.

In Birmingham the managerial response was to establish a network of neighbourhood offices and district committees at constituency level. Although by the time Knowles retired in 1993, the neighbourhood offices were not the centrepiece for

radical decentralisation of service provision as first anticipated in the 1984 Labour manifesto. As one former councillor recalled:

Neighbourhood offices, effectively as a system couldn't grow much further, it was really very expensive, the rhetoric was...that you should chop back at certain services to reinvest in those, but what lots of Local Authorities found was that once you had set that network up it was very difficult to expand it (I24, Councillor, 2004).

In arguing this point about the limitations of neighbourhood offices, this respondent argued that these were part of a devolution movement in the 1980s that saw a 'hiatus' in the 1990s, before a return to exploring the possibilities of localised management structures began again in the late 1990s. My point here is to ask how easy was it for actors to advocate decentralisation as part of the renaissance discourse? This refers back to the opening quote from the council officer in 2003, and demands of 'strategic leadership' of the city that is: 'developing networks and partnerships with businesses responding quickly to economic opportunities'. In other words, *strategic leadership* is a demand that embodies the demands of the renaissance legacy and the importance of risk taking, forward thinking individuals. It follows that if your identity as a city leader is about forging links with Europe, the performance rating of children's homes or street cleaning is not your primary concern. In this sense some form of devolved management is about 'freeing up' the leadership to be strategic, reinforcing David Walker's comment quoted in the renaissance discussion above, that 'all Birmingham leaders think big'. I will explore these issues further in subsequent chapters, but this, I argue is, how renaissance can begin to articulate problems of service quality as a result of size.

## **Demands around being too big to engage**

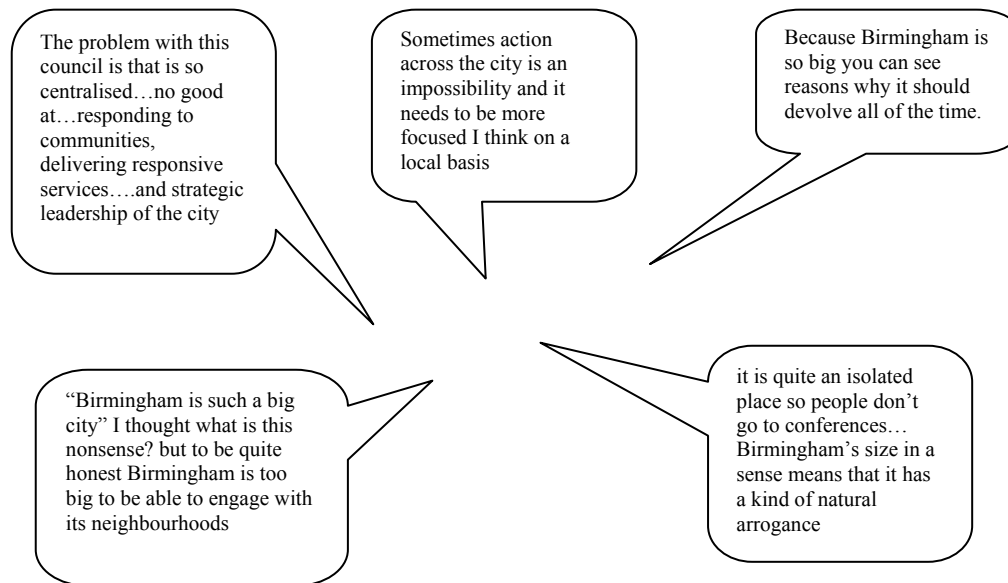
Following on from the previous set of demands, the fourth and final set of demands around size continue with a discussion around problems of size, that of how size affects the City's ability to engage with its communities or residents, 'being no good at responding to communities' (I12, City Manager, 2004). This is also articulated in other ways, for instance:

"Birmingham is such a big city" I thought what is this nonsense? but to be quite honest Birmingham is too big to be able to engage with its neighbourhoods (I46, Voluntary Sector, 2003).

In part this particular discourse of size is about a problem of complexity, that there is so much going on it is impossible to know what is best for neighbourhoods. This argument was consistent with various local authority officer interviewees, who were being confronted with plans to 'localise and devolve' at the time of my first interviews in 2003. Their problem definitions were clear, for example one argued: 'sometimes action across the city is an impossibility and it needs to be more focused, I think, on a local basis' (I43, City Manager, 2003) or as another argued 'because Birmingham is so big you can see reasons why it should devolve all of the time' (I47, City Manager, 2003). Figure 5.4 below reflects these claims.

The solution becomes an argument of subsidiarity, that policies should be made and delivered as close to the communities they affect as possible. Here however, analysts show a split in emphasis over the programmatic response to this problem of engagement between representative and participative demands.

**Figure 5.4 Too big to engage**



Representative democratic demands advocate a key role for the councillor as community leader as part of new devolved ward or district level committees, or perhaps as metagovernors in sub-local strategic partnerships (Sørensen 2002). In contrast, participative democratic demands highlight the failure of party politics at the local level and the damaging legacy of a post-war approach to area based regeneration (e.g. Atkinson 2004). Therefore, such participative approaches require empowering citizen led neighbourhood management models and a radical decentralisation of council control. I will discuss how these contrasting demands were accommodated as part of devolution proposals around 2000-2001 in the next chapter. For now I want to address how such demands for varying degrees of subsidiarity are articulated as part of renaissance.

Interviewees recall the past antagonism around many of the city centre developments that have since come to symbolise the sense of renaissance. They recalled how it divided the Labour party, such as the decision for the party to support

the building of the Birmingham International Convention Centre. The proposals also mobilised campaign groups and trades unions to question the purpose of the city centre developments, particularly focusing on the International Convention Centre. The two quotes below reflect an appeal to 'the people'. The first from 1985 by Birmingham Trade's Council questions the need to build a Convention Centre:

'Is the Convention Centre really going to create the image needed to rebuild employment in Birmingham? It is a project focused on very wealthy businessmen and employing cheap labour. It is hard, with the best intentions in the world, to see how Birmingham can compete on groups of scenery, climate, or entertainment with other potential and existing conference centres around the world...In a city starved of resources how will local people see the project – as a crafty way of getting money for a job creation exercise or as the sinking of local funds into a potential white elephant whose cost will be with us for a very long time?' (BTC 1985:3).

This quote summarises many of the suspicions around the need for the International Convention Centre, with most of the debate centred on the one hand, a positive sum 'trickle down' argument, and the other a zero-sum argument questioning what services and people would suffer following service cut backs to pay for its construction. The quote below from the campaign group 'Birmingham for People' demonstrates such demands for the ordinary Birmingham resident at that time:

"While the city centre gets its hundreds of millions of pounds worth of leisure facilities, urban neighbourhoods are seeing their libraries and swimming baths cut and closed. Voluntary and community groups, who care for the old people and children are fighting to maintain their funding. Whole areas are blighted by road schemes designed to 'open up access' to the city centre for visiting motorists and commuters and shoppers...A living city for people, or an up market, glittering slab of the leisure industry? Whose city centre? (Newson 1989: 12)

These demands should be understood in context of economic dislocation, namely the dislocation of Birmingham's identity as a city based on manufacturing. The antagonism that followed between 'economic modernisers' and those campaigning for the people, should be understood as part of a battle for hegemony over Birmingham's

future. Since the 1980s, the Labour ‘modernisers’ Knowles, Bore, Charlton, Caulcott and others argued the need to radically address the economic base. Reflecting back on the antagonistic divide, this interviewee argued:

‘And I won’t apologise for the decisions taken back then. With all respect, when you are facing the economic ‘crisis’ as we did in the 1980s, you don’t put more money into social services, you work to move the economic base’ (132, Councillor, 2005).

I discussed above how this legacy of renaissance won out. That the ‘glittering slab of the leisure industry’ was for more than for the benefit of visiting tourists. Despite the prominent left wing Labour councillor, Theresa Stewart, leading the City Council from 1993 to 1999, the renaissance success story became established, although that is not to say there was no further opposition to the city centre developments. Throughout the 1990s papers continued to be published questioning claims about number of jobs created by the development of the International Convention Centre and the quality of those jobs (e.g. Loftman and Nevin 1992; 1998, Henry and Passmore 2000; Hubbard 2001).

So far I have introduced the governing discourse of size to show how renaissance relates to its different sets of demands. I have drawn on quotes from interviews and contemporary documents but the analysis has shown how such debates are longstanding and visible in previous accounts. Crucially, the case of the International Convention Centre shows some of the antagonism in previous prestige projects as detrimental to communities. This is a ‘zero-sum’ analysis, that is, one side’s gains, is another side’s loss.

I want for now to ground this discussion with three longer extracts from a former Labour councillor. This councillor was a leading Labour councillor on the left of the group in the 1980s, and in this interview he is arguing as somebody who



opposed the proposals for the International Convention Centre and who was subsequently marginalised by the leaders of his party for not supporting the regeneration proposals. For instance he discusses how he and others used to refer to the International Convention Centre as the ‘Tom Caulcott memorial centre’, mocking the then Chief Executive’s advocacy for the project. The three extracts from the interview transcript set out how he viewed polarised arguments around the International Convention Centre, but concedes that he and his colleagues were wrong and that the projects of Caulcott, Bore and others delivered the transformation required:

‘The debate around the ICC polarised....There was an argument between the left and the centre saying you know, we don’t want to spend £50 million on this building, we want to repair the school, we want to improve the services, we want to inject money into public housing. That was that argument on one side, and on the other side they argued you guys are Luddites - you’ve got no vision. You can’t see. I would say in retrospect we were too strident in opposing that, I think our intellectual arguments were important and were by and large correct, but actually there is no denying that the city centre of Birmingham has been transformed, that has had a huge effect upon the local economy and the standard of living of people, for the people that live in Birmingham. And that is...a good thing’ (I22, Councillor, 2005)

‘Nobody can deny that the general regeneration of the city centre, which of course you know Board street and the ICC was the first bit, has transformed Birmingham. And has transformed Birmingham at time when its, yer’know, industrial base, has diminished immensely and it has needed like many other big ex-industrial cities to reposition itself and all of that has helped hugely to reposition itself. In that sense Caulcott was absolutely right and those that opposed it were wrong’ (I22, Councillor, 2005)

The quotes demonstrate something of the hegemony of the renaissance discourse, that the arguments against such projects in the 1980s are no longer valid. The two quotes above reiterate the renaissance discourse and accommodate demands around not only the good of the city, but the good of the people, therefore mapping over normative demands seeking to address Birmingham’s neglect. Finally, this third extract below links the project to ‘Albert’, referring to Albert Bore. That is, since the departure of Caulcott, Knowles and others from Birmingham politics, it is Bore, as leader of the

Labour party from 1999 onwards, that steps in to symbolise the prestigious Chamberlain identity:

'In fairness to Albert, I think Albert does deserve some credit actually for that regeneration of Birmingham, because, he, you know, whatever his motivations, he probably can't remember either now, but whatever they were in that first instance, he has had the balls to say well actually you know, this is good for many reasons - we needed to do it, and by and large he has been right I can't argue, by and large he has been right' (I22, Councillor, 2005)

On the one hand this analysis has shown to represent the seemingly sedimented stability of the Birmingham renaissance discourse. However it is important to understand that sustaining a successful chain of equivalence requires continual reiteration. The fourth discourse of size, that of being too big to engage presented the greatest threat to renaissance.

My guiding argument is that the success of renaissance as a discourse in the early 2000s was not only based on drawing equivalences of past legacies of greatness and leadership with more contemporary, largely infrastructure, projects, but also being able to accommodate demands around being too big to govern and too big to engage.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter has been a story of the stories, a narrative about renaissance and how this relates to previous actions, traditions, leaders and related to predominant discourses of size. Exploration of the various demands of size could each warrant a study of their own, of how actors come to articulate problems, strengths and enemies through an identity of being an actor in a big city, a different city, with a huge council machine and questions surrounding its ability to govern, deliver public services and engage with its communities. The explicit focus for this chapter has been narrower. It has

explored discourses of size with regard to their relationship with a hegemonic discourse of renaissance.

In the next chapter I turn to further explore how governing discourses are challenged. The challenge I describe came from renewed rhetoric around neighbourhood renewal that serves to reignite some of the longstanding demands of big city neglect. The challenge became how renaissance actors were to articulate these neighbourhood demands into their project to foster a hegemonic chain around renaissance.

## **CHAPTER 6: CHALLENGES TO GOVERNING DISCOURSES**

Governing discourses can establish a hegemonic position but are never safe from dislocation. This chapter continues an exploration of renaissance and size as governing discourses in Birmingham. The chapter explores the challenges and opportunities that arise from change from both within and beyond the City Council's control and how this potentially reordered the relationship between governing identities and their identification with governing discourses. This chapter explores the shift in Birmingham of a shift in national policy towards local government modernisation and neighbourhood renewal, and the instability generated locally from a change in leadership of the ruling Labour party and its affects on governing discourses in Birmingham. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section summarises the policy context surrounding local government with a renewed interest in the neighbourhood as a unit of governance. The second then sets out the implications for the Birmingham renaissance project. Finally, the third section explores a policy programmatic response in 'Going Local' described as a 'radical localisation' of service delivery and devolution of decision making (Smulian 2004: 16-17). The chapter concludes by stressing the importance of understanding not only the process of forging agreement for the Going Local policy but also how this consolidates a positive-sum, rather than a zero-sum, analysis of renaissance.

## **6.1 National policy demands**

What happens to a sedimented discourse when either local government policy is reframed or there is a change in leadership locally, or both? I will explore this case study of policy and leadership change in order to illustrate how actors, whose identity is reliant on the continuity of governing discourses, are motivated to act. New Labour had been elected in 1997 and began to issue white papers advocating the modernisation of local government. In Birmingham by May 1999, the Labour Council leader since 1993 Theresa Stewart was deposed by Albert Bore committing to lead the modernisation of Birmingham. Meanwhile, nationally the Government were in the process of establishing a Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The key ideas, as national demands, were 'modernisation' and the 'renewal' of 'neighbourhoods'. This chapter explores how this affected the governing discourses of renaissance and size. To begin I will outline the national picture at the time in terms local government modernisation and neighbourhoods.

New Labour's first term in office after 1997 was a time of change and expectation. Prime Minister Tony Blair's Government was developing a new political lexicon, emphasising community, the 'Third Way', and rights and responsibilities, (see Bastow and Martin 2003; Fairclough 2000; Newman 2001) two of the most pertinent policy areas were firstly an emphasis on social exclusion (Levitas 1998) rather than poverty and secondly on the modernisation of government. At the local level these two were played out in an agenda for local government modernisation (Stewart 2003; Stoker 2004), which emphasised joined up governance, modernising political structures, and greater use of performance management that involved central government rewarding or withholding from local authorities certain 'freedoms and flexibilities'. In 1998, the Government announced that the social

exclusion agenda would be played out through a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. This identified the 88 local authorities which contained neighbourhoods with the poorest, most deprived communities in terms of work, health and education. The neighbourhood renewal emphasis was about narrowing the gap between the richest and the poorest. In this opening section I will briefly revisit the proposals of modernisation and neighbourhood renewal before exploring what this meant for Birmingham.

### **Modernisation**

The modernisation agenda was a central theme at all levels of the New Labour project (Newman 2001), at a local level this was underscored by the publication of the White Paper: 'Modern Local Government In Touch with the People' (DETR 1998), hereon the 'Modernisation White Paper'. The paper set out how the Government intended to modernise local government, where reform would give both 'a bigger say' and a 'better deal' for local people (1998: 3). Jervis and Richards suggest three deficits in public management at that time: democratic deficit from the fragmentation of the public realm, design deficit in the failure of public policies capable of tackling wicked problems hindered by a system based on functional specialisms, and development deficit with limited political and managerial innovation (Jervis and Richards 1997). Overall, for New Labour, modernisation was a normative agenda of necessary change following 18 years of Conservative neglect and a hollowing out of sub-national governance. To give a flavour of the ethos (and the rhetoric) of the New Labour project, Newman quotes a model devised by the Cabinet Office that included the core competencies of: Forward looking, Outward looking, Innovative and Creative, Using Evidence, Joined-Up, Evaluates, Reviews and Learns Lessons (Newman 2001; 63-4,

citing Cabinet Office 1999). For local government, it meant political and administrative 'modernisation'

The Modernisation White Paper (DETR 1998) included the introduction of new political structures: the introduction of an executive cabinet and the possibility of a directly elected mayor aimed at achieving efficiency, transparency and accountability in decision-making. This included abolishing many of the usual council committees and introducing a key role for the 'non-executive' councillors to scrutinise the work of the executive with special overview and scrutiny committees. Modernisation of the administration saw a greater emphasis on performance management with increased use of performance indicators, regular audit and inspection and performance planning with the sanction of intervention in the event of failure. This performance framework was based on a notion of achieving best value: economy, efficiency and effectiveness. In addition there was a duty of well-being placed on councils that both required and allowed councils to do anything in their powers to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their communities. This was part of a wider joined up agenda that suggested local authorities work collaboratively with other organisations in the locality and where necessary enter into strategic and/or public-private partnerships.

Modernisation then, had a broad application which included considerations of democracy, administration and innovations in collaboration. The 1998 Modernisation White Paper was further consolidated the following year with a White Paper on local leadership (DETR 1999a) and formed the Local Government Act 2000. In practice, it meant local authorities were beginning to review and adjust their structures from 1998 onwards. For leading councillors, the changes required a series of decisions, these included a decision on whether to opt for a directly elected

mayoral model or retain an indirectly council leader. There was also a decision required of what form the cabinet should take. A key issue from the outset was how the authority would make these decisions following the ethos of the modernisation agenda. The emphasis on Best Value meant a continuation of the competitive tendering process introduced by the Thatcher Government in the late 1980s, however it now required councils to employ comprehensive measures of performance. Finally there was a greater requirement to demonstrate the ability to draw up an attainable vision for the future collaboratively with the many and varied organisations delivering public value at the local level. Therefore it became a question of establishing a series of collaborative forums for the purpose of ‘community planning’.

## **Neighbourhood renewal**

The second stream of policy reform to note here was New Labour’s National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. In 1998, the newly established Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) report set out the problem -

‘The problem. Over the last generation, this has become a more divided country...The national picture conceals pockets of intense deprivation where the problems of unemployment and crime are acute and hopelessly tangled up with poor health, housing and education...These neighbourhoods are not all in the isolated high rise...stereotype...Some are cut off on the edge of cities but others can be found close to wealthy suburbs and prosperous city centres’ (SEU 1998: 9),

It blamed the decline in traditional industries, poor social housing, failure of area based regeneration, lack of joined up government and:

‘a tendency to parachute solutions in from the outside, rather than engaging local communities; and too much emphasis on physical renewal instead of better opportunities for local people’ (SEU 1998: 9).

The Government’s assessment was a critique of previous area based approaches, and also a reminder that even prosperous towns and cities mask the deprived communities



within their jurisdiction. In part it was about continuing with the Single Regeneration Budget initiated under by the previous Conservative Government, in addition to an early initiative of the Neighbourhood Renewal agenda announcing a New Deal for Communities. New Deal for Communities proposed up to seventeen nominated neighbourhoods share £800 million over three years to transform their neighbourhoods. The emphasis, following the modernisation agenda, was clearly on partnership agreements between sectors and working collaboratively to engage local communities. Such short-term area based approaches have previously been criticised for ‘parachuting’ money at problems and having little impact (see Atkinson 2004). Rob Atkinson commenting on the Labour policy five years on notes ‘Since 1997, there has been a strong emphasis on countering social exclusion, facilitating social inclusion/integration and ensuring that communities both participate in and benefit from the regeneration process’ (R. Atkinson 2003: 167).

The focus on social exclusion, and in particular a focus on neighbourhoods and neighbourhood renewal, was developed further with the introduction of ‘Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies’ which entailed the poorest 88 local authorities drawing up local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies and developing a Local Strategic Partnership to deliver renewal. Primarily this programme affected urban areas, with this additional funding designed to help narrow the gap between the richest and poorest neighbourhoods. Compared to previous area based programmes, including Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal, the money for each authority was relatively small. Instead the emphasis was on local authorities working with ‘partner’ organisations to develop policies to tackle social exclusion and bring about economic, social and environmental well-being. Practically, the neighbourhood renewal agenda meant local authorities had to develop Local Strategic Partnerships to

administer the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund monies and nominate neighbourhoods for New Deal status. It meant initiating, or at least, reformulating collaborative institutional forms in the name of tackling social exclusion and focusing on neighbourhoods. The introduction of the New Labour reforms around modernisation and neighbourhood renewal, grounds the remainder of this case study.

### **Implications for Birmingham**

Following from the discussion of a predominant renaissance discourse in the previous chapter, this case explores how actors articulated demands of modernisation and social exclusion whilst promoting the sense of positive-sum renaissance, that is, a renaissance that benefits all and incorporates demands of size. In addition in this case, there is a question of how a focus on neighbourhood renewal and social exclusion could serve to reinvigorate the longstanding discourse of size, particularly the zero-sum analysis that a big city neglects its communities. The kind of zero-sum logics I have in mind are reflected in the quotes below from the headline and content of a Birmingham Evening Mail article in April 2001 (Birmingham Evening Mail 2001b: 6):

Headline: Brum Fifth Most Deprived Area: City Image Takes a Battering

'Councillor Brenda Clarke, a member of the city council's ruling cabinet, claimed that about 500,000 people in the city are so poor that they live at, or near, poverty levels. The claim...contrasts with record-breaking shopping, office and leisure regeneration in the city centre, which is expected to top £3 billion between 1999 and 2009

Deprivation and a danger of a 'two-class society' emerging as a result of concentration on the regeneration of the city centre'

The significance of the quotes above are not so much their claims of deprivation, poverty and divided society but rather the explicit re-coupling with the successful

renaissance project in its most acute form: the shopping, offices and leisure. The puzzle here is less about the Government's neighbourhood renewal and social exclusion agenda causing a dislocation of the renaissance discourse, but more how this is combined with a time of change and uncertainty both within Birmingham politics and nationally. I am interested therefore in the potential challenge to renaissance that arises from a suspension of normal politics and the response from those whose political identities were inscribed on a hegemonic discourse of renaissance. Additionally I am interested in how actors continued to reiterate renaissance in spite of discourses of governance failure articulated as 'failing the neighbourhoods'; as expressed in the newspaper quotes above and in the quote below from neighbourhood activist Dick Atkinson:

'Yet, as the new Century and new Millennium dawns 200 years after the exploits of Watt and Boulton, a major problem still waits to be solved. The inner and outer urban areas which ring the renewed centre of our City remain bleak and excluded. Indeed, the gulf between the residents who live in them and those of the more affluent areas who use the City Centre is now wider than ever before' (Atkinson et al 2001).

This quote from Atkinson and the newspaper quotes above are examples of attempts to unsettle the normal politics and the ability of renaissance to accommodate demands of modernisation and neighbourhood renewal. The hegemony of the renaissance project rested on the ability of actors to instil a positive-sum analysis of renaissance, what previously had been understood as 'trickle-down' (Loftman and Nevin 1990).

## ***6.2 Local strategies for articulating demands***

The post-1997 emphasis on modernisation and neighbourhood renewal for central government should be understood as demands upon local government. Therefore it follows in the case of Birmingham, where governing discourses of renaissance and size were predominant, the affect of these national demands on local governing

discourses was dependent on how local actors articulated these demands within their discursive constraints. I have divided the discussion into how actors articulate the demands and secondly how actors assess the state of discourse. The following section explores the potential argumentative strategies of situated governance actors in Birmingham at this time; and of whether to articulate these demands as ‘new’ and risk destabilising governance discourses, or to attempt to articulate modernisation and neighbourhood renewal as normal or more of the same.

### **Articulating national demands as new**

New Labour rhetoric described the proposals for neighbourhood renewal and modernisation as a time of radical change. In order to make the connection between this proposed programme of ‘radical change’ and changes locally in Birmingham, actors needed to signal these changes as they occurred. Based on discussions with interviewees there were four key changes to note: a new leadership, new executive structures, new institutional forms and a new (decentralised) decision making and management structure. I will address each in turn.

To begin with leadership, the change was not simply about the adoption of national policy objectives but how it was played out amid a change in leadership of the City Council. Theresa Stewart, who had been a leading Labour councillor on the Left of the party since the 1980s had been unopposed since 1993. In 1999, three of her Labour colleagues stood against her in what one interview described as a ‘coup’. As we know, the successor was Albert Bore, he had been a Birmingham Labour councillor since 1980 and, as the previous chapter detailed, had been heavily involved in many of the projects associated with renaissance in the 1980s as Chair of the Economic Development committee. The deputy leadership was won by Andy Howell. Their partnership was unforeseen as Howell had lost to Bore in the

leadership contest. Here is how the local press documented their victory in May 1999:

‘A wind of change is about to blow through Birmingham's Council House after the shock weekend sacking of its left-wing leader, 69-year-old Theresa Stewart. Traditions of managing the largest local authority in England are being dumped for a modern new style of government. The changes have been orchestrated over the past few months by the two men on the "dream ticket" chosen by Labour councillors to give Birmingham more direction, vision, and dynamism - Albert Bore and Andy Howell. Or, as the new council leader and deputy have told their staff and colleagues: "Call me Al, call me Andy" (Bell, 1999c: 7).

This ‘wind of change’ and the ‘direction, vision and dynamism’ was based upon how ‘Al’ and ‘Andy’ would lead Birmingham’s response to New Labour’s modernisation agenda including the local introduction of new executive structures. The local media focused on how this was the revival of Bore, after losing out to Stewart when she was first elected in 1993. The next two quotes below suggest a city that has lost its way and Bore who had been a saviour before, is back, this time as Leader:

‘Today, back from the political dead, [Albert Bore’s] files were moved from the mortuary into the suite occupied by the holder of the most important local government job in the country... Although she [Theresa Stewart] poured millions of pounds into city schools in a successful attempt to raise educational standards, the vision that provided Birmingham with the International Convention Centre, National Indoor Arena, and National Exhibition Centre was missing... Ironically, Coun Bore was heavily involved in all of them, raising the European grants that enabled them to be built’ (Bell 1999c: 7).

‘People wanted a more focused approach. We need a long-term strategy...I would like to see Birmingham becoming more like Barcelona, a thrusting city, led by an innovative and exciting authority. We need to get back to a time when Joseph Chamberlain was in power and Birmingham was considered the best-run city in the world’ (Bore, quoted by Bell 1999c).

This quote from Bore shortly after his victory says a great deal of how he views his role and it sheds light on his view that his leadership would be marked by a return to the pre-Stewart projects for which he was known for and which were increasingly

becoming labelled as ‘Birmingham’s renaissance’ (as suggested in Figure 5.1 in the previous chapter). Furthermore this includes an explicit reference to the Chamberlain and *best run* identity.

As I stated above, the 1999 Government White Paper ‘Local Leadership, Local Choice’ announced three choices of executive structure, including the possibility of introducing a directly elected mayor and the replacement of the majority of committee structures with a cabinet structure. In advance of the Modernising White Paper, and before becoming deputy leader, Andy Howell had been involved in discussions of how to ‘streamline’ the numerous committee systems. For Bore and his Chamberlain identity, he was keen on becoming Birmingham’s first directly elected mayor under the new system.

In Birmingham the new executive structures were seen to be about replacing outworn, slow bureaucratic committees, linked to the need to foster two kinds of city councillor. This quote from an interviewee, a councillor who defined himself as a ‘moderniser’ outlines the problem of the ‘silo mentality’:

‘Well I suppose when I came onto this City Council, I thought along the traditional lines that councillors normally think along. Local government has been tram-lined for a lot of years. People think in terms of housing, social services, education – whatever it might be. Those were the silos in which people operate in, so when you came onto a council like this there was always the question so “what is your interest, what committees would you like to sit on?” and that sort of approach very much emphasised the “silo Mentality” of the city council’ (I32, Councillor, 2005)

For Birmingham in 2001, the modernisation agenda also included the establishment of the City Strategic Partnership as Birmingham’s Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to not only administer of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding, but also as a collaborative mechanism to provide the ‘strategic direction of the city.’ The City Strategic Partnership (CSP) was involved a way of bringing together senior actors from the numerous agencies with a public purpose: either statutory delivery of

services (such as JobCentre Plus, Learning and Skills Council and Primary Care Trusts) or strategically focused not-for-profit organisations (such as Birmingham Voluntary Services Council or Birmingham Race Action Partnership). In addition, the period saw the formation of other city level partnerships. In documents this was referred to as the ‘family of partnerships’. All of this change, was about establishing new ways of working, new collaborative spaces to tackle Birmingham’s wicked issues and to join up what had previously become somewhat disconnected and congested.

As part of the initial discussions around how Birmingham would be reformed, Theresa Stewart’s last manifesto in May 1999 suggested appointing a ‘Democracy Commission’ to discuss and make recommendations about participation and community engagement in Birmingham, to assess the case for a directly elected leader and ‘issues surrounding subsidiarity and the appropriate level for decision making’ (Cadbury 2000:9). This was established and although the mayoral debate was highly contested, the Commission found widespread support for some form of increased decentralisation, by those seeking a greater capacity to govern locally and as a means of freeing up strategic capacity at the centre. Interviewees close to Bore remarked how he became increasingly interested in this decentralisation agenda as a means to radically restructure the city. By the end of 2001, the City Council had committed to decentralising a series of services to district teams to be overseen by devolved district committees.

“I think he kind of put the two together and realised that actually this was not only a way of delivering on what people were demanding but a way, a sense of pushing away a lot of the rubbish that was getting in the way of strategic stuff. And I think he instinctively grasped that very quickly”(I24, Councillor, 2004).

So far I have told a story of how two modernising councillors came to power in Birmingham to embrace the national demands of modernisation. The activities and use of rhetoric certainly reflect the promised 'radical' change sweeping through local government. However, as I will now explore, it is also possible to suggest little changed. If I address the policies raised above in the same order as previously beginning with a question of the leadership. Yes there was a new Council Leader in place in 1999, however he was not a new councillor nor was it a new party in power, it remained a Labour run City Council. Furthermore, the election of Albert Bore was about instating a councillor who had played a prominent economic role in the city since Labour took control in 1984. In that sense, there was little new about his victory. The victory however could be articulated as a step towards a modern city council. It was not about left and right, but old left and modern New Labour.

Although the New Labour government had given local authorities a choice of executive structure, their clear preference was for a directly elected mayor. Birmingham's councillors followed the majority of local authorities who voted against the 'radical' or as they saw it risky, proposal to have a directly elected mayor. Few councillors other than Bore were advocates of the mayoral model. After many months of speculation and contestation around, what became, the 'mayoral question', Birmingham formally adopted a 'Leader and Cabinet' model that saw Bore as the executive leader, elected to the position by his party. In that sense, it could be regarded as maintenance of the status quo rather than the democratic modernisation the Council espoused.

With regard to collaborative forms, previous accounts suggest Birmingham has a long tradition of 'partnership' working (Carley 1991). Furthermore, the centrally imposed Local Strategic Partnership suggestion is illustrative of the highly



centralised New Labour approach to local government policy. Drawing on the size discourse detailed in the previous chapter, the argument would be that Birmingham is a special case and was a national pioneer of strategic partnerships. It already had such a partnership in 'City Pride' (see Aulakh et al 2002). The only fundamental differences were that the City Strategic Partnership was chaired by the leader of the City Council rather than a prominent business leader and the new structure included civil service representation from the regionally based Government Office to oversee proceedings.

Finally, in terms of devolution and decentralisation, this 'little is new' argument problematises the claim that the devolution project proposed is as 'radical' as it suggests. This is in part fuelled by a memory of previous attempts at this form of subsidiarity, the 'principle that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level,' (Oxford 1999: 1429). In the 1980s Local Authorities such as Walsall, and the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Islington attempted decentralised models that saw the majority of budgets and control moved to local control (Burns et al 1994). Sceptics of Birmingham's 2001 proposals argued that the proportion of the overall budget being devolved was minimal because they were predominantly local and environmental services associated with 'low politics'. As a result, the district level committees had only a moderate capacity to govern. Furthermore, questions were asked of the decision to devolve to ten large multi-ward districts, with an average population of 100,000, rather than smaller wards, parishes or neighbourhoods. This was a debate played out in discourses of size about tensions between retaining 'economies of scale' against the need for 'bottom-up' engagement.

This exchange, between suggestions of radical modernisation and embracing of neighbourhood renewal verses sustaining the governing arrangements, demonstrates the importance of actors to rhetorically articulate logics of difference, equivalence and fantasy during dislocated periods where their agency is heightened.

### **Articulating governing discourse as stable**

So far it seems actors in Birmingham were articulating any change as modernisation and compatible with existing frameworks. But in what way does the acknowledgement of 'radical' modernisation destabilise governing discourses and associated identities? Reiteration of Birmingham's renaissance aimed to maintain the image of city with a 'spring in its step' and a strong leadership. In taking over the control of Birmingham city council the local press portrayed 'Andy and Al' as modernisers replacing the 'wishy washy' leadership of the Left during 1990s, in a Labour City Council which had been 'hi-jacked by equal opportunity activists' (Bell, 1999:1). Recalling the process:

'Well I think you start by understanding that...there was not a tissue between him and myself in terms of the policy objective. And that is important, because any difference in opinion is going to lead to non-delivery. So there was not a tissue between us' (I32, Councillor, 2005).

In addition to the leadership of the City Council, members of the newly formed City Strategic Partnership were seeking legitimacy as a decision making body for Birmingham. For members of the City Strategic Partnership it was important to maintain a united public face. In part this was achieved through the publication of jointly agreed Community Strategy and a Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. However, the monthly board meetings were held in private and no detailed minutes were produced other than a short newsletter. This was problematic for some of those aware of, but outside the CSP:

“As far as I am aware there is no communication between the City Strategic Partnership and the rest of the world. They are in their own bubble. Most people don’t know who they are, they’ve no [updated]Community Strategy, if they meet I don’t know what they talk about...The Government said “you will have on of these” (an LSP). They (Birmingham City Council) just transformed their usual forms of alliances into another ... “knowledge is power” and it works, it is very, very effective!” (I40, VS Manager, 2003)

The establishment of the CSP as a legitimate body was dependent first on its accreditation with the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit as approved executive body for the allocation of Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. Second the partnership sought legitimacy through the strategies it published. Here the emphasis was about projecting a consistent project. For example during the consultation phase of developing Birmingham’s decentralisation plan, a group of non-executive Labour councillors were preparing a working paper proposing the role of non-executive councillors in the new governance arrangements. However interviewees recount that the demands of this draft report were to resist:

“This drive towards participation and decision making potentially moving to partnerships or community organisations” (I12, City Manager, 2004).

“...Albert wasn’t very happy at all with what was coming out of that group. He felt it was: far too Councillor-Centric; would upset a lot of people; wasn’t really giving him the answers in terms of a real radical shake up of the structure; and it wasn’t recognising the importance of partnership working which is something very close to his heart...He was then stuck with this position saying well “what on earth do I do with this? I can’t reject the report of my backbench group” (I12, City Manager, 2004)

In order to maintain stability, Bore’s role was to appease the demands of this group, without allowing their report to go public. It never did. Another senior Councillor at the time referred to this group as “...the old kind of Luddite type councillors, who ‘didn’t really get it...I think a lot of modernisers hoped that they would just die out and you’d get a new breed coming in. It might be the case in some London Boroughs, but it is not happening here” (I24, Councillor, 2004). This example of preventing the

publication of a potentially destabilising report is about simultaneously advocating radical change and modernisation whilst maintaining a sense of stability and a united Party.

However, in what ways is it advantageous to promote a sense of instability? In cities, promotion of instability manifests as an emphasis on globalisation, complex problems, uncertainty and threat. Bore and Howell entered into the leadership of the City Council agreeing with the national agenda that the institution of local government was in need of modernisation. Modernisation of an institution that was slow, bureaucratic and in need of a 'culture change' as this interview quotations illustrate well:

'There were certainly people within the officer administration who were not very keen to see this happen, the word that we use in that respect is culture. Because you see in those early documents there needed to be a cultured shift, a cultured change, both in members and indeed in officers, we made that very, very clear in the beginning. All of this required cultured change and from both sides there was an unwillingness amongst some members to go through that culture change, and certainly among officers there was at first a lot of unwillingness to go through that culture change" (I32, Councillor, 2005)

It is the repeated overwording of 'culture' that stands out in the quote above. 'Culture' becomes the vehicle to articulate a logic of difference between those who understand the need for cultural change and those that oppose or resist it. For the 'modernising' councillors, modernisation was not about responding to central government dictat, moreover it constituted their very identity. It was set up as a debate between those that sought to modernise and those that misunderstand the need to change.

However in these first years of his leadership, Bore's position was weakened by relations with the 'left' of the party. In the first three years of Bore's leadership, he faced three successive leadership challenges. The third being from Howell himself in 2002, who had made public his concern for Bore's preoccupation with

Birmingham's international relations and the role of devolution to resolve poorly performing social services and housing (Audit Commission 2002; Power 2002). It was apparent that 'moderniser' was an insufficient general equivalent to map over the differences between Bore and Howell. Similarly, Bore's advocacy for a directly elected mayor found support with the electorate in a consultative referendum but ultimately not with his councillor colleagues. Overall, I argue Bore's position as leader of the city council was deeply unstable. He held a slim majority of support amongst his Labour party colleagues faced and leadership challenges.

In this section I have argued that the period is not only marked with a discussion of either change or stability, but rather how actors seized upon such change to successfully articulate their hegemonic project. I then moved on to discuss how actors articulated a sense of stability, and selectively, a sense of instability, whilst also mapping over potentially damaging signifiers of instability. At the same time, the aim has been to explore further the role of Albert Bore and Andy Howell in the identity of a 'moderniser'. To return to the focus of this chapter, I want to explore how articulation of radical change with a selective take on stability can be strategically deployed in order to map over any return to a zero-sum analysis of the relationship between the discourse and demands of size.

### ***6.3 Responding to demands with decentralisation***

In this chapter's final section I explore how programmatic discourses, or specific public policies, can assist in the accommodation of demands. The case I outline below is the discussion around decentralising governance in Birmingham. As I highlighted in the previous chapter, in Birmingham by 2000, decentralisation had been on and off the agenda for the previous twenty years. But in that sense,

decentralisation should not be viewed as an idea floating in a primeval soup waiting for a window of opportunity (ala Kingdon 1984), as 'decentralisation' is given meaning by the governing discourse at any particular time. In this case, I am exploring how actors rallied around the need to decentralise as a means of acknowledging national demands of modernisation and delivering neighbourhood renewal.

At first glance it may seem as if the Government's demands for modernisation were positively advocating the Council's decision to decentralise to smaller units in order to fulfil their modernisation and renewal expectations. On the contrary, there was relatively little mention of decentralisation in government guidance compared with emphasis on *joined up working* or *new executive structures*. Probably the closest the Government came to formally advocating local government modernisation-through-decentralisation is found in the modernisation White Paper, which suggested:

'The Government wants all councils to consider carefully how they can bring decision taking closer to the people – to make government easier to access and easier to understand. Decentralisation is a valuable way, but not the only way, of achieving this. The Government will encourage councils to consider, in the course, of working up proposals for their future political management structures, whether such arrangements would be desirable in their particular circumstances' (DETR 1998: 35).

In Birmingham the response was to understand modernisation and neighbourhood renewal demands through discourses of size. The programmatic response was to develop the policy of 'Going Local'. In the remainder of this section I will trace the development of this decentralisation policy and suggest how it became widely accepted by actors concerned with governing Birmingham. The end point for this analysis was that by February 2002 there was a unanimous vote for the decentralisation policy in the council chamber (BCC 2002e) and the endorsement from voluntary and community representatives (BCC 2001c). In the following

paragraphs I want to explore how decentralisation came back on the agenda and what it meant for demands of modernisation, neighbourhood renewal and governing discourses of size and renaissance.

### **Governance green paper, February 2001**

In January 2001, Birmingham City Council published a 'Green Paper,' a consultation paper on the subject of democratic and governance reform (BCC 2001a). The Birmingham Democracy commission, chaired by Sir Adrian Cadbury had published its final report in June 2000. The Green Paper was therefore the formal response from the City Council, entitled: 'A New Partnership for Governance', hereon referred to as the 'Green Paper'. When interviewed one of the authors described it as: "it was a green paper with white edges" (I12, City Manager), as it was part consultative and partly a statement of intent of how Birmingham should decentralise following recommendations from the Democracy Commission. I want to explore how the Green Paper functioned to articulate the sense of a crisis in Birmingham's governance, the need for change, the reasons for these problems and define what in Chapter 5 above I described as demands of size around effective governance and engagement, and then how this became a prescription for reform.

The foreword to the Green Paper was written by Albert Bore and provides an important insight. I reproduce extracts from this foreword below. The first quote says we are stable, we are strong but also the world has changed and we need to modernise. The second quote then argues how this is something new, something radical, something that you would expect from 'unique' Birmingham:

'These are times of much change in our city. Its strong traditions of industriousness and invention have been drawn upon to the full in responding to major shifts in the global economy. A new and even more successful city is now emerging...But times change and the system of governance is in need of modernisation...

This consultation paper is one part of our response to the Democracy Commission's report. But the new approach to governance set out in this paper, goes far beyond the change brought in by the Government and beyond the recommendation of the Commission...(Bore in BCC 2001a: 1).

Here I am interested in the prescience of this Foreword by Bore, in his ability to suture, or stitch together, a large range of demands and discourses into what is only a page of writing. I have reproduced the keywords of this opening passage in a chain in Figure 6.1 below. This gives a flavour of the rhetorical significance of this green paper.

**Figure 6.1: Equivalences in the Green Paper Foreword (BCC 2001a)**

-----'times of much change'---strong traditions of industriousness and innovation---responding to major shifts in global economy---new---successful city---cities are people---share ideas---participation at heart---right---obligation---tradition of good local governance---Chamberlain---international example---times change---in need modernisation---Government call---new forms of political leadership---accountability---efficiency---Democracy Commission response---improve local democracy=difference to lives---more power to communities-clear strategic leadership---beyond government and the commission---new proposals essential to prosperity---mobility---health---culture---education---devolve---resident influence---not party political or council---governance belongs to citizens---opportunity to debate-----

Albert Bore used the foreword of the Green Paper to make explicit connections between demands of renaissance and size discourses. In a final quote below it both advocates the importance of developing a participatory governance structure in Birmingham, whilst at the same time explanation restating the importance of renaissance. The Green Paper is also about making direct appeals to New Labour grammar of modernisation. However, it is careful to supplement rather than replace the memory of renaissance. Overall the Green Paper continued to articulate a renaissance discourse, whilst emphasising a period of change and crisis, to re-couch



demands of size within a New-Labour grammar and masking over problematic demands.

‘the debate around the future of Birmingham’s democracy and services is as important to the future of our city as its economic and physical renaissance. Only by working together can be create the lively and vigorous local democracy we want to see. With this consultation we want to start building a new partnership for governance’ (Bore in the Foreword to the Green Paper, BCC 2001a).

### **Constitutional convention, December 2001**

I will now set out how the Green Paper was translated into plans for decentralisation, including a constitutional convention in late 2001. In the Green Paper, Birmingham policy officers had invited readers to respond to the proposals, as one of the authors I interviewed put it: “It was done government style, you write back with your comments and we will assess them” (I12, City Manager, 2004). Over the summer of 2001, the proposals were then drafted into a ‘framework document’ (BCC 2001c). At each stage they had a guiding metaphor for their work, naming the initial report a ‘Green Paper’ as it was modelled on the traditional Whitehall template and a framework document modelled on the Northern Ireland peace process. The City then initiated a meeting entitled a Constitutional Convention, based on the US and Australia approaches with a primary aim for disparate groups in the city, including interest groups and marginal parties to ‘come together’ for a weekend and reach a consensus on how Birmingham should decentralise.

‘We had the idea of having a Constitutional Convention and that was very much from just awareness of what a Constitutional Conventions had been used in the past.... the great historic examples from America and wherever. And what came across is that basically a convention is a way of reaching a consensus, engaging as many people that, y’know, have got a stake in this

as possible but forcing the hand of politicians that are otherwise are finding it difficult to come to a helpful way forward (I12, City Manager, 2004)

A key notion to pick out from this quote is the desire for consensus. It was a fantasy of City Council policy officers and Albert Bore to reach an agreement of how to transform the governance of Birmingham. This convention was an event littered with gestures of reconciliation and neutrality. For example the former leader Theresa Stewart was asked to open the conference as the current Lord mayor and it was chaired by a Guardian journalist chosen for his neutrality. The Convention was facilitated by Janet Newman an expert on New Labour modernisation (e.g. Newman 2001) and importantly not employed by the City Council. A further indicator was that participants were asked to sign the final constitutional statement, and Jane Slowey the chief executive of the Birmingham Voluntary Services Council was the first to be asked to sign the final conference agreement.

Albert Bore used his speech to the delegates of the Constitutional Convention to promote a positive-sum analysis of renaissance. Many of those assembled were usually viewed as potential threats as they would be articulating the size issues, community neglect and so on. Therefore the importance of the Constitutional Convention was a clear signal to this set of people that not only are they at a *point* of change, but there is a willingness and acceptance that they *need* to change. It valued deliberation and consensus, as Albert Bore stated in his speech:

'For too long debate about the culture of Birmingham has been plagued by a false choice: either we could support the creation of a world class city centre and a more modern economy, bringing jobs and investment, or we could improve public services and local neighbourhoods. We must now move beyond that debate and establish once and for all that we must do both together' (Bore 2001).

His vision is clear, of a modernised, decentralised Birmingham that has room for both the city centre, its economic development and for consideration of local neighbourhoods and services. In so doing he was describing a familiar territory for all of those present, used to either viewing Birmingham through a renaissance or a size discourse.

Interviewees that were involved in organising the Constitutional Convention in December 2001 stressed the participative intent. In recounting the weekend, interviewees remarked on the realisation after the first day that a consensual declaration was possible:

“That evening...I said I think we can go for a draft declaration in the morning because there is enough consensus coming out here to produce a draft and see what people think...So we drafted something there and then. And, when we all came back in the morning instead of going straight into the planned workshops, we had a little session ...where we put this thing up on the PowerPoint, the wording of it... So it was a bizarre democratic process in a committee of 150 different people firing amendments at the typist” (I12, City Manager, 2004).

Another added:

“And we set up a screen and a computer with the document that we were trying to put together as the declaration of intent up on the screen and people were feeding back...as people saw what was going up on the screen... they started to engage and say “that is not what I wanted to say! or I did not mean that!” and that was a very exciting way of putting the declaration together, because everybody ...was very comfortable with what was up on the screen” (I32, Councillor, 2005).

The aim of the event was to draft a framework document that ‘everybody’ could agree with:

But it is very much a framework document. And we tried to write it in a language that framework documents get written in by civil servants. It gets accused of being a bit obscure, but the point is it looks like it is really open it is not a decision it is for discussion. We even looked at the framework document for the Northern Ireland peace process. That is how desperate we were (I12, City Manager, 2004).

In this final quote a policy officer describes the process from the point of reaching agreement at the Constitutional Convention:

“Then, amazingly we had this declaration! And everybody went off reasonably happy...it went to Council at the beginning of February in 2002 and got approved unanimously...so that was approved and then of course you have got officers starting to say “well hang on we did not realise this was going to be real, and it is going to happen we thought they would just argue forever and forget about it” (I12, City Manager, 2004)

Over the next year the principles of decentralisation were drafted into a statement of intent and by early 2003 had become known as ‘Going Local’ (BCC 2002d; 2003c; 2003e). This policy would see the formation of district committees made up of the ward councillors within each of Birmingham’s ten constituency boundaries. It was about created a new tier of governance between the ward and city-level, and these new political institutions would then oversee the management of localised services such as street cleaning or parks maintenance. The principles of localisation and devolution were widely supported by demands of size but by arguing the city was too large to deliver and engage. The debate then became how much control should be ceded to the new districts.

My concern with the process of Going Local is what this meant for demands of modernisation, neighbourhood renewal and governing discourses of size and renaissance. In response to the demands of Government, Going Local was the end product of a review of Birmingham’s democracy through the Birmingham Democracy Commission, in 2000 a formal process of consultation through the Green Paper in early 2001 and then by the end of 2001 broad agreement on the framework document of the Constitutional Convention.

With regard to discourse of size, the decision to respond to democratic modernisation through decentralisation was not because it was ‘on the agenda’ or waiting to be adopted or legitimised, but rather because of the predominance of

discourses of size that maintained the image of Birmingham being ‘too big to govern’ and ‘too big to engage its communities’. It meant that when actors articulated demands of modernisation and neighbourhood renewal into discourse of size this gave a new emphasis to decentralise. The challenge was never about City Council advocates of decentralisation convincing community, voluntary and political actors into accepting decentralisation. Instead, it was about the challenge of articulating demands of modernisation and neighbourhood renewal into the established discourse of size. In other words, size makes sense of modernisation and neighbourhood renewal through a programme of decentralisation.

With regard to the discourse of renaissance, demands of neighbourhood renewal were potentially threatening to its hegemonic status. They had the potential to re-evolve tensions between size and renaissance. This case study of Going Local has shown how Albert Bore used devices such as the Green Paper and his speech to the Constitutional Convention to articulate achievements of renaissance. The speech flagged how the city had ‘been plagued by a false choice’ a choice between the city and the neighbourhoods in order to maintain a positive-sum view of renaissance. The speech also drew equivalences between democracy and renaissance by saying ‘the debate around the future of Birmingham’s democracy and services is as important to the future of our city as its economic and physical renaissance’ (Bore, in Foreword to Green Paper, BCC 2001a) . It takes for granted that the ‘economic and physical renaissance’ is important and at the same time maintains it in the public consciousness.

## ***Conclusion***

Governing discourses face continual threats and opportunities from what are contingent and counter hegemonic demands. This chapter has explored how in Birmingham the governance discourses of renaissance and size articulated external demands. The example I cited was of modernisation and neighbourhood renewal coupled with the appointment of a new council leader in 1999. I explored the various strategies available to governance actors whose identity was dependent on the continuation of governance discourses and who are therefore motivated to act strategically. The second section of this chapter explored how incoming demands can be framed in different ways to different affects. Similarly, I showed how it is possible for actors to employ rhetoric to suggest stability or instability. The third section took this discussion further with a case study of the process of how Birmingham City Council introduced a programmatic discourse of decentralisation known as 'Going Local'. It showed how decentralisation was the means of a governance discourse of size to articulate government demands of modernisation and neighbourhood renewal.

However, the articulation of neighbourhood renewal and a need for decentralisation and modernisation refocuses the argument that Birmingham is 'too big' to govern. It reiterates a sense of governance failure. On the surface it severely undermines the reputation of 'Birmingham as the best governed city in the world'. It reorders the relationship between governing discourses of size and renaissance and threatens to dislocate renaissance, its legacy and the identities of those actors dependent on it. In response, I showed with the case of Going Local how actors attempted to absorb such a threat and promote a positive sum view of renaissance. However, strategies for the successful reiteration of governing discourse are not restricted to a selective use of rhetoric or the introduction of policy programmes.

Instead the success and reiteration of a governing discourse is dependent on establishing general equivalents to stabilise the newly reordered equivalences of differences and fantasies that constitute the governing discourse.

In the next chapter I explore the role and emergence of general equivalents as devices to reiterate governing discourse. If this and the previous chapter discussed governing discourses and reiteration in the face of challenge to governing discourses, the next introduces the role of general equivalents in this process. As I introduced in Chapter 4, the general equivalent in focus for this thesis is ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’. The next chapter tracks the process of this demand as it becomes a general equivalent for an ever longer chain of demands and what this means for the reiteration of the governing discourse of renaissance and its precarious relationship with demands from the discourse of size.

## **CHAPTER 7: HOW FLOURISHING NEIGHBOURHOODS BECAME AN EMPTY SIGNIFIER**

Empirical understanding of how and why demands become empty signifiers remains a conceptual work-in-progress. This chapter traces the journey of a demand for flourishing neighbourhoods, how it became a general equivalent for a long chain of demands and by 2003 an empty signifier for governance in Birmingham. To recall from the discussion in Chapter 3, the process of becoming an empty signifier is understood in the literature as a series of demands that share a common negation. Over time one of the demands steps in to represent the whole chain. This demand then assumes a dual identity, both as a general equivalent and as a particular demand. As more demands are added to the chain, the ties between the general equivalent's equivalential identity and its particular identity are gradually severed.

This chapter explores the process with the example of flourishing neighbourhoods. The chapter has three sections. The first section traces the origins of flourishing neighbourhoods which began as an aspiration for neighbourhood activists and which was adopted by city elites during a planning conference in 2001. The second section then explores how governance actors in Birmingham incorporated flourishing neighbourhoods into their work over the following two years. The third section suggests flourishing neighbourhoods became an empty signifier for governance in Birmingham through two examples. The first example is the case of a coalition of neighbourhood activists, who on the one hand value the category of flourishing neighbourhoods and yet on the other seek to influence the debate by



defining it. The second example is how City Council actors used flourishing neighbourhoods in the face of counter-hegemonic and contingent demands.

### ***7.1 Flourishing neighbourhoods: demand to equivalent***

This chapter begins with a return to the flourishing neighbourhood Figure in Chapter 4, now as Figure 7.1 (below) it lists 75 examples of how actors and the documents they write define what they associate with flourishing neighbourhood. This can be understood as a plurality of actors attaching an array of demands to this single demand of flourishing neighbourhoods. But how does such a demand attain this status?

Although there was considerable discussion of neighbourhoods in both the Democracy Commission report and the Green Paper which culminated in the introduction of Going Local, neither documents refer specifically to ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’. However, only two years later, flourishing neighbourhoods was a key concept for a range of City Council and non-City Council governance actors in their speeches, argumentation, websites, strategies and documents. The discourse theory literature suggests such general equivalents start out as a demand. I conducted further interviews to explore the particularist content of flourishing neighbourhoods.

#### **Neighbourhood beginnings**

My interviewees were divided in how they responded to my questions of the origins of flourishing neighbourhoods. Most pointed to the importance of the February 2001 Highbury Conference as being where it all began. I explore these claims below in the second section. However some of my interviewees refuted any suggestion that flourishing neighbourhoods had multiple meanings, arguing flourishing neighbourhoods had always had a very particular meaning.

**Figure 7.1 Flourishing neighbourhoods constitute places where<sup>2</sup>...**

Able to manage change	Community Leadership	Happy to bring up children	Low crime	Residents Matter
Accessible jobs	Communities taking charge	Harmony	Low Unemployment	Residents fulfil/Realise potential
Active Citizenship	Compassion	High Educational achievement	Meaningful involvement of citizens	Responsive Services
Active communities	Confident about life	Home, seen as	A “My Constituency Culture”	Safe
Affirmation	Decent homes	Hopeful about the future		Sense of Pride
Attractive	Devolved Power			
Benefits Everyone	Dignity	Human beings flourish	Neighbourhood Management	Belonging
Better Services	Distinctive	Independent	No racial barriers	Social Capital
Better to <i>live</i>	Economic Prosperity/prosperous	Innovation of the city centre, draws on	Open structures for involvement	Skills Developed and utilised
Care about the environment	Elderly Feel Safe	Invigoration from the city centre	Participation	Say in the future
Civic Pride	Equality of life chances	Interconnected Services	Participation in further education	Sustainable Communities
Civic society	Feel safe	Investment in suburbs	People take an interest	Thriving Community
Citizen led community planning	Flourishing shopping centres	Involved in decision making	Pride in their environment	Trust
Clean	Forgiveness	Library Services		Vibrant
Choose to stay	Generous/Generosity	Live and Work in safety	Proud to live	Well managed services
Choose to live	Happy most of the time	Local Voice	Quality Housing	Want to live
Collaborative Services		Localisation	Racial Equality	Want to work
Community Cohesion		Locally responsible for services	Real Involvement	Want to invest
Community groups work together			Residents Have a say	Well Being

This particular meaning was owned and attributed, they said to a community activist and writer in Birmingham: Dick Atkinson.

<sup>2</sup> Full reference to each of these flourishing neighbourhood ‘qualities’ can be found in Appendix C below

‘About 4 or 5 years ago he started pushing this idea of Flourishing Neighbourhoods in the Balsall Heath Forum. Basically his idea of Flourishing Neighbourhoods is where communities take charge of their own services in their neighbourhood...And that is the ideology of a Flourishing Neighbourhood. The City Council’s ideology is no ideology it is a terminology that says we want to say communities are in control’ (IVCS actor 2003)

Here this interviewee went on to argue ‘Dick Atkinson has a methodology, a way to get there’ whereas City Council strategies around flourishing neighbourhoods ‘talk waffle but have no substance’.

‘They stole it Dick won’t admit it but he has been pushing it for 5 years and the City Council have only used it since Highbury 3 [in 2001]’ (I VCS actor 2003),

This is a useful observation for this analysis, for although the meaning for flourishing neighbourhoods went on to become ‘up for grabs’ and its particularity severed, for this interviewee the meaning in its particular sense is the legitimate meaning and not under question.

In Dick Atkinson’s writing (Atkinson 1995; 1999; 2003) and his work in the regeneration of the inner city suburb of Balsall Heath is grounded on a series of unfulfilled demands of the system locally and of urban governance more widely. In short, his demands are for residents to be recognised as legitimate and competent actors to lead the regeneration of their neighbourhoods. Furthermore, he argues that collectively, millions of pounds are spent by separate departments of the national and local state which if decentralised to the control of local communities would transform wilting neighbourhoods into flourishing neighbourhoods (Atkinson 2004).

It is clear from Atkinson’s project he has been inspired by communitarian works of Etzioni and Putnam and in turn he himself has inspired politicians from across the political spectrum (for example Alan Howarth, Paddy Ashdown, Gordon Brown (Atkinson 1995: vi), David Blunkett, David Willets, Oliver Letwin (Atkinson 2004: vi) and inspired resident led regeneration projects in England and Europe (for

example Residents for Regeneration movement). Atkinson has demonstrated the ability to remain up-to-date through his grasp of rhetoric, through a rhetorical rearticulation of his demands to fit with the current policy trends. For example, consider his book titles over the last decade: *Cities of Pride: Rebuilding Communities, Refocusing Government* (Atkinson eds. 1995) *The common sense of community; Urban Renaissance* (Atkinson 2003) and *Civil Renewal, mending the hole in the ozone layer* (Atkinson 2004).

It was also apparent from interviewees that Atkinson's relationship with the City Council was complex. As this councillor below suggests:

'Dick Atkinson is another story. And, the city has this most odd relationship with Dick Atkinson. I mean he has been around a long time...probably since the early 70s... Ever since then he has been a thorn in the flesh, he is the epitome of a certain style of community development in which the local authority is the enemy...And that his main problem is that he appears to have all these friends in very high places, like David Blunkett' (I29, Councillor, 2004).

Although at times Atkinson's relationship with the City could have been categorised through certain discourses, for example size, as antagonistic, his position through others was that of adversary. He was close to the system but engaged in a longstanding campaign to satisfy his demands by shaping a city governance based on autonomous self governing neighbourhoods.

"These neighbourhoods need to flourish. Otherwise people live miserable lives and they die sooner and are less well educated and have fewer jobs. So we do need neighbourhoods to flourish. But the System has been preventing it. And persuading the System that means well, that actually it is f\*\*king everybody up, is a difficult argument (I34, VC Actor, 2005).

This discussion of Dick Atkinson reveals that the flourishing neighbourhoods for him had a particular meaning as flourishing rather than wilting, as being not necessarily economically rich but cohesive, sustainable and relatively autonomous neighbourhoods. The value of flourishing neighbourhoods for Atkinson is that it

symbolises his fantasy neighbourhood. However, the analysis cannot stop there, as I will now show, the fantasy appeal of flourishing neighbourhoods stretched beyond the demands of neighbourhood activists.

### **The story of Highbury 3**

Flourishing neighbourhoods as an idea, caught the attention of policy makers during the Highbury 3 conference held in Birmingham in February 2001. Its previous particularist meaning was not the concern, instead actors were drawn to its credibility and fantasy properties. This section now turns to explore this process of 'catching on'.

The logic behind the Highbury 3 conference was a continuation of the tradition of thinking big, of finalising innovative ways to guide the city forward. To recall from Chapter 5, it was known as 'Highbury 3', because it was the third in a series of planning conferences, with the first held at Highbury Hall, the official residence of Joseph Chamberlain. The first Highbury conference in 1987 as discussed in Chapter 5, was remembered for the city centre transformation (Highbury 1 pedestrianisation and inner ring-road demolition and Highbury 2 development of a new Bullring shopping centre, see Collinge and Hall 1997) where planners, architects, urban experts and politicians met to discuss a future model for the city centre. As with the Constitutional Convention, Highbury 3 operated as a legitimising mechanism seen to enable discussion and deliberation; a process beyond the traditional departmental and committee structures of the City Council. During his announcement of Highbury 3 back in October 2000, council leader Albert Bore suggested how this would build on the renaissance:

'It is no good standing still. I want to see Birmingham as a top ten European city and to do that we must keep forging ahead' (Albert Bore quoted in the Birmingham Post 2000a)

In his position as Leader of the Council, Bore wanted to host another Highbury to reflect on the previous achievements and discuss future agendas. Bore made this clear to those working around him:

'Albert was keen to hold another Highbury event to say 'look we have made great progress with the ICC, the squares are in place and the Bullring well on its way, we know the next phase is Eastside, now let's have an event' (116, City Manager, 2003).

When it came to selecting the organisers to stage the event, Bore, Andy Howell and the Chief Executive Michael Lyons chose Charles Landry and his consultancy Comedia. They were attracted to his expertise in approaching urban regeneration by fostering creativity (see Landry and Bianchini 1995). The local press announced at the time: 'Leading urban thinker Charles Landry will be asked to inject new life onto the debate on the future direction of regeneration in Birmingham' (Birmingham Post 2000: 6). Landry was chosen for his reputation in urban regeneration circles, he had worked in numerous cities in the UK and overseas. For Birmingham Landry's emphasis on creativity transcended the traditional zero-sum analysis of urban regeneration, an analysis damaging to the renaissance legacy. One of the commissioners of Highbury 3 recalled his preference for Landry in the following terms:

"Landry is one of these gurus in urban development...Yes you did have this great success in the city centre, but you have a massive disparity about opportunity and problems in the inner cities and I think there was a feeling that we needed to really explore that in a much more dynamic way... The notion was to try and take that 'creative cities' debate and have it in Birmingham" (124, City Manager, 2004)

In planning the event, Landry, his colleague Phil Wood and officers of the city council devised workshops for the Highbury 3 conference around the key policy themes in Birmingham, they described how this process involved discussions with senior officers of the City and other governance actors. One of the working papers

from October 2000 reveals the names of the 10 suggested workshops, they are listed below in Figure 7.2

**Figure 7.2 The 10 Thematic Workshops of Highbury 3**

- |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Creating flourishing neighbourhoods</li><li>2. Unleashing the potential of Birmingham's rich cultural mix</li><li>3. Facilitating movement around the City</li><li>4. Building the new economy, releasing new resources</li><li>5. Learning today for tomorrow's world</li><li>6. Crime, social behaviour and tolerance</li><li>7. Access, quality and aesthetics: creating the urban experience</li><li>8. Communication and connectivity in the city</li><li>9. The City as a stage</li><li>10. Fostering a healthy city</li></ol> | (Source: Wood 2001) |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|

For each theme Wood and Landry wrote a working paper. For the theme on neighbourhoods, 'Creating Flourishing Neighbourhoods', they drew on the core critique that although renaissance had occurred in the city centre, this was to the expense of 'urban villages and suburbs':

- There is a perception that whilst B[irmingham]'s city centre has flourished, the urban villages and suburbs have languished.
- Traditional local centres are struggling to hold their position, whilst some of the outer city estates are spiralling into decline
- Neighbourhoods are best revived though joint initiatives from both the centre and neighbourhoods thus harnessing public, private and community enterprise' (Wood 2001).

These bullet points are the earliest printed reference to flourishing neighbourhoods in my corpus of documents. It reminds of the flourishing 'city centre' but outlines a dystopian reality in neighbourhoods and an appeal to the neighbourhood renewal agenda. Just as other themes cover different policy disciplines: health, transport, crime, culture, arts or education; the workshop brief for flourishing neighbourhoods acknowledges renaissance but the theme is centred on neighbourhoods. This is

important, for although seemingly banal that the flourishing neighbourhoods workshop was about 'neighbourhoods', it is important to acknowledge at this point.

The Highbury 3 conference took place over a weekend in February 2001, with delegates invited from business, public and voluntary sectors. In addition the conference included keynote speeches from: Landry; Bore, planners Leone Sandercock and Peter Hall; and Prime Minister Tony Blair whose video message reiterated unquestionable renaissance:

'Birmingham is a city with enormous potential – I don't think that anyone doubts that now. It has reinvented itself over the past 20 to 25 years but now, in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it wants to take this process of change, modernisation and renewal forward' (Tony Blair, quoted BCC 2001g: 20).

As the previous Highbury conferences had shown, these large scale public events provide an excellent stage to reinforce a particular message or to announce a change in direction. Highbury 3 allowed repeated acknowledgement of renaissance. Of interest here is how flourishing neighbourhoods went from a particularist workshop theme regarding the plight of neighbourhoods, to a general equivalent as a symbol for the conference. I will explore this next.

### **From workshop theme to newspaper headline**

#### *'A City of Flourishing Neighbourhoods'*

Birmingham's city centre has improved dramatically and has generated a sense of excitement about what can be done...But now is the time of the neighbourhoods. Each needs be a quarter of distinctiveness, each different in their own way, yet contributing to the colours that makes Birmingham a richer whole' (from the First Cut Newspaper, BCC 2001g, Highbury 3 Report).

On the final morning of the conference organisers published a newspaper for the delegates to read over coffee. The headline read: 'A City of Flourishing Neighbourhoods'. As the quote below suggests, at the beginning of the conference flourishing neighbourhoods was 'no more prevalent' than any other phrase or theme:



'Before that evening flourishing neighbourhoods was no more prevalent than any other phrase, only that evening did it crystallise...when you have something complex you have to summarise it in some way'" (I43, Highbury Organiser, 2005).

Of the five conference organisers I spoke to on this matter, they all referred to a meeting that took place on the Saturday evening before the final day. During this meeting flourishing neighbourhoods was chosen for the newspaper headline above. I asked them to describe the process, to begin this organiser recalls:

'We met that evening...and we said the only way we can do this was...to find a slogan which put this together...and flourishing neighbourhoods came up...It was clear that the city centre could only survive if the neighbourhoods were flourishing...so it was not only saying the neighbourhoods, it was saying the neighbourhoods *and* the city as an organic thing if the neighbourhoods were to be flourishing as well' (I43, Highbury Organiser, 2005, my italics).

Here this organiser is suggesting the adoption of flourishing neighbourhoods as a 'slogan' for the city was because the future of the city was dependent on fostering the neighbourhoods.

In this second account this organiser acknowledges that it had been in discussion as a theme before but as a headline for the newspaper it fulfilled the requirement of 'one phrase' for the conference:

"I wrote, well, we published a newspaper...between the first and second day...and I took that phrase because I wanted it to be the one phrase that made the headline for the newspaper, for Highbury 3, I think that had emerged a couple of months before hand...in a discussion that Charles Landry led...and we picked that up, we thought it would be a possible theme" (I16, Highbury Organiser, 2003).

In addition, this quote also contains some insightful slips between 'I' and 'we'. Here he corrects himself regarding who wrote the newspaper, he suggests that he chose the phrase but that it was a collective decision to 'pick it up' in the earlier planning stages.

This third organiser recalls how flourishing neighbourhoods was chosen because it ‘encapsulated the feelings’ more than any other. The newspaper was then a process of reproducing those ‘feelings’:

“flourishing neighbourhoods encapsulated the feelings at the end of day one. Then those involved in the paper production for the Sunday Morning took this feeling and made it the headline, the theme of the conference” (I42, Highbury Organiser, 2003).

This is also insightful metaphor of the phrase flourishing neighbourhoods ‘encapsulating’ or in other words accommodating a whole range of ‘feelings.’ Following this logic, the credibility of flourishing neighbourhoods was its ability to encapsulate a range of ‘feelings’.

In the next quote, this fourth organiser describes flourishing neighbourhoods as a ‘phrase that stuck’. He places the decision to choose flourishing neighbourhoods as more than just the feeling of the conference but also to signal a change in overall direction for a leadership associated with city centre development. It reveals the views of senior governance actors at the time, particularly the disparity between those that saw a centrally driven programme of neighbourhood improvement and those that saw a bottom-up process. But a vision for flourishing neighbourhoods is able to accommodate both these views as this organiser states:

“Out of the discussion, I think, came the view that really we have to start looking at neighbourhood democracy. And I think there were two, I think there was a polarity of views about that: Albert Bore’s view was that...we have completely restructured the city centre so we should be able to do it in the suburbs. Other people, felt that actually you needed very different agendas for different places...So we thought about a vision around those sorts of themes that would be really good at doing that’ (I24, Highbury Organiser).

Here the organisers were seeking a ‘vision’ that reflected the ‘polarity of views’ around the future of democracy in Birmingham’s neighbourhoods. Put another way,

the organisers were seeking a general equivalent for their disparate demands. I then asked this organiser to say more about where flourishing neighbourhoods came from:

‘If you could imagine out of a big flipchart comes a discussion sheet...it was a phrase that stuck...I am not sure whose phrase it was, but it was a phrase on a flip chart...that was picked up by Media-Communications. You can see how these things happen, a team from the City on the Saturday evening brought together all of the notes that had been collected during the day ...someone from the media team picked it up and it became an ongoing notion’ (124, Highbury Organiser, 2004).

There are two points to note: first this organiser is unconcerned about the origins of flourishing neighbourhoods or about how it got onto the flipchart, and second he is aware that it had a certain endurance. It flags the importance of understanding why certain ideas stand out and are credible for policy actors.

Unlike previous Highbury conferences that proposed shopping centres or road demolition, the product of Highbury 3 was a shift in emphasis. This quote reflects a desire by the organisers to somehow sediment the discussion or as he describes it as ‘badging’ it so as to raise interest in the Highbury 3 process:

“There is a lot of interesting stuff going on [in neighbourhoods and suburbs] but you don’t really know they are happening...So you need to find a way of badging these things so that they seem interesting. Because usually the only things that stand out, like the car race<sup>3</sup>, are those that seem visible” (143, Highbury Organiser, 2005).

Referring back to the discussion of Griggs and Howarth (2001) in Chapter 3, the necessary conditions for the emergence of a general equivalent: availability, presence of actors and credibility are relevant in this case of flourishing neighbourhoods. The inclusion of a discussion workshop on neighbourhoods made ‘flourishing neighbourhood’ available. The conference meant the presence of strategically placed actors who both acknowledged flourishing neighbourhoods and then fostered its

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<sup>3</sup> By ‘car race’ this interviewee is referring to the Super Prix road race that was organised by Birmingham City Council in the late 1980s as a way of boosting the local economy. It is often cited in research as an example of Birmingham’s boosterist approach to economic development.

development through the conference newspaper article. Most importantly, flourishing neighbourhoods was credible, but what made it so?

### **The credibility of flourishing neighbourhoods**

To a certain extent, flourishing neighbourhoods is universally appealing. For example flourishing is generally positive and can mean anything from economically prosperous to being rich in 'social capital'. (Putnam 1993). Similarly, the term neighbourhood conjures up emotional attachment as a spatial unit, yet is difficult to define. This is problematic to those who write or legislate around neighbourhoods, but for the purposes of a general equivalent, this ambiguity can be helpful. For example previous research exploring neighbourhood aspirations in the United States reveals a tendency for impractical ideals, as Brower argues:

‘Ask people to describe their ideal neighbourhood, and what you get if you add it up is a place with one door on Fifth Avenue, another on a New England Common, and a window looking out over the mountains’ (Brower 1996: 1).

However, this example of the utopian aspirations of neighbourhoods does not explain the credibility of flourishing neighbourhoods. In addition it is important to understand what flourishing neighbourhoods meant for actors in 2001, 2002 and 2003, the demands of neighbourhood renewal and modernisation, and to understand how actors framed problems and solutions through legacies of renaissance and dilemmas of size. Quite simply, the credibility of a general equivalent, such as flourishing neighbourhoods, cannot be understood without the considering context within which it is situated.

There are at least four aspects that help reveal the credibility of flourishing neighbourhoods: fantasy fullness, fantasy repeated, equivocal capacity, and renewed legitimacy:

1. Fantasy fullness: Flourishing neighbourhoods is fantasmatic as a neighbourhood yet to come. The fantasy is an appeal to the city in a Lacanian 'Real' sense.
2. Fantasy renewed: When articulated alongside the achievements of renaissance and the 'best governed legacy' it is articulated as a fantasy repeated. It is the lack of neighbourhoods flourishing that is preventing the complete realisation of renaissance.
3. Equivocal Capacity: Flourishing neighbourhoods is credible because of its capacity to accommodate a range of different demands on the democratic franchise of Birmingham's neighbourhoods. It also fits with national policy of neighbourhood renewal whilst maintaining a unique local identity, as a Birmingham idea.
4. Renewed Legitimacy: there is also legitimacy that comes from a number of sources over time. Initially its legitimacy is somewhat personal with Charles Landry is advocating it as important. As I will explore below, following the Highbury conference, legitimacy is grounded in this event. Beyond this is the legitimacy gained from it being a widely used category. It no longer requires an explicit link with Balsall Heath, Landry or Highbury 3. Action is carried out in the name of flourishing neighbourhoods for the sake of flourishing neighbourhoods.

In the next section I explore the two years following the Highbury 3 convention to show how flourishing neighbourhoods became widely adopted as a general equivalent for governance in Birmingham.

## ***7.2 Flourishing neighbourhoods: equivalent to empty***

The focus of this next section is to explore what happened to flourishing neighbourhoods in the two years following Highbury 3 in February 2001. In particular I am interested in the process of flourishing neighbourhoods ascending from general equivalent of the Highbury 3 event, to becoming a broader aspiration first for the City Council, but also for other identity discourses. For this purpose I draw heavily on published policy documents and media accounts.

What is immediately apparent, and somewhat unexpected, is the notable absence of anything about ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ in the six months following Highbury 3. Unlike the previous two Highbury events there was no great announcement of demolition or a multimillion pound investment. In both the local press and the Council Chamber, there was little mention of the conference.

Charles Landry and Birmingham City Council published the final Highbury report in June 2001 (BCC 2001g). It contained several references to flourishing neighbourhoods, labelled as not only a workshop title but also the title of Charles Landry’s speech and a theme for Sir Peter Hall in his after dinner keynote. Despite this, at this point in the mid 2000s flourishing neighbourhoods is not privileged over any other theme in the way suggested above by the conference organisers I subsequently interviewed. The local press decided to interpret the conference as a change in direction where big business would no longer have the upper hand, with the headline ‘Think Tank Tells Business Its Pay Back Time’ (Dale 2001a: 1).

In September 2001, when announcing the Birmingham Constitutional Convention, to be held in December (as discussed in the previous chapter) Albert Bore specifically referred to ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ as his ambition for Birmingham. This would be the first of many references to flourishing

neighbourhoods in press releases and interviews over the next three years. He argued: 'Birmingham needs to be a global player, but it also needs flourishing neighbourhoods and thriving communities' (quoted in The Birmingham Post, see Dale 2001b: 6).

The next mention of flourishing neighbourhoods came the following month in October 2001 from an article written by Sir Michael Lyons in his final days before retiring as Chief Executive of Birmingham City Council. He had been Chief Executive alongside the previous Council Leader Theresa Stewart during the 1990s. He used his final article to in the local broadsheet to problematise what he called the 'top-down model' of governing neighbourhoods:

'Highbury 3's conclusion about making Birmingham a city of flourishing neighbourhoods' is a welcome departure from the inadequate top-down model in a 'city of one million people living in distinctive communities and neighbourhoods' (Lyons 2001: 11).

In reflecting on Lyons' comments, the editorial of the Birmingham Post emphasised the importance of Highbury and flourishing neighbourhoods:

'Lyons captures the essence of the Highbury 3 planning conference and the importance of making Birmingham a 'city of flourishing neighbourhoods'. The city centre renaissance must be rolled out to the suburbs amid real devolution of power to local people. Nothing less will do' (Editorial, Birmingham Post 2001: 10)

The importance of this statement should not be underestimated. This is the first example of many that defines flourishing neighbourhoods as a translation of renaissance success at a local level. It supports a positive-sum analysis of renaissance as it celebrates renaissance without question and articulates the renaissance project as the foundation *of* rather than a problem *for* neighbourhood renewal.

The first City Council actors to publicly incorporate flourishing neighbourhoods were members of the planning department when launching a regeneration initiative in the ward of Stirchley. The Flourishing Neighbourhood

Initiative appealed to the work of Highbury 3 and was primarily focused on regenerating the neighbourhood particularly around attracting a large supermarket into the area. Here a flourishing neighbourhood was defined as a physical and economically enhanced space (see Birmingham Evening Mail 2000a).

However it was not long after the implementation of the Stirchley neighbourhood initiative, that flourishing neighbourhoods became a citywide strategic policy concern. Figure 7.3 (below) illustrates this transition. In a period of one year from October 2001 to October 2002, flourishing neighbourhoods went from being a neighbourhood initiative to a strategic city council priority.

From the start of 2002, flourishing neighbourhoods being to feature as a council priority in strategic policy documents. In February 2002, the Council Cabinet released their draft Cabinet Statement. The three central priorities were service improvement, devolution and flourishing neighbourhoods. The Birmingham Post newspaper reported this announcement with the headline 'Suburbs to Share in Cities Success'. The communications unit of the City Council drew on the well-established hegemony of renaissance. In announcing the Cabinet plan for 2002, the Birmingham Post quoted the following from the document:

'Birmingham is justly proud of the regeneration of its city centre, which has provided real economic and social benefits and is fundamental to the new buoyant image that the city now enjoys. 'This transformation, more than 20 years in the making, has been absolutely critical to the well being of the entire city...it is now apparent that the next vital task is neighbourhood renewal. The city centre has a spring in its step and this sense of confidence and pride must reappear in all the city neighbourhoods (BCC Cabinet Statement 2002, in Dale 2002b: 3).'



**Figure 7.3 Articulating projects as flourishing neighbourhoods 2001-2**

<b>When</b>	<b>Who</b>	<b>What</b>	<b>How/Where</b>
October 2001	Cllr Andrew Coulson (regeneration)	'flourishing neighbourhoods initiative'	Birmingham Evening Mail 2001a
January 2002	Newspaper reporter Paul Dale, referring to draft Cabinet plan	'flourishing neighbourhoods objective'	Dale 2002a; and BCC 2002a
February 2002	Paul Dale, referring to draft Community Strategy	'flourishing neighbourhoods theme'	Dale 2002c; and CSP 2002a
July 2002	Cllr Andrew Coulson	'City Council's strategy for creating flourishing neighbourhoods'	Hudson 2002
July 2002	Cllr Albert Bore (leader)	'City Council's flourishing neighbourhoods priority'	Connor 2002b
August 2002	Birmingham Post Editor	'Real agenda...flourishing neighbourhoods'	Birmingham Post 2002b
August 2002	Cllr Sandra Jenkinson (housing)	'flourishing neighbourhoods regeneration strategy'	Docherty 2002
October 2002	Reporter Paul Dale, referring to Albert Bore's personal agenda	'policy to create a city of flourishing neighbourhoods'	Dale 2002f
October 2002	Cllr Albert Bore	'a major city council priority...to create flourishing neighbourhoods'	Groves 2002
December 2002	Cllr Andy Howell (former deputy leader)	'policy of building flourishing neighbourhoods'	Bell 2002
December 2002	Paul Dale, referring to Council policy amid closure of Swimming Baths	'Labour leadership's...policy of flourishing neighbourhoods'	Dale 2002g
December 2002	Cllr Roy Pinney (education)	'the cabinet's intention to create flourishing neighbourhoods'	Pinney 2002

Similarly the City Council published, in the name of the City Strategic Partnership, Birmingham's first Community Strategy. In this the City Strategic Partnership agreed to the following 'vision' for the future, a vision that maps over the antagonism between renaissance and size and incorporates flourishing neighbourhoods:

“The Vision for Birmingham...Birmingham therefore needs to be facing two ways: a leading, successful city facing outwards to the national and international scenes: a city facing inwards to ensure that local neighbourhoods are flourishing, safe and healthy places adding to the prosperity of the city and benefiting from it “(City Strategic Partnership 2002a:5)

Finally, also in early 2002, the City Strategic Partnership published their first 'Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy'. It follows from the Community Strategy vision of:

'Birmingham should become city recognised for its international competitiveness and celebrated as a city of flourishing neighbourhoods...this strategy provides the vehicle through which the main partner organisations in the city centre address joint actions to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of Birmingham's most deprived neighbourhoods and to ensure that currently less deprived neighbourhoods do not deteriorate' (City Strategic Partnership 2002b: 3).

In both cases they attempt to define the governance terrain, to reduce it to two or three categories. However, it requires more than strategic documents to transform flourishing neighbourhoods from a demand of Highbury 3 to an empty signifier for governance of Birmingham and to successfully mask over potentially antagonistic relations between discourses of size and renaissance. The selection of flourishing neighbourhoods in the three strategy documents was about the first stage of articulating the sense of a flourishing neighbourhoods as a strategic priority beyond neighbourhood management and regeneration. Such an agenda, can be understood as a chain of equivalence. The task for those actors engaged in hegemonic articulation is to publicise and maintain a sense of this chain, whilst providing a commentary on the local governance environment by articulating equivalence, difference and fantasy. The chain is therefore a dynamic rather than static; continually growing and modifying over time.

In this section I am arguing that 2002 was a crucial year for the hegemonic articulation of flourishing neighbourhoods. As Figure 7.3 demonstrated above, the

specific rhetoric differs depending on the actor and the context: objective/policy/priority/ intention/strategy/theme sense of a project greater than a single demand.

I am interested in how different actors adopted flourishing neighbourhoods to define their demands and how this propelled it closer to being an empty signifier; from the particular to the universal. Below I explore examples from three diverse areas of policy to demonstrate how actors incorporated flourishing neighbourhoods into their area of concern. The examples stem from health, commerce and policing.

### **Example 1**

Following the announcement of a new 'Local Finance Improvement Trust' (or LIFT) to finance the building and improvement of primary care facilities in Birmingham and Solihull, the cabinet member for regeneration responded with:

'LIFT fits perfectly with the city council's strategy for creating flourishing neighbourhoods. It will give us new means of pulling in finance to improve local health centres and doctors' surgeries, and to do so in our local shopping centres and suburbs' (Cllr Andrew Coulson quoted in Hudson 2002: 5).

### **Example 2**

'Birmingham Better Together Group's Business Charter for Social Responsibility' was launched in October 2001, a collaboration between the City Council and business interests in the city. In July 2002, the Group announced the milestone of the 100th Business to sign up to the charter committing themselves to help Birmingham City Council's task of improving the 'environmental, social and economic well-being of neighbourhoods and communities' (Connor 2002b: 3). As part of the announcement Albert Bore drew equivalences with flourishing neighbourhoods:

'Birmingham has built up a very successful track record of working in public - private partnerships, resulting in enormous changes in the city's physical environment...It is very encouraging to see the range of companies that have signed up to the Charter and are already getting involved in making a difference in local communities. This is a real boost for the city council's priority to create flourishing neighbourhoods (Albert Bore quoted in Connor 2002b: 3).

### **Example 3**

In September 2002, the Community Safety Partnership published a three year crime and disorder strategy. In a joint announcement by partnership members the deputy chief constable of West Midlands Police and the Deputy Chief Executive of Birmingham City Council stated:

'Birmingham City Council and West Midlands Police are two...organisations with our own priorities and...cultures...But this strategy is a good example of... a common purpose. When it comes to reducing crime and disorder, there is no daylight between us...there are two objectives. One is how the police and the council align to make sure local services are delivered effectively...The other, and it is important to stress, is local people must start to engage at ward level with crime reduction and how they can help achieve it....People have to become engaged with the problems and the solutions (WMP Deputy Chief Constable Nick Tofiluk quoted in Docherty 2002: 3)

'It is clear that reducing crime is the top priority for the majority of people in Birmingham. We cannot have flourishing neighbourhoods unless we can make people feel safer' (Deputy chief executive BCC, Jamie Morris quoted in Docherty 2002: 3).

Examination of the three examples: LIFT, Social Responsibility Charter and the Community Safety strategy illuminates the emerging 'flourishing neighbourhoods agenda'. For flourishing neighbourhoods to go beyond an equivalent of Highbury 3 it had to be continually articulated and defined within a public sphere. The occasion of announcing each new initiative gave opportunity for City Council actors to comment and articulate each initiative. In each case Councillors Albert Bore, Andrew Coulson and Birmingham City Council's Deputy Chief Executive Jamie Morris chose to

articulate equivalences with a flourishing neighbourhoods agenda. Each new policy initiative was presented as complementary to flourishing neighbourhoods.

The consistent application of flourishing neighbourhoods in this way serves as a sense-making commentary of Birmingham's governance. For example with the LIFT project, this could be controversial as it seems to advocate the use of private capital in development of public service buildings. However, flourishing neighbourhoods provides a rationale for this initiative, that flourishing neighbourhoods contain first class, accessible modern and integrated primary care facilities and the LIFT project will provide this.

Moreover, this articulation of equivalence continually modifies the frontiers of flourishing neighbourhoods. For instance it might be assumed a flourishing neighbourhoods agenda is about local policy concerns, the managements of a specific locality or 'pavement politics'. However these examples link flourishing neighbourhoods with strategic concerns around safety, capital investment in health care and social responsibility amongst Birmingham's business community.

Third, such regular articulation of equivalence serves to preserve the flourishing neighbourhoods agenda in the public consciousness. Importantly this is not about a specific initiative but a reoccurring general equivalent that grounds and legitimises future initiatives. The role of Bore, Coulson, Morris and others was to cultivate and foster a general equivalent, such as flourishing neighbourhoods, for this purpose. What can be achieved out of doing this? In the next and final section I will explore cases of how flourishing neighbourhoods assisted in the coalition of groups and in strategies warding against dislocation.

### **7.3 Flourishing neighbourhoods in action**

In this final section I explore how flourishing neighbourhoods operated as an empty signifier for governance. I first discuss the indicators that suggest flourishing neighbourhoods had achieved an empty signifier status. Second I want to explore further how City Council officials and councillors continued to articulate flourishing neighbourhoods to defend against contingent and potentially dislocatory demands. Finally, I will explore a case study of the aptly named ‘flourishing neighbourhood group’ a coalition of neighbourhood activists who actively sought to influence the direction flourishing neighbourhoods policy, or what can be understood from the perspective of this analysis, as an attempt to reparticularise flourishing neighbourhoods.

#### **Flourishing neighbourhoods empty signifier**

At the limit, general equivalents sever their particularistic ties to the extent that they become self legitimising. This quote below reflects the general equivalent, flourishing neighbourhoods, at that limit:

“The Highbury 3 convention came up with the flourishing neighbourhoods agenda as the way of trying to take the successes of Highbury 1 and everything that followed on from Highbury 1 and tried to make sure that that was spread across the city. As soon as you get to flourishing neighbourhoods you start to connect with the devolution and localisation agenda. And if you look at the early cabinet and corporate plans you see those two threads separate as they might have been at one stage, they are then pulled together!! – there is a relationship between both of those!!” (I32, Councillor, 2005)

Here are the Cabinet and Corporate plans to which this interviewee above enthusiastically refers:

“Cabinet Statement 2002/2003...Three corporate priorities: performance, flourishing neighbourhoods (following Highbury 3) and Devolved Governance (following the Constitutional Convention)” (BCC 2002a)

Cabinet and Corporate plan 2003/4, published January 2003,

two core priorities: performance and flourishing neighbourhoods (BCC 2003a).

However the continued application of flourishing neighbourhoods does not validate its status as an empty signifier. More persuasive perhaps are quotes of the kind below, where flourishing neighbourhoods means the continuation of renaissance rather than any specific form of neighbourhood development.

Flourishing neighbourhoods? Well it is all a story isn't it... "We have a wonderful city centre, but our five year plan overlooked and neglected the suburbs. We have a flourishing nightlife and flourishing shops but now we need Flourishing Neighbourhoods"(I26, VC Manager, 2004).

I think that the concept of a Flourishing Neighbourhood is a sound concept ... obviously a recognition that the city centre has been an enormous success, but the benefits that accrue have not been spread out through the wider suburbs, so the idea behind Flourishing Neighbourhoods is to take that wealth of prosperity innovation invigoration etc and drive it through the city. (I41, City Manager, 2003).

Above are examples of how flourishing neighbourhoods had all but severed its particularistic ties as a demand of neighbourhood management or regeneration.

### **How actors defended their project**

I now turn to explore how actors employed flourishing neighbourhoods to defend against potential threats. These were important high profile public issues, however implicit in explicit events is how flourishing neighbourhoods operated in the background and thereby legitimising policy responses. In the early 2000s the question of whether Birmingham should adopt a directly elected mayor had been widely rejected by Birmingham Councillors. A consultative referendum in 2002 had seen greatest support for an indirectly elected leader model, however by combining the votes for the other two models more had supported a mayoral model than had not. The debate polarised around two camps. The vast majority of councillors in Birmingham were against the idea of a directly elected executive mayor and a small

group of advocates including Albert Bore were in support. Speculation then followed that the Local Government Minister Nick Raynsford would force Birmingham to have a referendum on the question of a mayor. By June 2002, he confirmed the Government would not intervene.

“Albert was very much in favour of elected Mayors – so his mind was on how can we engineer a way of making this happen in Birmingham” (I12, City Manager 2004)

Below is an extract from a Birmingham post editorial discussing the political significance of Birmingham not having a mayor. It discusses the usual issues of public disengagement with local politics and concludes:

“Electing a mayor would have been radical. But frankly it pales into insignificance beside the opportunity that now lies before Birmingham. Having once created the model for vibrant, caring democracy, we can do it again. Local government is not about electoral processes, it's about making a difference. The vision for flourishing neighbourhoods hailed at Highbury III is simple: devolve power and money to local level, harnessing anew the passion of local people to forge effective, relevant, inclusive local democracy. The cabinet system frees more councillors to get out of the Council House and back where they belong: to their neighbourhoods, there to become mini-mayors - elected mayors - and champions of empowered, united communities...And if the Great Elected Mayor Debate helped create, even indirectly, the mood for change, then Amen to that” (Birmingham Post 2002b:10).

With flourishing neighbourhoods it is possible for this journalist to make linkages between a range of demands: modernisation, democracy and flourishing neighbourhoods.

A second big headline around 2002 was regarding the resident rejection of transferring social housing to the third or not-for-profit sector. For many years Birmingham City Council was known as Europe's biggest landlord, responsible for the management of more houses than any other authority. However, as with other local authorities, social housing was a huge financial expense. In 2001 the City held a



referendum to ask tenants to vote to transfer the control of their housing to a housing association through Large Scale Voluntary Transfer. However, unlike many other areas, Birmingham tenants voted against the transfer. This meant Birmingham would continue to be criticised by the housing inspectorate for its poor housing provision, and furthermore city leaders had no alternative backup plans as they had expected residents to support the proposal of housing transfer. By August 2002, the Cabinet began discussing the introduction of nine 'Housing Market Areas'. The cabinet member for housing was quoted in the Birmingham Post arguing:

"We need to continue to look for investment opportunities, not only to improve council housing but also to develop our strategy across all tenures within the city's broader regeneration strategy creating flourishing neighbourhoods for present and future generations' (Cllr Sandra Jenkinson, quoted in Docherty 2002: 3).

In response the Birmingham Post editorial argued although this was controversial it was also an opportunity for the 'real agenda' of empowerment:

'The opportunity is that the housing controversy, although it didn't paint the council in a flattering light, did bring people together. And councillors should exploit this team spirit to gain maximum support for the real agenda. So what is the real agenda? It's not about council homes, it's about communities; it's about flourishing neighbourhoods. For while inward investment pours into the city centre, neighbourhoods around the edge of the 'doughnut' fall further behind by comparison' (Birmingham Post 2002c: 10)

The argument in this Birmingham Post quote echoes that of the anti-development lobby in the 1980s and 1990s, at the height of the antagonism between the discourses of renaissance and size. This critique revolved around a notion that renewal is about people or communities and not 'bricks and mortar'; that investment should be in building people not prestige projects. Here the Birmingham Post editorial is appealing to harness the mobilisation of Birmingham's residents in the process of voting 'no' to the transfer of their council houses. In this paragraph the 'real agenda,'

as they describe, was to address those communities neglected by city centre investment.

A third example of how flourishing neighbourhoods was employed to defend contingent demands is in how city actors responded to a weak corporate performance rating. In December 2002, the UK Government's Audit Commission (2002) published their first Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of Birmingham City Council. They found housing and social services to be performing poorly and gave the City Council an overall rating of 'Weak' (out of a scale of Poor-Weak-Fair-Good and Excellent). As one former councillor argued "Birmingham was beginning to believe its own publicity" (I23, Councillor, 2004). The standard of housing and social services was of long-standing concern. For much of 2002 the deputy leader Andy Howell had been concentrating on standards in Birmingham's social care function. Howell cites Albert Bore's lack of interest in poor performing services and his focus on flourishing neighbourhoods and devolution as grounds for his challenge on the leadership in October 2002. The CPA publication two months later came too late for Howell who had been unsuccessful in his attempt to depose Bore.

The Birmingham Post commented (with a headline: Weak Local Authority Failing to Deliver):

'There are decisive strategies in place to address these shortcomings, according to council leaders...It is difficult to see, however, how years of failure in social services and housing can be quickly turned around...Much emphasis is being placed on proposals for devolution. The so-called flourishing neighbourhoods will, it is promised, increase efficiency and promote new enthusiasm for local government by bringing service delivery much closer to communities' (Editorial, Birmingham Post 2002e: 12).

Just as Bore and Howell had articulated modernisation and neighbourhood renewal within a banner of flourishing neighbourhoods and subsequently carved out an

agenda, Bore's response to service failure also revolved around flourishing neighbourhoods and the specific policy of devolution. As the quote above reflects this was a clear message to the press. Furthermore, Bore had also succeeded in hegemonising an equivalence between flourishing neighbourhoods and devolution.

For those who had spent many years advocating that Birmingham had transformed its economic base and image as a world city, the CPA result presented a potentially huge blow. It fuelled longstanding views, articulated most clearly in the 1980s, that services were suffering as a result of a preoccupation with prestige developments. However, rather than dismantling the renaissance project as a failure, actors turned to the arguments of a discourse of size; that Birmingham was too big to serve its communities and it needed to devolve. However, there were famous precedents of local authorities devolving almost everything to neighbourhoods in the 1980s such as Tower Hamlets or Walsall, only to return to centralised control after costs increased and service quality suffered. For Birmingham's modest form of devolution and localisation to come across as a 'radical' and capable of reversing the poor CPA result, it drew on the rationale of flourishing neighbourhoods that highlighted past achievements, acknowledged shortfalls and set out a vision for Birmingham as a city of flourishing neighbourhoods.

The versatility, or universality, of flourishing neighbourhoods is reflected in how it could be deployed in response to the mayor debate, the housing 'no vote' and the 'weak' CPA rating. By this point, flourishing neighbourhoods is a long way from the particularity of Atkinson's flourishing and wilting neighbourhoods ideal. I want to conclude this discussion of flourishing neighbourhoods as an empty signifier by exploring how actors were also seeking to reinstate this former particularity. For them, it was a battle of meaning.

## **Attempts to particularise an empty signifier**

Flourishing neighbourhoods was largely unquestioned, but never completely so. In the final part of this chapter exploring flourishing neighbourhoods as an empty signifier in action, I want to show how a group drew an identity from the flourishing neighbourhoods but also sought to particularise its meaning. The case in question is the formation of a coalition of mainly neighbourhood activists into ‘the flourishing neighbourhoods group’.

Founding members described this process of mobilisation as a reaction to the way in which the City Council had consulted and decided upon Birmingham’s nominated New Deal for Community (NDC) neighbourhoods. Under this New Labour policy, two neighbourhoods in the city would receive £50 million each over five years. One interviewee recalled how neighbourhood activists were invited into discuss the nomination on a Wednesday but on the previous Friday the decision to grant the funding was leaked to the press. I reproduce three passages from an interview with a founding member of the Flourishing Neighbourhood Group what was initially (and nominally) entitled the *Ad Hoc* group (I25, VC Actor, 2005):

“We were due to meet on a Wednesday...[but]...on the Friday before all over the Evening Mail [Newspaper] was ‘New Deal for Communities, Kings Norton to get 50 million Regeneration Money’. So we were all really angry because it is just City Council power game again! [They had]... already made the decision...But we met anyway...a big group from across the city

[Later] a smaller group met of about 20 people who said "we have had enough" In that [second, smaller] meeting there were people...from Birmingham Voluntary Services Council...Business... the University of Birmingham...Learning and Skills Council. And so we formed into this sort of group, a very loose...discussion group....A kind ‘of loose confederation of individuals who began calling ourselves the Ad Hoc group.

[We were] basically saying “this is just typical of the way you get a Big Brother Council who knows best, [who] has the infrastructure to ride rough shod over

any other partner and will always be powerful...you get a lot of rhetoric from the Council Leader but you do not get action, and it has got to change”.

Picking up on this comment of ‘a close confederation of individuals’ a primary concern of the founding members was how to sustain this group beyond this initial negation. As the second paragraph above reveals, there was a pride in the prestige of those who had joined together. The group was unusual as it was not simply neighbourhood regeneration workers or CSP elites but it was specifically ‘non-City Council’. Although this was a coalition with promise, the challenge was not so much about influence or credibility but about sustaining this plurality of actors and demands:

If you are a challenge group, but you don’t meet regularly...how do you find your focus? You know what you want to do but you haven’t got any money to do it. Every one is incredibly busy” (I25, VC Actor, 2005).

For the Ad Hoc group the initial focus was Albert Bore and his recent and emerging personal interest in neighbourhoods. However, having met with him they realised that “he did not have the power we thought he had” (I25, VC Actor, 2005). Their focus soon shifted. In this process the senior executives began to leave the group, as the quote above reflects, with the phrase, ‘every one is incredibly busy’.

The next set of quotes document the process by which the Ad Hoc group became the Flourishing Neighbourhood Group (FNG). Their focus was on neighbourhood regeneration and by 2002 they picked up on the flourishing neighbourhoods concept. As this chapter has already explored, by 2002 flourishing neighbourhoods had emerged as a central policy concern and organisations were using it in a variety of ways. The Ad Hoc group organised a seminar of (largely non-city council) actors to discuss this popular but emergent concept, described below as a meeting of ‘strategic people’. The narrative is of enlightenment, that is, a collective

belief in commitment to flourishing neighbourhoods and yet a shared sense of lack together with a normative pursuit of 'generosity'. Note how also in one of the quotes below community control excludes the role of councillors as community leaders.

So the second, big, big catalyst for change was the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. Imagine...the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund comes to the city: Big Money...but why should the Council decide how that should be spent? And particularly how could you give so much power to local councillors. Our big challenge was about Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. There was a huge opportunity to make neighbourhoods flourish and use that money to support this.

[We asked] how can we make things change? And probably, the key opportunity was around flourishing neighbourhoods that the Council made a big statement about that, but the practice was it was still a centrist approach.

And then we had a seminar on a Saturday in 2002. Which was basically...a conversation about...what does a flourishing neighbourhood look like? We were saying that there is something about humanity, that is missed by [flourishing neighbourhoods being simply about] 'clean and safe'...We had invited key individuals from PCTs, Council, Business, the Learning and Skills Council...You know "Strategic people" in the city who had an interest in or a responsibility for flourishing neighbourhoods.

The exercise in the morning [of the seminar] was [to try and] sum flourishing neighbourhoods up in three words, with different groups...we cut up newspapers and then came back together. This was when the Bishop of Aston...said "I think flourishing neighbourhoods is about generous". And...you could almost see light bulbs come over people's heads. And...the programme was put on one side and people were just discussing "generous".

When you get the Chief Executive of a PCT, talking to: a senior officer of the Council, a Bishop, the chief Executive of the Birmingham Voluntary Services Council and a couple of business people...all talking about "generosity" actually you know you have got something!

In order to get the funds we had a partnership agreement...So the Ad Hoc group became the Flourishing Neighbourhoods Group. And said actually the city Council is still over there on this. The challenge was to change the way they operate (125, VC Actor, 2005).

Therefore the FNG, a group without the institutional legitimacy of for instance the City Strategic Partnership, utilised the concept of flourishing neighbourhoods to articulate a group identity, to create a focus of for that identity and also to give the impression that they had overcome differences.

This exploration of the FNG has shown how difficult it can be for actors to influence the meaning of an empty signifier. The FNG effort should be seen as a counter hegemonic project about reordering the chains of equivalence around flourishing neighbourhoods. The chains they suggest are less about renaissance and size and more about generosity. The actors involved saw this as a window of opportunity as they interpreted the move to flourishing neighbourhoods as city elites entering their field of expertise (e.g. “we had an idea of how we could do this”).

### ***Conclusion***

This final case study chapter moved the debate on from how actors reiterate governing discourses to understanding the role of empty signifiers.

The starting point was to make sense of the multiple meanings of flourishing neighbourhoods. My approach is to say empty signifiers have severed particularist origins. I found this in the project of Dick Atkinson around neighbourhood management and decentralisation. I then showed how flourishing neighbourhoods caught the attention of city leaders ahead of and during a planning conference, Highbury 3, developing a vision for the future of the city. I demonstrated that the conference alone was not enough to sustain the credibility of this general equivalent, rather it required continued and repeated use for it to become common place in policy documents and local media. In the final section, I argued this general equivalent had taken on the role of an empty signifier. I showed how actors can employ an empty signifier to defend their projects and maintain a normal politics. Finally, I explored the attempts of a group to re-particularise the meaning of flourishing neighbourhoods. However I would add by the time they began this attempt, flourishing neighbourhoods was no longer ‘up for grabs’ in that way. Its particularist had been all but severed. It was an empty signifier.

This chapter concludes the case study. In the next and final chapter, I will return to the opening themes that introduced this thesis, summarise the argument in full, flag contributions, limitations and future research agendas.



## **CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION**

This conclusion is divided into three parts. The first summarises the argument of the case study and returns to the question of why ideas catch on and supplementary questions from the opening chapters. The second section sets out the contribution of the thesis and in the third I reflect on the process of research, the limitations of my approach and outline how this can be furthered as an intellectual project.

### ***8.1 The argument summarised***

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis I applied discourse theory to a case of urban governance in Birmingham. I began by developing a comprehensive and qualitative understanding of city level policy making in 2003 and 2004. I was interested in taken-for-granted policy ideas that I assumed to be operating within established governing discourses. In addition, I was interested in identifying the general equivalents, operating as floating and empty signifiers in these governing discourses. Each chapter focused on different aspects of my case. The first case study chapter, Chapter 5, introduced how governing discourses are relational and historic. In Chapter 6 I showed how governing discourses are also vulnerable to contingent events and counter hegemonic demands and demonstrated how actors respond by reiterating their governing discourses. Finally, having set out the conditions of possibility for policy ideas, Chapter 7 addressed the focal question of how ideas catch on, by exploring how demands become general equivalents and empty signifiers of

governance. I will now expand on each chapter before returning to the central questions guiding this thesis, developed in earlier chapters.

The case study analysis began in Chapter 5 where I outlined key identities and the two governing discourses of renaissance and size. I outlined five key aspects of renaissance as being:

1. The legacy of Birmingham's reputation of being the best governed city in the world
2. The legacy of Birmingham's strong symbolic leaders, established by Joseph Chamberlain
3. The maintenance of a sense of threat to Birmingham's renaissance
4. Continual reminders and equivalences between new projects and how these relate to renaissance
5. A narrative that Birmingham has been renewed, has experienced a renaissance, but that the project is incomplete

In order to show how governing discourses are relational, I set out a discourse of size that, like renaissance, is relatively unquestioned, but is somewhat more of a precarious set of diffuse demands. I suggested there were four sets of demands in the governing discourse of size, that:

1. Birmingham was a big and special case
2. Birmingham City Council was big and dominant
3. Birmingham was too big a unit to manage delivery of its services

#### 4. Birmingham was too big a unit to engage its people effectively

I showed how the relationship between these discourses during my time of enquiry was relatively stable, however interviews and previously published accounts revealed that an antagonistic relationship previously existed between renaissance demands and the discourse of size around city council dominance and ability to engage. My theoretic approach understood the new found stability as an indicator of hegemonic articulation. Such articulation is necessary to successfully rearticulate governing discourses.

By way of example, Chapter 6 provided a case study of how national demands can reorder the terrain and provoke hegemonic articulation to stabilise the governing discourse. The case in Chapter 6 outlined two sets of national demands to which actors in Birmingham had to respond:

1. Demands of local government modernisation – which included new choices for political executives, scrutiny of decision making, democratic engagement and collaboration
2. Demands of neighbourhood renewal – which identified that Birmingham, contrary to claims of renaissance, contained neighbourhoods of intense deprivation in terms of wealth, employment, health, environment, housing and education.

I have shown that these demands themselves do not contain any intrinsic threat or opportunity. Instead, more important is how actors in a city like Birmingham articulate demands within existing governing discourses, and make sense of these

demands thereby avoiding dislocation identity; identities that are dependent on discursive stability. I explored some of the strategies that governance actors can employ to articulate demands to fit within existing governing discourses. I used the case study of developing a decentralisation policy, 'Going Local', to demonstrate the process of articulating demands of modernisation and renewal. This involved garnering support for decentralisation through appeals to the discourse of size and renaissance, whilst at the same time articulating it as a response to demands of modernisation and neighbourhood renewal. This is also an illustration of my approach that focuses on the conditions of possibility rather than the policy programme itself.

In Chapter 7 I turned to explore the emergence and operation of general equivalents. My analysis had revealed the example of flourishing neighbourhoods as a rhetorically discrete demand that actors began using in documentation by 2001.

I traced the case of 'flourishing neighbourhoods' back to 2000, where it began as a demand of developing autonomous and cohesive neighbourhoods as a project of neighbourhood activists in the Birmingham's Balsall Heath. I then tracked the acceptance of flourishing neighbourhoods as it captured the imagination of consultants and political elites during the Highbury 3 conference in 2001. Flourishing neighbourhoods became the general equivalent for the conference and then a year later City Council strategic policy. In the following two years between 2002 and 2004 it was used by a broad array of policy actors. I gave the example of how the 'Flourishing Neighbourhood Group' adopted flourishing neighbourhoods as the general equivalent for their coalition of neighbourhood activists but sought to rearticulate and re-particularise its meaning towards a sense of generosity.

With regard to the question of why flourishing neighbourhoods ‘caught on’ over any other demand, the case shows the importance of strategically placed actors who sustained the presence of flourishing neighbourhoods in the months and years beyond the Highbury 3 conference. However, its credibility was of critical importance to the success of flourishing neighbourhoods. In Chapter 7 I argued this credibility can be understood in four ways as a fantasy closure, a fantasy repeated, a continually renewed legitimacy from events and actors involved and a equivocal capacity which drew few boundaries.

### **Returning to questions of ideas**

This thesis began by revisiting the ideational turn in public policy. It argued that for ideas to challenge the dominant mainstream of interests or institutions there remained several questions for clarification, the most important of which was: *why does a policy idea catch on?* In Chapter 2, I reviewed how ideational and other mainstream policy accounts answered this question. The process generated a series of supplementary questions for clarification around:

1. Unit of analysis (what is an idea?);
2. Capacity and framing of change (how do ideas suggest change?);
3. Cohesion (how do ideas glue coalitions or groups?); and
4. Agency (can agents consciously forge and foster ideas?),

It is these themes of conditions for, and process of, ideas catching on, concise of units of analysis, capacity, cohesion and agency, that have run throughout this thesis. In Chapter 3 I explored how discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe responds to these questions of ideas. I concluded that discourse theory had the potential to respond well

to each of the key themes of this thesis. In light of the case study of Birmingham above I will now revisit each of the thematic questions in turn.

My first consideration is to ask what is an idea? Through the review of how policy literature considers ideas, it became clear that there was not one clear conception of a unit of analysis. Ideas ranged from specific beliefs, trends or thoughts to being broader constellations of these elements in the form of frames, belief systems, paradigms or worldviews. This disparity in the literature is dissuasion enough for considering any attempt at synthesis. Discourse theory offered units of analysis in demands and discourse. This thesis was about exploring ideas that had ‘caught on,’ that is, achieved a notoriety within a given policy context. The counterparts for ‘ideas’ in discourse theory are then both hegemonic governing discourses and the general equivalent empty signifiers that maintain this hegemony. The task of the case study was to understand how these discourses and general equivalents achieve and maintain their position.

A second consideration was around the role of ideas in change. Institutional and frame accounts of public policy suggest that ideas as paradigms, ideologies, worldviews or belief systems maintain a path dependence of certain ideas and interests overtime. However, this presents a challenge for understanding why new ideas catch on. Discourse theory is structuralist, in that it acknowledges that all social practice takes place within structures of meaning, however it is also poststructuralist in that it says that all structures, no matter how stable, are vulnerable to dislocation because of the presence of a socially antagonistic ‘other’. In the case study of Birmingham this was demonstrated by focusing on the hegemony of the governing discourse ‘renaissance’. Throughout the case study chapters I discussed the continued challenges facing actors whose identities depended on successful reiteration of this

‘renaissance’ discourse. I showed how the empty signifiers ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ and earlier ‘renaissance’ aided the process of stabilising discourse the particularly in smoothing the potential antagonism between demands of renaissance and demands of size.

A third consideration in this thesis questioned the role of ideas in cohesion. In Chapter 2, I discussed the claims that ideas play a key role in cohering coalitions of actors through a shared cognition of a problem. I reported for Hajer, story lines are the glue that cohere a discourse coalition with a shared discursive affinity. For discourse theory the important logics are of equivalence, difference and fantasy. Through a logic of equivalence, empty signifiers, such as flourishing neighbourhoods in the case of Birmingham, assist in anchoring what is equivalent in a disparate set of demands (or the actors that utter those demands). Empty signifiers, through logics of difference and fantasy, reinforce the frontiers of the group. I have shown throughout the case how actors draw on empty signifiers to cohere their collective identities. For example, the ‘Ad Hoc’ group introduced in Chapter 7, described how they found their equivalence in ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ and renamed the group, the ‘Flourishing Neighbourhood Group’. This is an explicit example, more implicit examples include the City Strategic Partnership or the ‘moderniser’ councillors who employed the empty signifier of flourishing neighbourhoods to map over their differences.

However, not all those that share the use of certain rhetoric should be understood as part of a discourse coalition. The symbol of ‘flourishing neighbourhoods’ had a number of interpretations, some of which maintained their particularistic origins from the neighbourhood activists in Balsall Heath. The challenge of the Flourishing Neighbourhood Group to the predominant definition of flourishing neighbourhoods reminds us that ideas are political; that ideas ‘whose time

has come' will, despite their predominance, be questioned by somebody somewhere. However, the failure of the Flourishing Neighbourhood Group to arrest the meaning of flourishing neighbourhoods says something of the inertia and difficulty of rhetorical rearticulation of a demand once it becomes an empty signifier. That said, like any discourse an empty signifier is always vulnerable to dislocation.

This discussion of the challenge to flourishing neighbourhoods links to the question of 'agency', the fourth supplementary question of ideas in this thesis. I noted earlier that rational accounts of public policy are unremitting in their understanding that it is interests, not ideas, that shape human action. Furthermore, I noted how rationalist accounts argue that actors are self-interested, purposeful agents who make rational choices to maximise their perceived preferences. Ideational accounts of public policy disagree arguing that any interests are grounded in ideas, but fail to provide an alternative explanation of what drives human action. Discourse theory responds by suggesting actors have failed structural identities and action is understood as their attempt to forge, maintain and protect this identity. Their values of whether they agree or disagree will continually modify as they integrate and absorb emerging contingent and counter hegemonic demands into the discourses they maintain. I suggested above that their agency is heightened during dislocation, where systems of established meaning break down and become 'up for grabs'. The case study of Birmingham did not contain the paradigm-shift 'dislocation' that follows revolution, natural disasters or war. Instead it was a case of how actors maintain their projects, the status quo; the taken for granted. In the process, I showed that when faced with potentially destabilising demands, actors draw upon established rhetoric to protect the governing discourse, and in the process their own identity and political legacy, from dislocation. The most prominent example throughout this case was of



the Council Leader Albert Bore. I showed through all three case study chapters how he announced new projects, changes of direction and framed problems with reference to renaissance. Renaissance functioned both to sediment a previous successful legacy of city centre, but also to ground the challenge ahead to return to the status of the ‘best governed city in the world’ and the Chamberlain identity that came with it.

The final question to address here is the overall question itself of why ideas catch on. In many respects this was always a question to provoke and problematise the ability of ideational accounts and to comprehensively explore the role of ideas. The accounts I reviewed in Chapter 2 offer explanations which include something of the quality of the idea itself, that it has a ‘stickiness’ (Gladwell 2000), or a crispness (Hajer 2003) or virus like quality (Richardson 2000). Additionally the presence of actors also matters in retaining, brokering or promoting these ideas. Finally, there are critical points where ideas matter, or as Kingdon describes ‘windows of opportunity’, where problems and politics align and policies are adopted. Discourse theory concurs with these explanations but adds the requirement of actors to actively articulate demands into becoming general equivalents and later empty signifiers for a range of demands. Yet for actors to note these potential general equivalents they judge the demand on its credibility.

I suggested through the case that flourishing neighbourhoods was credible because it represented the *fantasy* of complete neighbourhoods, but also the completed city. The renaissance was incomplete because ‘wilting’ neighbourhoods remained. Flourishing neighbourhoods represented what was missing in renaissance. But it should be noted it carried with it the weight of *legitimacy* from the Highbury 3 conference, following from previous Highbury conferences that helped constitute the renaissance process. Finally a range of equivalents could be inscribed because both

‘flourishing’ and ‘neighbourhood’ could accommodate a bewildering range of demands, as the figure 3.1 and repeated as 7.1 demonstrated, in other words, it had an *equivocal capacity*.

## **8.2 Contributions of this thesis**

With this the thesis I am offering the following contributions in three areas of concern: the application of discourse theory to questions of ideas, the empirical development and application of discourse theory and the standing of ideational accounts in mainstream public policy analysis.

### **Contribution 1. The Application of Discourse Theory to Questions of Ideas**

The first contribution of this thesis is the translation of discourse concepts into a framework sufficient to enable us to ask questions of ideas as governing discourses and general equivalents. Laclau and Mouffe’s key arguments around discourse, hegemony, social antagonism, dislocation and the split subject provide a comprehensive account of the social and political world. However, in this thesis it was necessary to adapt these key arguments into a framework suitable for application of policy ideas. The framework developed in this thesis is concerned with the analysis of three varieties of discourse: identity discourses, programmatic discourses and governing discourses.

Furthermore, I have been able to address the central question of why an idea catches on, as ideas can be understood as both governing discourses and general equivalents that represent the range of demands within a governing discourse. Discourse theory suggests the process by which these general equivalents come to be. I have shown, with the case of flourishing neighbourhoods, how a demand around neighbourhood autonomy can have a credibility as equivocal for a range of demands.

This credibility was in how it symbolised a fantasy closure. I demonstrated how strategically placed actors fostered this general equivalent over time to the point where it became an empty signifier. I illustrated how as an empty signifier, actors used flourishing neighbourhoods to forge alliances, mask over differences and defend against dislocation. In addition, I found actors will continue to engage in battles to hegemonise meaning.

## **Contribution 2. The Empirical Development and Application of Discourse Theory**

The development of discourse theory cannot be a philosophical process alone. As I argued in Chapter 3, there are a growing number of studies developing discourse theory through a process of empirical application. This thesis has contributed to the discussion of understanding of why a certain demand becomes an general equivalent and how general equivalents become empty signifiers. There are several previous examples of empty signifiers but little consideration of how they came to be.

In addition, this thesis shows how discourse theory can problematise consensus. The starting position for this thesis was agreement rather than antagonism. This was flagged early in the fieldwork with a broad support for decentralisation (Going Local) policy and widespread acknowledgment of city centre renaissance. This project is offered as a response to Torfing's (2005) request for more applications of discourse theory to 'hard topics' including governance and public policy. This thesis acknowledges that discourse theory explains antagonism between two social movements, but also demonstrates discourse theory is also well suited to problematising consensus.

### **Contribution 3. The Standing of ideational Accounts in Mainstream Policy Analysis**

This thesis is also a contribution to literature that values the role of ideas in public policy. In many ways this thesis is sympathetic to the ideational critique that it is essentially ideas that drive human action and that rational interests or institutions are grounded first in ideas rather than in any *a priori* structures. As I found in Chapter 2, what ideational accounts lacked was a robust response to mainstream accounts of public policy which asked if human motivation was driven not by interests or structured in institutions then what? This was revealed through asking of this literature ‘why do ideas catch on’, and a number of further questions around what is the basic unit of analysis in understanding ideas, what is the role of ideas in change, or in the cohesion of groups and at what point can agents matter. These are challenging questions for the ideational and interpretative models I reviewed in Chapter 2. However, as I demonstrated throughout Chapter 3 and the remainder of the thesis, discourse theory, when applied to ideas in public policy, is well suited to these challenging questions. A contribution of this thesis is to show how ideational accounts can be bolstered by applying discourse theory as an alternative to interests and institutions as explanations for ideas in public policy.

I have has shown how discourse theory can be applied to understand public policy and how actors engage in the reiteration of governing discourses. This thesis translates into a set of questions for the evaluation of taken-for-granted policy. There are three sets of questions that may be of use:

#### 1. For Analysis

- What governing discourses are structuring the process?
- What general equivalents/empty signifiers are making this discourse possible?

## 2. Of Process

- What were the particularist origins of the idea before it became a general equivalent?
- Why is that demand a credible general equivalent?
- Why did that governing discourse become predominant?

## 3. Of Implications

- What is the status of those who fostered that particularism previous to it becoming a general equivalent? Whose identity is dependent on this governing discourse?
- Whose identity is enhanced and whose is marginalised as a result of this governing discourse?
- What groups are made possible as a result of these governing discourses and general equivalents?
- What projects are made possible as a result of these governing discourse and general equivalents?

The examples in this thesis give clues to how policy analysts may want to begin asking these questions.

### ***8.3 Reflections, limitations, prescriptions***

Having outlined the argument and contribution of the thesis, this final section reflects on the research process, limitations and future research agendas.

In beginning to reflect on the process of developing this thesis, I want to recall some of the key quotes I encountered during this research process. There are three I

want to share here. The first is from Lukes (1974) whose seminal work on Power was an important starting point for this work. The particular quote that sticks with me is:

‘the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place’ (Lukes 1974: 23).

This is an important quote as it spoke directly to my concerns about taken-for-granted, that, if policy ideas are unquestioned, what sort of power structures are at play.

The second quote follows from this, it was from one of my first interviewees at a point where my ideas were raw and I was developing my research design. Following on from Lukes, I had been reading about hegemonic articulation when a voluntary sector officer told me:

“I’ mean let’s get one thing right, Birmingham as a city is a very, very successful city no doubt about that. If anybody tells you otherwise don’t believe them, and I am prepared to throw facts and figures at that. The city is doing very well” (I28, Voluntary Sector Manager, 2004)

The certainty and veracity of this statement stuck with me for the remainder of the interview and the days that followed. It was at this point that I thought I may have found a governing discourse worthy of further investigation, although it was not for several more months that I began to make the patterns using transcripts and documents. This discussion of analysis links to the third quote I want to share which I came across from Forster, whilst reading Dvora Yanow:

‘How do I know what I think, until I see what I have to say’ (Yanow 1996: 2, attributed to E.M Forster 1927).

If there is one thing I have learnt from the process of developing this thesis, it has been that analysis is not a discrete stage somewhere between fieldwork and writing up. This process of developing a comprehensive and qualitative

understanding of governance has been a continual process of analysis and reflection, and each draft brought new insights and themes. Applying discourse theory in this way is an intensive, continual but immensely rewarding experience.

It is rewarding because as a theoretical approach, it can be applied to yourself, your project, your relationship with supervisors and your support network. Discourse theory reveals motivation underlying a research project that is to articulate a series of disparate entities as equivalent, to mark out others as different and to mask over the lack that prevents its full realisation with logics of fantasy fullness.

Whilst this project has responded to the stagnation of ideational accounts of public policy and the empirical application of discourse theory, it marks the start rather than the end of the process. Below I will acknowledge some of the limitations and puzzles that have resulted from this approach.

The case of Birmingham proved to be rich with examples of hegemonic discourse in action, with examples of actors engaged in the articulation of a hegemonic project over time to evade dislocation. This process provided the necessary empirical context to understand how ideas as general equivalents catch on. However, this case did not contain examples of dislocation in the sense of a complete displacement of a governing discourse. My case demonstrated some of the genealogical roots of the renaissance discourse but lacked the data to document the process of it becoming hegemonic. A longitudinal project over a decade or more on perhaps a scale smaller than a city is required to show how and why governing discourses catch on.

This thesis has demonstrated the applicability of discourse theory to questions of taken-for-granted public policy ideas and their emergence. I argue that incomplete

discourses, constituted in social antagonism and constituting human motivation, can be understood as the fruitless pursuit of a full and complete identity and can ask revealing and refreshing questions of, in this case, urban governance. However, some of the most important units of analysis for this application: demands, empty signifiers and general equivalents, are also the least well developed in the discourse theory literature. There are at least two questions to consider. First is to ask at what point a general equivalent becomes an ‘empty signifier’ and second, if the original particular demand is severed, what becomes of the original demand?

This application has gone some way to show how analysts can identify governing discourses and the general equivalents that cohere the chain of demands that constitute such discourses. However, ultimately this is one case. At no point have I suggested this case is typical or findings can be generalised to other cities or policy contexts. Instead, I encourage scholars to continue to apply these questions and categories to other contexts. Towns and cities are well suited to this kind of enquiry, as such cases will be hegemony-led rather than following dislocation or a policy sector. Future research should continue to develop discourse theory as a means to problematise the taken-for-granted in addition to understanding unrest and social movements.

The methods I have used have sought to capture the use of rhetoric by actors with in-depth interviews and have traced concepts overtime with newspaper databases and document archives. The result is a comprehensive and qualitative analysis of urban governance with a focus on the role of individuals in maintaining certain taken-for-granted ideas and the fostering of new ideas to complement this pursuit. There are limitations to this approach. In addition to the longitudinal limitation I suggested above, there remains a focus on language. Political discourse theorists favour the



categories of Laclau and Mouffe as their scope is beyond a preoccupation with language such as that found in linguistic discourse analysis. For example discourse theorists argue discourse is more than language but is also practices, yet in documenting these discourses, the methods remain dependent on quotations. Furthermore, the analysis of the symbolic form of the empty signifier, as in the case of flourishing neighbourhoods, privileges its linguistic or rhetorical attributes. In response, future work needs to innovate with methods to go beyond linguistic forms.

There are questions here about how much the researcher matters. Some might say that the researcher biases the research, bringing with them a series of ways of seeing the world and the discourses they determine. The discourses we find in our research belong in the research. It might be that you could member-check to see if interviewees recognise the discourse. Member-checking involves going back to interviewees to see if they see the analysis as ‘true’ or accurate. But this then asks interviewees to be able to step outside of their structural constraints and give an overview of the discourses that constitute them. I argue they cannot, and this is why I did not employ such a method. Instead, what matters is how the identification of governing discourses leads to new questions being asked of a case, and taken-for-granted equivalences problematised. That said, a great deal hinges on the researcher to pick out what is tacit and unfamiliar.

In addition, my approach has focused on the role of actors and their articulation of equivalence, difference and fantasy. Quotes from interviews and documents show this well, but there remains a distance from the cognitive processes at play. There is scope for greater intensity of the analysis to combine the interpretative work in this thesis with analysis of inter-subjectivity amongst key individuals, this taking into account how they understand what is, what was, what

should be and asking them to categorise other actors as friend, adversary or antagonist. It warrants looking to other intensive approaches of studying inter-subjectivity and asking whether there are any methods that go beyond analysis of documents and interviews.

For instance, Q methodology is a method of inverted factor analysis as a measure of inter-subjectivity, devised by William Stephenson (1953) and championed in political analysis by Steven Brown (1980). It is an intensive method that involves actors sorting statements into a forced distribution. Factor analysis can then reveal patterns of subjectivity revealed in 'factors', where those loading on factor 1 might strongly favour statements x y and z and simultaneously strongly dislike a b and c. Whereas those loading on factor 2 might favour y and z and a but not b and c. The statements (usually between 30 and 60) are drawn from the volume of debate on a particular topic. This debate can be captured through transcribing interviews, group discussions or documentary sources. Scholars including John Dryzek have already shown how Q methodology can be used alongside a discourse approach (e.g. Dryzek and Holmes 2002). However, I am unaware of it being applied it alongside discourse theory of the Laclau and Mouffe variety.

In applying Q methodology alongside discourse theory there are a range of possibilities. The factors are produced from the factor analysis, rather than the final discourses, but could be used support the identification of discourse and flag up new patterns that might go unnoticed during a purely qualitative analysis. In addition, there is scope to apply the statements several times to the same actor to explore not only likes-dislikes but perhaps questions of: 'how was it done previously?', 'how does actor x understand how it is done?', 'how is it done currently?', and importantly for discourse theory 'what would be the ideal way of doing it?'. This could be a

systematic measure of the subjective ‘lack’ between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. The interview that followed this could then focus on why they chose the statements they did.

## **Conclusion**

Ideas become taken-for-granted in public policy. There is a point where what was once contested and political becomes normal and part of the system. This thesis has shown, through the application of discourse theory to urban politics, how and why such ideas achieve such a status. Ideas are not complete fixed entities but have precarious meanings that are stabilised in forms of discourse. I have shown, with examples of renaissance and size, how the identity of policy actors depends on their ability to reiterate governance discourses and general equivalents over time. They do so through the articulation of equivalences, differences and fantasies. There are certain ideas that have a credibility in how they can represent a whole chain of demands and in turn become the general equivalent for a discourse. I demonstrated this through the case of flourishing neighbourhoods as a general equivalent that became an empty signifier for governance in Birmingham.

Discourse theory applied to hegemonic policy bolsters ideational understanding of public policy without the need to resort to institutional or rational accounts. In an age where politicians argue the need for consensus, and where those who cannot identify look to the extremes, we need to be able to understand hegemony. In an age where the attention of media and policy analysts focuses on crises and breakdowns in normal politics, yes we need to understand the drivers for dislocation, but we must also take account of the mundane, the taken-for-granted and the usual. Hegemonic policy analysis.

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# APPENDICIES

## ***Appendix A: Documents Used***

All documents used in the preparation of this thesis are arranged by category:

1. Birmingham City Council Documents;
2. Voluntary and Community Sector Related Documents;
3. Other Birmingham Related Documents;
4. Newspaper Articles

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## **Appendix B: Interviews**

### **Councillors and Former Councillors**

- Cllr Albert Bore, Leader of Birmingham City Council, 6<sup>th</sup> February, 6/02/2004
- Cllr Catharine Grundy, Labour member for Brandwood and Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2004
- Cllr Andrew Coulson, former Labour member Selly Oak and Cabinet Member for Regeneration, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2004
- Cllr Andy Howell, former Labour member for Moseley and Kings Norton and Deputy Leader BCC, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2004
- Cllr Albert Bore, Leader of Labour Group and member for Ladywood, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2005
- Cllr Chris Kirk, former Labour member for Moseley and Chair of General Purposes Committee in the 1980s, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2005
- Cllr Theresa Stewart, former Labour member and Council Leader 1993-1999, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2005

### **Officers of Birmingham City Council**

- Dave Carter, Planning Officer, BCC, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2003
- Lin Homer, Chief Executive, BCC, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2004
- Dave Howl, Senior Policy Officer, BCC, Several during 2003 and 2004
- Jagwant Johal, Officer in Leisure Culture and Sport, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2003
- Michael Lyons, former Chief Executive, BCC, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2003
- Kevin Mitchell, Environment Officer, BCC, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2003
- Jamie Morris, Deputy Chief Executive, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2003,
- Lesley Poulton, Head of Policy, BCC, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2003,
- Tom Tierney, Partnerships Manager, Department of Education BCC, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2003
- Andrew Whetnall, Director of Policy and Performance, BCC, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2004
- Tony Smith, Senior Policy Officer, BCC, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2004

### **Voluntary Community Sector**

- Mark Guest, Chair of Birmingham Association of Neighbourhood Forums, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2004
- Mohammed Mahboob, Birmingham Race Action Partnership officer, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2004
- Terry Potter, Birmingham Voluntary Services Council, Head of Research, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2003
- Mohammed Shafique, Sparkbrook Neighbourhood Forum, Birmingham Association of Neighbourhood Forums, B:CEN, 15<sup>th</sup> December 2003
- Paul Slatter, Director of Birmingham Community Empowerment Network, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2004
- Clive Wright, Manager of Groundwork Birmingham, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2003

- Dr. Dick Atkinson, Chief Executive of Balsall Heath Forum, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2005
- Fred Rattley, Birmingham Diocese Community Regeneration Officer, Chair of the Flourishing Neighbourhoods Group, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2006

### **Other Relevant Policy Actors**

- Sophie Churchill, Chief Executive of Regen-West Midlands, and former Chief Executive of City Pride, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2003
- Michael Clarke, Pro VC of University of Birmingham and member of City Strategic Partnership board, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2004
- Jane Lutz, Lecturer in Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham, member of Birmingham City of Culture Bid, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2003
- Naomi Rees, City Strategic Partnership/Birmingham Strategic Partnership Manager, 20<sup>th</sup> January 2004
- John Stewart, Professor of Local Government and Consort to former Leader and Mayor Cllr Theresa Stewart, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2003
- Charles Landry, Director of Comedia and organiser of Highbury 3 conference, 4<sup>th</sup> January 2005



## Appendix C: Flourishing neighbourhoods definition references

### Flourishing neighbourhoods constitute places where... With References

Able to manage change (I26 VCS 2004)	Community Leadership (BANF 2003c)	Happy to bring up children (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	Low crime (CSP 2002b)	Residents Matter (CSP 2002b)
Accessible jobs (CSP 2002b)	Communities taking charge (I46 VCS 2003).	Harmony (CSP 2002b; KPMG 2003; Bore 2002)	Low Unemployment (Birmingham Post 10/12/03)	Residents fulfil/Realise potential (Howell 2003a; I39 cllr 2004)
Active Citizenship (BANF 2003c)	Compassion (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	High Educational achievement (CSP 2002b)	Meaningful involvement of citizens (BANF 2003b)	Responsive Services (CSP 2002b; Bore 2002)
Active communities (I27 VCS 2003)	Confident about life (Homer 2002)	Home, seen as (I39 Cllr 2004)	A "My Constituency Culture" (Post 29/07/03)	Safe (CSP 2002b; KPMG 2003; Bore 2002; Flourishing Neighbourhood Group 2003)
Affirmation (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	Decent homes (Cllr Jenkinson in Birmingham Post 31/0307)	Hopeful about the future (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	Neighbourhood Management (I26 VCS 2003)	Sense of Pride (Cllr Coulson in Groundwork 2003)
Attractive (Cllr Coulson in Groundwork 2002)	Devolved Power (Birmingham Post 16/06/03)	Human beings flourish (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	No racial barriers (I28 VCS 2004)	Belonging (Cllr Coulson in Groundwork 2003)
Benefits Everyone (Cllr Bore in Birmingham Post 7/2/03)	Dignity (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	Independent (I26 VCS 2003)	Open structures for involvement (I28 VCS 2004)	Social Capital (Whitton 2003)
Better Services (Whitton 2003)	Distinctive (Jones 2003)	Innovation of the city centre, draws on (I41 Officer 2003)	Participation (I39 Cllr 2004)	Skills Developed and utilised (Homer 2002)
Better to <i>live</i> (B:CEN 2002b)	Economic Prosperity/prosperous (CSP 2002b; KPMG 2003; Bore 2002; I41 Officer 2003).	Invigoration from the city centre (I41 Officer 2003)	Participation in further education (City College Birmingham 2003)	Say in the future (Bore 2002)
Care about the environment (Mark Jackson in Birmingham Post 17/03/03)	Elderly Feel Safe (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	Interconnected Services (CSP 2002b)	People take an interest (BANF 2003b)	Sustainable Communities (I26 VCS 2004)
Civic Pride (Cllr Bore in Birmingham Post 0703/03)	Equality of life chances (I28 VCS 2004)	Investment in suburbs (Birmingham Friends of the Earth 2002; Keith Hill MP in the Times 7/11/03)	Pride in their environment (Homer in Birmingham Post 03/04/03, Cllr Ward in Birmingham Mail 10/12/03)	Thriving Community (KPMG 2003)
Civic society (BRAP 2003)	Feel safe (Homer 2002)		Proud to live (CSP 2002a; Bore 2002; Jones 2003)	Trust (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)
Citizen led community planning (Ali 2002)	Flourishing			Vibrant (Jones 2003)
Clean (Flourishing				Well managed

Neighbourhoods Group 2003; Coulson in Groundwork 2003)	shopping centres (I29 Cllr 2004)	Involved in decision making (B:cen 2003a)	Quality Housing (CSP 2002b)	services (CSP 2002b)
Choose to stay (CSP 2002a)	Forgiveness (Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	Library Services (Birmingham Post 05/08/03)	Racial Equality (CSP 2002b)	Want to live (Howell 2003e; Homer 2002; Cllr Coulson in Birmingham Post 03/02/03; Cllr Jenkinson in Birmingham Post 11/03/03)
Choose to live (CSP 2002a)	Generous/Generosity (C22; Rev. Weaver in Birmingham Post 18/07/03)	Live and Work in safety (Coulson 2002)	Real Involvement (KPMG 2003)	
Collaborative Services (BANF 2003c)	Happy most of the time (Homer 2003)	Local Voice (BANF 2002b)	Residents Have a say (CSP 2002b)	Want to work (Cllr Coulson in Birmingham Post 03/02/03)
Community Cohesion (BRAP 2003; Cllr Jenkinson in Birmingham Post 11/03/03)		Localisation (I23 Officer 2003)		Want to invest (Cllr Coulson in Birmingham Post 03/02/03)
Community groups work together (BANF 2003b)		Locally responsible for services (I27 VCS 2003)		Well Being (Cllr Coulson in Birmingham Post 05/08/03)