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# Active citizenship and the governmentality of local lesbian and gay politics\*

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Political Geography 25 (2006) 921 — 943

November 2006

## Not Published Version

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationship between new forms of speakability and continuing unthinkability in the context of British local government lesbian and gay work, particularly post-1997. The paper argues new municipal speech acts ushered in progressive modes of sexual citizenship; at the same time, local government's refusal to think hard, deeply or critically, limited the modes of active citizenship made possible. The paper addresses the easing out of active citizenship through an analysis of local government's self-care and its intensification of firewalls which restricted the possibility of certain non-state forces guiding from 'a distance'.

**Keywords:** Lesbian and gay; Local government; Citizenship; Governmentality; Sexual politics

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## Introduction

At first glance, the promotion of lesbian and gay equality fits squarely within a sexual citizenship paradigm oriented towards greater inclusiveness and parity for historically excluded and disadvantaged constituencies. While sexual citizenship can be read in many ways, to the extent we think of it as a project of empowerment, anti-discriminatory measures for lesbians and gay men seem central to a programme aimed at giving non-heterosexual people rights and civic membership. And in pursuit of this reformist sexual citizenship agenda, local government in Britain has played a pioneering role. Since the 1980s, it has developed diversity and equality policies aimed at lesbians and gay men; since the mid-1990s, these have been extended to include bisexual and transgendered people as well.

Yet, alongside this picture of progress is another, more critical impression. This second perspective questions how we understand sexual citizenship and how we understand municipal practices in this area. While it recognises the value of new governmental speech acts, which rearticulate the relationship between sexuality and citizenship, anchoring communal belonging in liberal tolerance rather than heterosexual monogamy, such speech acts are not sufficient in themselves to advance a progressive form of active sexual citizenship.

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\* David Bell, Jon Binnie, Jean Carabine, Jon Goldberg-Hiller, Emily Grabham, Didi Herman, Surya Monro and the two anonymous referees of Political Geography provided enormously helpful and challenging comments; thanks also to Lucy Barnes for her research assistance. Research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, award number 000-23-9293; my use of the pronoun 'we' indicates the research team of myself, Jean Carabine and Surya Monro.

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How British local government, post-1997, undermined active citizenship through its engagement with sexuality is this paper's focus. My analysis centres on the creation of new blockages or 'firewalls' that impeded the capacity of counter-normative agendas to be advanced through local government. These firewalls need to be placed within a wider context, cognizant of the power of other agencies and bodies to structure local government practice<sup>1</sup>; however, my concern in this paper is with how local government took ownership of these wider pressures, incorporating them into its project of self-governance and deportment e by which I mean how local government managed itself to produce a particular self-impression of what it was, what it could do, and how it must act.

Municipal practices of deportment are not new; however, their form and content evolved between the 1980s and 1990s to privilege new norms of efficiency, performance and managerialism. The development of these norms has been extensively explored elsewhere (eg, Newman, 2001), and I shall not focus on them here. Rather, I want to explore one particular element of local government's changing deportment e its deployment of limited thinkability or irrationality. Irrationality appears as the antithesis of impressive state practice; however, it is often deployed e strategically and otherwise. My argument is that, in the context of Britain in the late 1990s, this deployment largely worked to undermine active sexual citizenship through producing and maintaining policy and practical firewalls that stopped the circulation of a more challenging sexual politics. However, irrationality and limited thinkability are always uncertain in their effects. Thus, here they also opened up possibilities for alternative constituencies to guide from a distance, thanks to local government's refusal to directly challenge an alternative sexual politics. To develop this line of argument, I shall draw loosely on the work of Michel Foucault (1983, 1988a, 1991) and more recent governmentality scholars (Dean, 1999, 2002; Legg, 2005; Rose, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Rose, O'Malley, & Valverde, 2006; Valverde, 1996). Reading social freedom as a means of rule, governmentality analysis poses an interesting challenge for those understandings of sexual citizenship that see it simply and positively as increasing sexual minorities' rights and membership. From a governmentality perspective, sexual citizenship becomes a mode of governance e a way of ruling through techniques of inclusion, empowerment and recognition, offered in this case to lesbians and gay men (see generally Foucault, 1988b, 12e13; Rose, 1999, 95). But does this mean freedom is no more than an illusion e perhaps the ultimate kind of political scam? It may be that we can read extending social/political rights

<sup>1</sup> Local government was subject to the dispersal of its powers to other private and quasi-public bodies, while its own actions were restructured through central government legislation.

and membership to sexual minorities as a positive move towards greater equality as well as a technique of governing. However, my analysis in this paper does not turn on this balance. My interest, rather, is in exploring a mode of citizenship that seeks to contest and go beyond what the state offers. Active citizenship, as I am using it, identifies the capacity of non-state agendas to permeate, influence and guide institutional practice. While these unauthorized (or partially authorized) agendas are undoubtedly shaped by the institutional terrain on which they struggle, and by the discourses that they face (and often incorporate), they cannot be seen simply as a means of state forces governing at a distance.

In the discussion that follows, these lines of argument will be fleshed out. I start by briefly exploring how sexual citizenship relates to the paradigm of active citizenship being utilized here. I then introduce British local government developments in the sexual orientation field, highlighting the change between first generation endeavors of the 1980s, and second generation work a decade later. From here, the paper progresses to explore developments more analytically, focusing on the new modes of 'speakability' brought into play. It then situates these new speech-act performances in the context of local government's changing department and self-care. One key dimension of this department, I argue, was the establishment of firewalls e organizational, cultural, affective and resource-based impediments e which limited counter-normative or otherwise unauthorized projects from circulating through local government's channels of communication and action. Finally, the paper considers the place of limited reasoning and thinkability as a means of restricting the flow and impact of local government's new sexual speech. However, while restricted thinkability did prove an epistemic firewall, it also worked simultaneously to enable sexual initiatives to slip around some of the other firewalls in place. Whether such slipperiness contributed to local government's self-care, even as it helped secure a more active sexual citizenship, remains an open question.

#### Active citizenship and domain walls

In the last decade, an extensive literature on sexual citizenship has emerged (eg, Bell & Binnie, 2000; Richardson, 2000; Stychin, 2003; Weeks, 1998). While some authors, such as David Bell and Jon Binnie, have been careful to draw the terms of sexual citizenship broadly, arguing that the key question is how sexual citizenship is experienced, much work in this field assumes sexual citizenship to be a good thing. These claims focus on the growing status or incorporation of sexual minorities, particularly lesbians and gay men (eg, Isin & Wood, 1999, 85), through three processes: gaining rights and responsibilities (Kinsman, 1996; Richardson, 2000; Stychin, 2003), status and recognition (Bell, 1995), and incorporation within the polity or society as full members (eg, McGhee, 2004; Weeks, 1998).

Local government in Britain provides one key site for understanding the development of a politics of sexual inclusivity and greater equality. Yet, while municipal developments seem to map onto a new, more progressive sexual citizenship, my aim in this paper is to trouble this equivalence. In particular, I argue that new more liberal speech acts co-existed with a decline in active political engagement on the part of alternative sexual forces. In other words, a governmental project of inclusivity worked against (or at least co-existed with the growing impediment of) sexual citizenship as a form of active citizenship. This argument lies at the paper's heart; I will therefore outline my use of active citizenship in some more detail. The emergence of new 'registers' of citizenship e consumption-based, cultural, cosmopolitan, global, environmental e challenges perspectives that restrict citizenship to the attainment of prescribed and static rights or construe it as a universalised form of belonging. Several

writers have explored sexual citizenship as an ongoing kind of practice or ‘doing’ (eg, Hubbard, 2001, 59), while work outside the sexual citizenship field has highlighted the importance of activity, participation and, even, adversarial relations to thinking about modern citizenship. Tully (1999, 170e171), for instance, argues that people are constituted as citizens through their participation in various forms of dialogue or negotiation over the exercise of power. It is engagement in political games, including the capacity to call into question and modify the rules of the game, not rights and duties which, Tully (1999, 169) argues, produces citizenship. Clearly, citizenship as a conceptual framework cannot be pinned down to a single ‘true’ meaning. For the purposes of this paper, with its focus on the limits and possibilities of political engagement, I want to approach citizenship from the angle of active citizenship, that is, as involving collective acts of participation and political guidance.<sup>2</sup> This does not necessarily entail overt struggle, conflict and competition, although it includes them. More generally, active citizenship describes the ongoing interplay or push-and-pull between social marked constituencies and political, state or social bodies (see Young, 1998), as the former seeks to advance new, not fully authorised, agendas.

In reading active citizenship in this way, my use of the term significantly differs from its usage within recent British Conservative and Labour governmental discourse. There, active citizenship rhetorically flourished, if only for a short while, having acquired very particular meanings relating to consumer complaint, on the one hand, and voluntary, individualised altruism, on the other (see Chandler, 2001; Kearns, 1995; Smith, 1995, 192; Sullivan, 2001). Active citizenship, as I am using it, does not require citizens to ‘give something back’ (Kearns, 1995, 159), or to take responsibility for other’s well being alongside their own in ways aligned with governmental thinking. Rather, I want to read active citizenship as a process of engaged activity in furtherance of a political or normative agenda. Let me highlight three elements underpinning my usage. First, active citizenship concerns attempts to control, guide, shape, or otherwise inflect governmental and social practices.

<sup>3</sup> This may occur in open deliberative forums or the terrain usually centred in discussion of community involvement with governmental politics; it also incorporates the multiple other ways in which influence, governance or guidance occur, for instance, through the deployment of resources or in the exercise of disciplinary, coercive or ideological power (Cooper, 1995; see also Brown, 1997). In other words, and this is crucial to thinking about external forces’ capacity to imprint from a distance,<sup>4</sup> active citizenship does not require convergence around a meeting table of different sector interests (although this explicit deliberative process is what liberal scholars and political actors often emphasise). Active citizenship is also, therefore, not a mode of governance in which the ‘community’ are impelled or incited to govern themselves (see Cruikshank, 1994; Rose, 1996a). While governing through community provides a way of understanding local government’s new speech acts in this field (and a way of understanding its limited willingness to think), active

<sup>2</sup> I do not want to suggest that rights, recognition and inclusion ought to be contingent on the performance of active citizenship (although we might read citizenship’s de jure forms as the sediment active citizenship generates).

<sup>3</sup> The ‘citizenship’ dimension to active citizenship is two-pronged: hailing oneself as a social participant or player, and framing one’s actions and agendas according to generalisable values, such as justice, fairness, equity and belonging. It can therefore be undertaken by individuals or groups, since the terms upon which one hails one’s self and one’s claims provides the social context.

<sup>4</sup> Within governmentality studies, the concept of “governing at a distance” is particularly important to highlighting the mediated and indirect ways, often involving expertise, moral inculcation and self-care through which subjects are ruled (see Rose, 1996a, 1996b; see also Cooper, 1998; Higgins, 2004). In my discussion here, I twist the concept to explore how social forces can advance projects beyond the state’s authorization through indirect means.

citizenship, with its agonistic agenda, here disrupts - or at least challenges local government to go further in its incorporation of lesbian and gay politics.

Second, active citizenship depends on recognition by others. I therefore exclude from my discussion those transgressive acts that remain invisible or completely ignored in this instance by state bodies. Likewise, I discount those route-ways and opportunities governments make available for collective participation, in turn ignored by social constituencies. The third element highlights the most important dimension to active citizenship practice explored in this paper. This concerns the way active citizenship creates, mobilises and organises the linkages between different policy sectors, allowing constituencies and agendas to impact on governmental practice from a distance, and to impact on social action by extending the state's reach. In this paper, my focus is on the institutional blockages that confront counter-normative agendas. However, not all practices of active citizenship aim to remove obstacles in order to enhance community capacity to guide from a distance. This point is important in thinking about active citizenship's relationship to power. Walls may be needed to restrict the impact of powerful reactionary forces, but they can also prove necessary against stronger elements within a broad social movement. Active citizenship may, consequently, sometimes entail installing, as well as undermining, boundaries or 'social walls' between spheres, in order to protect one part of a social movement or constituency from being dominated by another. In a different context, [Michael Walzer \(1983\)](#) has explored the necessity of compartmentalisation to social justice. He argued that justice required walls so different social goods could be distributed according to different procedures. Walzer did recognise that no single sphere's autonomy could ever be absolute; however, he argued that converting one good into another where there was no intrinsic connection between the two represented a wrongful intrusion upon the governance of other sectors. For complex equality to exist, Walzer argued, no citizen's status or position in relation to one social good should be able to be undercut or enhanced by their standing in relation to another such good. In our research, a need for walls, in certain situations, emerged from interviews with lesbian and gay community actors. Several interviewees, for instance, drew attention to the ability of wellfunded AIDS organisations to use their enhanced networking, political 'know-how', governmental opportunities and financial resources to dominate lesbian and gay community organising. In such contexts, some means of containing these advantages or of closing off particular circuits might have helped empower less well-resourced community members. However, although several interviewees raised concerns, by the late 1990s active citizenship, in the context of same-sex equality agendas, largely depended on establishing rather than blocking route-ways.

#### Two generations of lesbian and gay local government activity

This paper focuses on second generation lesbian and gay equality developments within British local government; that is the developments that emerged after the election of the Blair Labour Government in 1997, drawing on research carried out between 2001 and 2003 in 12 local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales. Although the authorities were primarily selected to achieve a balance between second generation newcomers and first generation pioneers (see [Cooper & Monro, 2003](#)), they were also selected with a view to achieving geographic coverage, jurisdictional diversity, and political representativeness.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This paper uses data from interviews with close to 100 officers, councillors and community activists; it also draws on other documentary material including reports, council bulletins, and media coverage.

Lesbian and gay municipal policy development first came to public attention in the mid-1980s in a handful of mainly metropolitan authorities the most high-profile districts being Islington, Haringey and Camden in North London, and Manchester in Northern England. While fragmented initiatives took place earlier, it was the rise of the new urban left within urban government, and their articulated commitment to equal opportunities and multiculturalism, which led to more institutionally structured developments in the lesbian and gay field (Lansley et al., 1989; Lent, 2001). I have explored the development of 1980s lesbian and gay policies in considerable detail elsewhere (Cooper, 1994a), and so will not repeat that discussion here. However, to help clarify the argument that follows, I will briefly mention four aspects of the 1980s “equal opportunities” lesbian and gay municipal project.<sup>6</sup>

Organisationally, lesbian and gay work was developed and delivered within local authorities through organisational structures initially put in place to pursue gender and race equality and subsequently extended to sexuality, disability and, in some cases, age. Structures established involved the creation of formal standing committees, mini-departments known as units, the appointment of specialist officers, and the construction of internal policy and implementation networks. Lesbian and gay policies and practices sought to remove heterosexual bias within council policies, as procedures, guidelines and principles were scrutinised for explicit as well as covert and indirect discrimination. Developments here were uneven since in some areas, adoption policy and education, for instance, discrimination was maintained both directly and indirectly through legislation. In addition, the willingness of different services or directorates to respond was variable, with housing, leisure and community services usually more responsive than technical and direct labour departments.

Work also went into supporting community development within lesbian and gay communities, through sector funding, symbolic initiatives, and dedicated provision. This proved, perhaps unsurprisingly, among the most controversial dimensions of the work, exacerbated by the media attention paid to specialist or targeted services involving children or recreation. Paralleling the condensation and framing of anti-racist and anti-sexist municipal work through mythological episodes such as the banning of the children’s rhyme ‘baa baa black sheep’ and terms such as manhole covers, and black bin-bags, media defined moments within the same-sex equality agenda e gay men’s swimming sessions, lesbian gym mats, and the library availability of the gay-positive children’s book, written by Susanne Bosche (1983), *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin* e came to popularly define the entire programme (Cooper, 1994a, chp 7). Finally, governmental power was used to tackle external hostility and discrimination. Councils, albeit in uneven and limited ways, supported protests against homophobia in Britain and abroad, made compliance with their equal opportunities programme a condition of community group funding, and sought to use powers of procurement to extend equality work.<sup>7</sup>

Lesbian and gay initiatives reached a highpoint in the late 1980s. Their decline in the aftermath of the Conservative general election victory of 1987 was precipitated by several factors (see also Durham, 1991). These included increasingly severe financial pressures, conflicting (and competing) legislative demands, including, but not limited to, s. 28 Local Government Act 1988 which prohibited local government from “promoting homosexuality”, relentless

<sup>6</sup> For detailed references to archival material and interviews on which the following discussion of 1980s work is based, see Cooper (1994a).

<sup>7</sup> For general discussion of the deployment of local government’s powers of contract, licensing and procurement to pursue a progressive equality politics, see Cooper (1999).

media hostility, decline in new urban left control of key metropolitan authorities, and the withdrawal of energy and interest by lesbian and gay communities. Through the 1990s, initiatives did continue in a largely low-key, ad hoc way; still, it took the election of a Labour government in 1997 for the programme to receive a renewed boost of energy.

Developments in the late 1990s resembled initiatives of the previous decade, particularly in the continued emphasis on equality training and the elimination of discriminatory provisions. However, in other respects, work differed reflecting wider changes in local government (see also Carabine & Monro, 2004; Monro, 2006). In local authorities pursuing second generation, same-sex equality work, officers and community activists moved into the front-seat, in contrast to the 1980s when local gay politicians fronted developments. Relations with local residents also changed, or, at least appeared to have changed from the language and frameworks now deployed by local councils, as pastoral politics, on the one hand, and customer orientation, on the other, displaced service user models (see also Cooper & Monro, 2003) e a shift that intersected a further discursive move from equal opportunities to inclusion and diversity. Organisationally, work became both mainstreamed and peripheralised.<sup>8</sup> Externally located multi-agency forums involving lesbian and gay community groups and state agency representatives replaced standing lesbian and gay committees. Ad hoc officers and initiative-funded staff at the state/voluntary sector border pursued lesbian and gay equity policies in the place of a previous generation of council employed staff, who had been located at the heart of local government. And internal council working groups and forums were established with neither formal political representation, on the one hand, nor, for the most part, community membership, on the other.

Finally, support for community development had also changed. While some councils did continue to support and fund community events, such as Mardi Gras, in the main, interviewees suggested, less emphasis was placed on 'positive' cultural initiatives. Instead, councils, through partnerships and inter-agency structures, directed their attention to challenging individual hostility through community safety and anti-bullying work (see also Moran & Skeggs, 2004).

In the analysis that follows, I focus on the speech acts generated by local government's common ground. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge, from the outset, that this emerged in the context of local and regional variation. Divergences in lesbian and gay histories, urban politics, sexual attitudes, and governmental trajectories, all structured the response of councils to sex-same equality and inclusion. We can read this response in two different, if overlapping, ways: first, as a case of uneven development with councils positioned at different stages along a shared trajectory; second, as reflecting different pathways of development. However, while acknowledging differences in approach, my focus in this paper is in developing a line of argument based on the broad commonalities apparent in how councils responded to lesbian and gay agendas.

#### New speakabilities

Government. depends upon the production, circulation, organization of truths that incarnate what is to be governed, which make it thinkable, calculable, and practicable. (Rose, 1990, 6)

<sup>8</sup> For description of the shift to mainstreaming, see Haringey Council's *Achieving Equality, Respecting Diversity*, 2000, pp. 13e14.



My aim in this section of the paper is to set out the new sexual ‘speakabilities’ that emerged in British local government as it advanced its programme for lesbian and gay inclusivity.<sup>9</sup> I am using the neologism ‘speakability’ to identify a cluster of normative and epistemological practices. These include the urge and capacity to speak, the extent to which a topic or field renders itself utterable, what can be legitimately said, and a talent for speaking. More simply, in the institutional context of local government, it concerned what could and could not be said, where, when, by whom, to whom, and with whom. Speakability thus directs us to considering changes in how local government understood the ‘problems’ it encountered, lesbian and gay men’s place, local government’s perception of its own role and potential, and the difficulties facing diversity and equality work in this area.

### The problem

The new problems that local government sought to address, in relation to same-sex inclusivity, faced two directions: the governing of conduct and the conduct of governing (Dean, 1999, 27). Governing conduct centred on challenging the ‘irrational’ fear homosexuality generated, that produced, in its wake, verbal and physical acts of harassment, bigotry, exclusion, violence and discrimination, towards a community who comprised neither the mainstream majority nor the uncivil minority (Rose, 1999, 88). The emphasis on irrationality is interesting here. Both community projects and local government reproduced the premise that fear of homosexuality was problematic because, and to the extent, it failed to be underpinned by reason.<sup>10</sup> Post-1997, lesbians and gay men themselves also came to constitute a problem as a ‘hard to reach’ group e a phrase deployed in Home Office guidelines on community safety.<sup>11</sup> While several scholars, activists and officials criticised the term for locating responsibility with lesbians and gay men,<sup>12</sup> local authorities in the late 1990s repeatedly referred to the difficulties they encountered accessing lesbians and gay men, particularly those uninvolved in community organisations.<sup>13</sup> The absence of lesbians and gay men as both recipients of, and participants within, the speech acts of local government, became reinterpreted as an ongoing effect and, significantly, as a cause of invisibility and marginalisation (cf Cruikshank, 1994).<sup>14</sup>

The AGM for the Anti-Homophobic Forum. You have to be far more sensitive about what you do with lesbian and gay, even the names and addresses.it’s a much more complicated communication method than other groups, ’cause loads of the others you could tell if they belonged to a group or not, but with lesbians and gays, it’s not that easy. (Specialist lesbian and gay officer)

<sup>9</sup> Although lesbian and gay initiatives in the late 1990s were not organised exclusively around social inclusion, this did define the primary agenda of the period. I pay less attention to the discourses, technologies and tactics of those explicitly seeking to oppose such initiatives from within local government.

<sup>10</sup> Brighton and Hove lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community strategy, Count Me In, 2001e2006, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Home Office, Guidance on Statutory Crime and Disorder Partnerships, Crime and Disorder Act, 1998, para 2.44 (July 1998). See also Local Government Association Supporting Inclusive Communities e Lesbians, Gay Men and Local Democracy, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> According to one senior police officer: “gay groups are not hard to reach, we have just failed to reach them” (see also McGhee, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Pubs and clubs were used in the late 1990s to reach less political members of the ‘scene’ alongside growing partnerships and inter-agency networking with lesbian and gay organisations.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Brighton Council, Equalities Policy, Appendices, p. 13, 5 September 1991.

The second direction lesbian and gay work faced concerned the conduct of governing. In exploring local government's speakability here, we need to distinguish between public modes of corporate expression and more informal speech. In relation to the former, lesbian and gay work constituted governing as a process that was invariably optimistic, not simply despite, but also through, its equally inevitable failure to achieve its goals; so that 'coming up short' became the opportunity to promise more and better (see Hunt & Wickham, 1994, 79e80). These interlinked processes of failure and aspiration were markedly evident in the narrative local government told about itself, as can be seen from reports, minutes, correspondence, and interviews. Alongside its elimination of derogatory terms, in a double-act of changing present practice in order to prefigure a different future, municipal texts promised to rename conduct as homophobic, render sexual orientation irrelevant to service treatment, relocate lesbians and gay men within new normative frameworks of dignity and respect, support and enhance diversity, extend the parameters of who was inside sexual and spousal normality, and incorporate lesbian and gay communities within participative and programmatic structures.

In this way, municipal aspirations were set against the limitations and disappointment of past approaches. Local councils repeatedly brought the commitments and organisational measures of the present to the fore to defeat pessimism caused by past failings. Despite considerable municipal ambivalence about the relationship between intimate and public dimensions to sexual citizenship, it proved imperative that municipal speech be optimistic in its capacity to effectively resolve the problems the programme identified through the use of champions, comprehensive 'performance and management' procedures, and inter-agency working (see also Bell & Binnie, 2004).

At the same time, the pursuit of a liberal model of sexual inclusivity also produced more pessimistic informal speech from actors involved. There are parallels here with my earlier research (see Cooper, 1994a), particularly in the stress actors placed on inadequate commitment from senior officials and politicians, competition between different equality strands (especially, race, gender and disability), insufficient evidence of anti-gay discrimination in many sectors to make an effective case (the result of invisibility), and constant organisational restructuring. However, among those we interviewed, three other difficulties were also identified. These appeared particularly characteristic of second generation developments, given the presence post-1997 of a Labour government: namely, the need for a facilitative legislative framework (to parallel other equality areas), councils' insufficient responsiveness to voiced community demands, and initiative overload (see also Cooper, 2004). We can understand this last concern, in a sense, as local government trying, simultaneously, to say 'too much'. As one London-based equality officer described:

Implementation often doesn't happen effectively because of the fact we are so inundated with initiatives that we just get things underway but don't often get the chance to complete it because before you get a chance to something else comes up. so you get initiative apathy in a sense where people think, well, how much time do I invest in this when I know that something else is going to come over the horizon very soon.

### Resources and expertise

Governing conduct and the conduct of governing are not two discrete issues when it comes to the speech produced. Their tightly ravelled nature can be seen in the new depiction of lesbians and gay men, from the late 1990s, as a 'resource'. This shift, driven by wider changes,

reflected local government's internalisation of discourses concerned with the representation and, in some cases, transformation of people, processes and things into phenomena with a calculable market value. Indeed, treating non-hegemonic sexualities as commodifiable provided a major way of incorporating lesbians and gay men, positively, within local government's new agendas, and of legitimating this incorporation.

The capacity of lesbian and gay bodies to augment municipal capability was raised by council staff in relation to adoption and fostering provision: the need for additional suitable parents to look after children in care. It also emerged in the context of staffing and personnel practices. As one Council leaflet declared, "productivity decreases when harassment takes place. when irrational attitudes and prejudice direct behaviour in the workplace".<sup>15</sup> In the late 1990s, lesbians and gay men were not only depicted as a form of occupational capital, they were also tied to urban regeneration, tourism and economic development (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Moran & Skeggs, 2004, 122e123; Quilley, 2002, 93). Local government's inclusion agenda depicted the failure to exploit the commercial possibilities offered by local lesbian and gay venues, companies, home-owners and shoppers as a failure of urban leadership and vision, particularly in a context of inter-city competition (see Brighton and Hove LGBT, 2001, also Bell & Binnie, 2004, 1814).

Yet, while this new mode of resource-based speech stands out against the prevailing equal opportunity discourses of the earlier era of the 1980s, I do not want to suggest it was the only discourse available within local government. Municipal documentation from the period also demonstrates the extent to which lesbians and gay men continued to be incorporated in terms of diversity, fairness and equality. Interviewees, engaged with local government's sexuality agenda, also described how they located lesbian and gay work within whatever terms appeared then in vogue.

People who've been involved in its for a while, they are going to pick up on whatever the buzz-words were at the time. If social inclusion is what we are talking about then clearly we need to be included and if its social exclusion then clearly we are excluded. If it's moral values, we will find our own moral values to throw back you know.. (Community worker, Midlands)

While "buzz-words" largely came from wider political processes, those developing lesbian and gay initiatives were not completely subjected to central government and corporate frameworks. As I discuss below, lesbian and gay community politics also impacted on the terms of speakability. The role given to lesbian and gay constituencies in defining and shaping municipal discourse is important to understanding new modes of speakability; it is also important to understand the potential for active citizenship in a context of limited municipal thinkability. Running through all local government's work on lesbian and gay rights was a readjustment in authoritative speech about sexuality, as specialists 'at a distance' became replaced with 'indigenous' experts (Rose, 1999, 189). The status of indigenous experts, as authoritative generators and representatives of the truth within local government's programme of 'same-sex inclusivity', proved particularly significant. Although some interviewees complained their local council too often ignored activists' and organisers' knowledge base, in the main both community and local state actors agreed that the best knowledge about homosexuality could be found amongst homosexuals. And the most knowledgeable homosexuals were those running

<sup>15</sup> See Hackney Council leaflet on lesbian and gay harassment, September 1993; emphasis in the original.

voluntary sector organisations. As I discuss further below, local government incorporated bisexual and transgender status following similar moves within the community sector. It also used lesbian and gay community organisers and consultants extensively to run awareness training, tell local government what the community wanted and needed, and to comment on council reports.

Yet, as I discuss, the speakability of lesbian and gay champions and indigenous experts was not unconstrained. The lynchpin, particularly between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, was the non-negotiable claim, emanating from senior political and administrative figures, that lesbian and gay work was controversial, largely unpopular within the ‘broader’ community, and difficult. This meant work had to be pursued with great care and tact, and developed in ways hugely mindful of the media’s response. These requirements became amplified in the lead-up to local or national elections<sup>16</sup> or when children or teenagers were involved.

As a consequence, what could be spoken proved constantly in flux. Promises to support initiatives by senior officers, councillors or committees could be, and were, discarded, abandoned, ignored, or even countermanded, at any time. In response, a range of micro-tactics emerged. These included speech acts that would function as a ‘door-wedge’ e that is utterances whose own acceptability let other things through. As one London educational activist and consultant, not without reservations, described, we have never been able to get into schools and, on the syllabus, and being taken seriously as an issue; we always have to go on the back of something. We went in on the back of AIDS, now we’re going on the back of homophobia. The problem with both is that unless you are politically aware, you are enabling people to see LGBT people as victims.

#### A new department

So far I have explored the new, progressive mode of speakability which local government contributed to ushering in. In the 1980s, a handful of councils pioneered speech acts about sexual orientation scarcely heard in any other state agency. While they were lambasted from many quarters for doing so, including the national Labour Party and the Right (see Cooper, 1994a; Durham, 1991), by the late 1990s, the approach pioneered a decade earlier had become the new state-supported common sense. This new speakability transformed lesbians and gay men from pariahs and deviants to being seen simultaneously as (a) specialists of their situation, (b) needful of support and protection, (c) a resource, (d) hard to reach, and (e) politically risky. In identifying the new speakability as ambiguous and contradictory, I want to underscore the fact that the late 1990s did not witness a straightforward transition to a glorious new liberal mode of representation; ambivalence, rather, remained at the heart of the new speech acts deployed. Yet, it is probably right to read the terms of local government’s sexual speakability as part of a new sexual citizenship which changed what could and should not be said, where, when and by whom, in ways that both reflected and advanced greater recognition of mainstream lesbian and gay sexualities.

<sup>16</sup> To some extent, the electoral factor eased as incorporating lesbian and gay work within local government equity policies became less controversial. It also had geographical salience and, in a few districts with sizeable lesbian and gay vote, played out somewhat differently.

What I want now to explore is the way the expansion of a liberal sexual citizenship interfaced and contributed to local government's changing mode of department; this department, as I have suggested, undermined the potential of a new sexual politics to circulate freely through the body politic of local government. My argument has two parts: first, local government through the 1990s became subjected to new firewalls e constituted and shaped by external processes, including, importantly, central government legislation e which impeded certain forces from being able to guide from a distance. Second, these external processes became 'owned' and domesticated by local government through internal regimes of self-care, and the acquisition of new forms of department, which differed significantly from those deployed by councils pioneering progressive initiatives in the mid and late 1980s.

## Firewalls

As the 1990s wore on, local government became subjected to a whole range of new 'firewalls'. I use this term figuratively to identify imposed breaks in the circulation of political discourses, policies, programmes, networked practices and initiatives.<sup>17</sup> Local government firewalls in the 1990s took a wide variety of forms. They ranged from the containment strategies generated by individual council staff to enforced privatisation, and the expansion of judicial *ultra vires* doctrine, which declared certain policies and practices as beyond local government's remit. For lesbian and gay work, the external imposition of two firewalls proved particularly significant, namely, the requirement that councils put their services and activities out to tender, and devolve their overarching managerial and co-ordinating role to individual agencies, such as schools (see Cooper, 1998). The breaks these externally imposed reforms produced in what previously existed as more readily intelligible chains of power and authority challenged the ability of lesbian and gay work to create linkages across and between different spheres e the meat of active citizenship. As one London educational activist described, "the complexity. of getting into schools is much more difficult now that schools are functioning on their own."

In thinking about firewalls, I do not want to suggest the power of all constituencies was reduced. Firewalls work relationally. By this I mean, structures and practices that blocked the promotion of (certain) lesbian and gay agendas worked to facilitate other agendas, particularly e during this period e that of corporate and supra-local governmental interests. So, privatising the provision of many public services, increasing business involvement in local governance initiatives, and centralising political power within local councils enhanced the ability of commercial interests to circulate through and to structure local government's work. Closing off the linkages necessary for one political project to be advanced can, therefore, simultaneously enable others. However, forces pursuing lesbian and gay initiatives did not give up faced with the new difficulties in imprinting from a distance. Rather, they reconfigured their focus to utilise partnerships and inter-agency working groups. Interviewees described how positive gay initiatives that would have been blocked by council committees could be pushed through partnerships;

<sup>17</sup> I have defined active citizenship as involving unauthorised agendas e pushing bodies further or in directions other than they mean to go. This does not mean authorities have coherent, unitary agendas that active citizenship troubles. The situation is far messier. However, the promotion of an unauthorised (or not fully authorised) agenda will encounter firewalls unless (a) the institutional body allows e organisationally, affectively, through its disciplinary structures or resource allocations e counter-normative politics to enter its terrain or (b) it is unable to stop circuits being created and deployed by agonistic forces.

partnerships could also be used to embarrass councils into action. At the same time, interviewees commented about the uneven strength and influence of different members in interagency working. Thus, more powerful institutional participants could block lesbian and gay agendas during forum meetings or, to the extent they became a forum recommendation to local government (or other agencies), ensure the recommendation was subsequently defused or ignored by the institution in question.

### Self-care

The second part of my argument concerns the question of how external processes, imposed on local government, came to be 'owned' by local government through a regime of self-care and stylised deportment. One central strand in work on governmentality addresses how subjects manage themselves and behave responsibly through the ways their freedom is governed and structured (see also [Kinsman, 1996](#)).<sup>18</sup> I want to consider here the moderate, self-governing subject by focusing not on lesbians and gay men, but on local government itself (see generally [Burchell, 1996](#); [Dean, 1999, 86](#); [Foucault, 1988a, 150e152, 1991, 97](#); [Haahr, 2004](#)). This discussion is necessarily brief and tentative, but provides some broad threads for future work.

In a context of national governance, led by central government and the private sector, local government has been tasked with its own self-care, something it has pursued in several ways. One mode of self-care works through the governance of others so an institution amplifies and augments its own power by aligning itself with the increased capacity of its subjects ([Simons, 1995](#)). A second mode of self-care, in the local government context, took shape through the way councils managed, evaluated and represented their processes, discourses and procedures. I do not want to suggest same-sex inclusivity was introduced in order to enhance local government. Nevertheless, how the programme was deployed and developed, in the late 1990s, was structured if not entirely driven or produced by the logic, demands and priorities of municipal self-care, particularly as this manifested itself through an interiorized ethic of deportment (see also [Foucault, 1988b, 6](#)).

Deportment, in recent years, has come to be associated with poise, manners and style. However, I want also to draw upon its connotations of proper conduct and behavior. Thinking about local government's articulation of the proper can take two paths. One suggests that local government returned to the proper, and the articulation of propriety, after a period of 'loony' conduct, during which time many councils forgot they were agencies of the state, behaving instead like oppositional, grass roots organizations. A second perspective argues that it is just the content of the proper that has changed. In the mid-1980s, for a small number of urban left-wing councils, the proper meant, at least in part, being responsive to the agendas of marginalized and excluded constituencies (including lesbians and gay men). A decade later, propriety and proper conduct were associated with managerialism, political centrism and an eschewing of oppositional ideologies whether as instrumental projects or as a counter-normative common sense ([Cooper, 1994a](#)). In any event, by the late 1990s, lesbian and gay work occupied a different place within local government's care of itself. Although many of the same-sex initiatives resembled, in terms of content, those of a decade earlier, in an increasingly competitive, performance-driven political environment, these initiatives now demonstrated local government's maturity, flexibility, viability and responsibility (see also [Newman, 2001, chp 5](#)); lesbian and gay work no longer

<sup>18</sup> This also draws on [Foucault's \(1988a\)](#) work on care of the self (see also [Foucault, 1988b, 2](#); [Rose, 1999, 43](#)).

represented opposition and challenge to hegemonic state forces. Most particularly, lesbian and gay work became integrated within, indeed symbolized and stood in for, local government's effective management of community concerns. Through the conversion of claims (translated from social agendas to governmental policies), and through a foundational 'mobilization of bias' (which shaped the very demands lesbian and gay organizations made), local government lesbian and gay policies worked to re-align communities with national and local governmental priorities, to diffuse and deflect conflict and antagonism, and to traverse a symbolic mid-path between excessive and inadequate identity recognition. Deportment for local government, in the late 1990s, then, meant 'hearing' socially marked and differentiated communities without being reconfigured in any way in the process. One means of achieving this was through the deployment of irrationality or limited reasoning.

#### Local government's limited reasoning

Irrationality, non-reasoning, limited thinkability do not seem, at first glance, practices of deportment and self-care. For the latter seem to suggest respect and legitimacy, anchored in knowledge, evidence and thought, rather than the reverse. However, the ties between lack of thought or a refusal to know and institutional stature are well wrought. Judicial reasoning, for example, often incorporates judges' explicit referencing to that which they do not know because they should not know whether it is non-conventional forms of sexuality or other religions or beliefs (eg Cooper & Herman, 1999). Indeed, in such instances, knowing becomes indicative of contagion or infection, evidence of having got too, improperly, close. In other contexts, silence, opacities, policies such as the US military's "don't ask, don't tell", highlight how a certain kind of not knowing has proved central to the management of 'moderate' gay sexualities.

In this section of the paper, I want to tease out some forms this institutional ignorance has taken in relation to British local government's same-sex inclusivity agenda. My argument is not that ignorance or irrationality were deliberately or instrumentally deployed, at least not primarily; nor do I want to suggest that not knowing was inherently functional, in the sense that a necessary not knowing helped to maintain the status quo. Instead, I want to make the simpler claim that not knowing worked as part of a regime of institutional deportment. Paralleling my earlier discussion of speakability, I treat limited 'thinkability' as identifying, and linking together, the object's capacity to be thought, and the subject's capacity to think. Capacity, however, should not be treated as something intrinsic to either party; it is structured by the terrain of their relationship, by the forms through which something like sexuality can be known by something like local government, by historically specific notions of legitimacy, and by socially conditioned urges which demand or deny thought.<sup>19</sup> To explore this further, I consider here three quite different, though interlinked, forms of ignorance or irrationality: lack of coherence; failure to consider or deliberate; and a circumscribed intelligibility.<sup>20</sup> I will address the first two briefly, and focus on the third.

<sup>19</sup> In making this argument, my focus is on how certain possibilities for thinking and knowing about sexuality outside local government proved impossible within. My analysis is therefore restricted to a discussion of institutional possibility; I am not making grander and more general claims about knowing the limits to thought per se.

<sup>20</sup> While limited reasoning proved hegemonic among institutional forces, it did not completely monopolise the programme for same-sex inclusivity. Proponents and participants, working in this area, pursued strategies that would make people 'think' or 'think better', as they also organised tactically to circumvent, or deploy, the non-reasoning of others.

## Contradictory rationalities

The first dimension, also described as contradictory or discontinuous rationalities, concerns the disjuncture between those rationalities articulated in oral and written texts, and those legible from other technologies of rule. Mitchell Dean (1999, 72) argues that there is often a substantial discordance between the rationalities of governmental programmes and the logic to be derived from practices themselves (see also Dean, 2002, 120). In the case of local government's first and second generation lesbian and gay work, public utterances tended to promise more than was actually delivered (and of course public utterances themselves, as I have described, were also constrained). But discontinuities should not be read simply as 'watering down' along a linear path from statement to policy to delivery (see Cooper, 1994a). Discontinuities traversed council practice at every stage in ways that underscore the poor coordination between departments as well as the inconsistencies in programmes and policies. As one community organiser described,

There are tensions about planning as one part of the council might do planning about a certain area of [the city] which impacts on another part of the council's work about, for example, public sex environments. Different parts of the council disagree about the things that impact on the LGBT community. For example, there was a situation where I wrote a web-site for the anti-homophobic bullying campaign and I contacted the information Department about the council hosting it and they said "no", they said it was an ill-thought out thing; it was [for them] about s. 28, although the council as a whole does not support s. 28.<sup>21</sup> For example, we cannot get onto the LGBT websites as the council has a firewall, although these sites are not porn.

Different rationalities, articulated by different sections of the council, provided de facto firewalls that impeded the ability of lesbian and gay politics to permeate many local authorities. Although corporate municipal documents ostensibly spoke for the council as a whole defining a unified political agenda and prevailing discourse, our research suggests many councils allowed, if simply by default, less sympathetic departments and services to pursue a different approach. Thus, while the lesbian and gay politics being impeded was not necessarily unauthorised at the corporate level of local government (and thus only with difficulty claimed as counter-normative), it nevertheless conflicted with the hegemony of particular council departments. Central to maintaining this fragmentation or discontinuous rationality, within local government, was the culturally pervasive, administratively rationalised process of not thinking.

## Refusing to think

In some cases, not thinking produced and was sustained by failure to act e interviewees and documentation, from the late 1990s, record the repeated exclusion of lesbian and gay issues from multidimensional equity or social justice initiatives, particularly where initiatives were framed in what was seen as the poverty-oriented language of social inclusion. In other cases,

<sup>21</sup> A further example of this kind of disjuncture or ambivalence can be seen in the case of Nottingham County Council, which established a Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Equality Consultative Forum that voted to advocate repeal of s. 28. However, its parent committee, the Social Inclusion Select Committee, expressed far more uncertainty about supporting its forum or, in effect, supporting gay equality (despite establishing a forum with this brief): three members voted in favour of repeal, three abstained, and one voted against, 8 March 2000.



limits to thinkability can be read off from, or explicitly identified in, what was said. Paralleling Jill Humphrey's (1999) work on lesbian and gay social workers, where she explores how heterosexual staff used lesbian and gay colleagues to maintain their own distance from same-sex matters, our interviewees provided considerable evidence of failures, unwillingness and deliberate refusals on the part of local government to turn its mind. Strategies disclosed by our research included locating responsibility for lesbian and gay issues with officers lacking expertise or experience, attending lesbian and gay forums to observe rather than participate, authorities refusing to take ownership of, or put their name to, gay-positive reports, abolishing committees which had lesbian and gay issues as their purview, and generally failing to put the 'thinking time' in.

Outsourcing knowledge and expertise was also a marked feature of the programme. Alongside a display of 'in-house' moral anxiety and epistemological distance, local councils relied heavily on "indigenous experts". Indeed, particularly in the early 1990s, community activists in some authorities expressed concern that they were being used as "unpaid advisors", saving councils their money and "letting them off the hook" from having to do the work themselves. The general preference for freelance rather than in-house experts was a distinctive characteristic of the late 1990s agenda and, I want to argue, integral to the council's overall strategy of limited thinking. Local government could combine not knowing with policy initiatives, because it could access those willing to do the thinking for it.<sup>22</sup> But this does not mean external experts had a free rein. Consultants and advisers were expected to behave and talk appropriately, acculturated in the discourses and limits of what talk to council staff in council time could entail.

### Avoiding sexual politics

Notions of appropriate speech in this area underscore the point that a refusal to think, by the late 1990s, did not represent the dominant mode by which the 'rationality' of limited rationality operated in this field. While not thinking on the part of officials and politicians allowed an internally pluralist approach to continue, what increasingly came to dominate as lesbian and gay inclusion became an increasingly accepted part of the public sector's equality and diversity spectrum was a particular form of rationality (or irrationality). Lesbian and gay work, from the mid-1980s onwards, relocated local government's homosexual away from the terrain of moral and practical deviance to that of social identity with its attendant problems of bias, prejudice and discrimination. In this way, sexual orientation became largely analogised to gender and race as a process witnessed in other contexts and jurisdictions, particularly in the development of modern equality law. While the causes of suffering were seen to vary, suffering itself and the strategies for tackling it, even as they veered between mainstreaming and more targeted, specialised responses, were depicted as shared across different constituencies. As one policy officer stated: "We've kind of taken the same views as in terms of racist harassment. If someone's perceiving themselves to be harassed on account of their sexuality, then it's recorded as such."

The assumption gender, race and sexuality shared an analogous form and structure also underpinned the co-existing discourse of (special) needs. According to this, different constituencies,

<sup>22</sup> In this sense, councils could maintain legitimacy and credibility with proponents of inclusivity, by demonstrating their deference to the 'real' experts, and credibility with opponents, who would prefer that their council not be infected by excessive sexual knowledge.

like different individuals, had needs derived from their particular social location or identity (see also Cruikshank, 1994).<sup>23</sup> The logic of ‘special needs’, like the logic of ‘irrational’ prejudice, emerged from a system that read inequality according to a framework in which people were either marked as vulnerable through membership of a particular group or were seen as unfortunate individuals hindered by an external set of irrational barriers. I do not want to suggest this liberal reading of inequality lacks rationality, for this might seriously underestimate its coherence and power. However, what is revealed is how circumscribed the terrain of comprehension proved to be. The truth claims and epistemological techniques underpinning lesbian and gay work did not seek to deconstruct sexual orientation in order to promote an anti-hegemonic politics which denaturalised sexual fixity. They did not even seek, for the most part, to challenge the privileged status of heterosexuality or the relation between gender asymmetries and sexual identity (see Cooper, 1994b; generally Sedgwick, 1990). The omission of a feminist perspective was contested by a small handful of interviewees and particularly women who had been involved as community activists and council officers since the 1980s. As one London activist commented, “.proper anti-racist work, anti-disabled work, lesbian work; I mean for me as an old-time radical feminist, if you haven’t got feminism, you’ve lost a hell of a lot”.

Instead, local government worked to consolidate a range of social identities, which, in the case of lesbian and gay sexuality, frequently meant consolidating an identity with some contingent, if uncertain, relationship to sexuality and sex.<sup>24</sup> This is not quite the entire picture. Lesbian and gay municipal work sought to disentangle lesbians and gay men from sex, even as concerns about sex pervaded local government discourse and utterances and including in how the lines around what constituted local government’s legitimate business should be drawn.<sup>25</sup> Gay community organisers participated in this redrawing. One community organiser, for instance, described his attempts to get the council and police to deal with male sex in a public lavatory because it gave “all gays a bad name”. Another told us, The local authority deals with the statutory stuff. but doesn’t necessarily need to get involved with the sexuality stuff. SM issues do not have a place in local authority work as such, except in terms of a larger-scale tolerance. Back-room sex in a safe environment is not the business of the council. But cottaging is problematic because it brings it into the public arena and it is unsafe. This is the business of the council, especially if young, vulnerable people are involved.

In some authorities, public sex by gay men and as cottaging, cruising and, particularly, “rentboy” activity continued to receive attention, even as community activists sought to stop police and local authorities from discriminating between heterosexual and gay sexual encounters.

<sup>26</sup>In other cases, the imperative to desex gay proposals, and to publicise this desexing,

<sup>23</sup> For example, see Haringey Council, Report on Lesbian and Gay Equalities in Housing and Social Services, para 8.7, Equalities Coordinating Committee, 31 October 1994.

<sup>24</sup> A number of writers in recent years have usefully and critically explored the place of domesticity, intimacy and the private sphere in formulations of sexual citizenship, see Bell (1995), Berlant and Warner (1998), Cossman (2002), Hubbard (2001), Plummer (2001) and Weeks (1998) (cf. Berlant, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> For instance, one training officer said they used the term “lesbian and gay” rather than “sexual orientation” because the latter opened up a wider agenda that included paedophilia. Some examples also exist of councils more positively recognising gay sexual desires, eg. see “Manchester Council eroticises safer sex”, Pink Paper, 20 January 1990.

<sup>26</sup> Certain police forces moved in the late 1990s towards a more conciliatory, low-key approach to sex in public places in the absence of any complaint.

dominated: a process that echoes Bell and Binnie's (2004, 1816) concerns that the broader commercial success of Manchester's gay village was tied to the increasing production of a sanitised, desexualised space (see also Moran & Skeggs, 2004). So, in one authority, we researched, community organisations had to ensure their Mardis Gras was "family friendly"; "we had to demonstrate we were not a freak-show in the middle of the park". In another case, a librarian interviewed emphasised that a gay-positive ordering policy did not mean having "magazines in the libraries with nude photos on the cover".<sup>27</sup>

Desexing functioned as an instance of, and technique for achieving, a circumscribed intelligibility. It worked at several levels. It embraced the rhetorical claim that homosexuality had no particular relationship to sex, alongside strategies aimed at disarticulating gay identity from an excessive sexuality. Desexing also functioned as a normative requirement that subjects had to meet as the condition for receiving equal treatment. These intersecting, sometimes diverging, processes were particularly apparent in adoption and fostering policies. Several interviewees referred to anxiety about the sexual activity of gay male carers, one Northern officer describing her authority's preference for gay men who were not embedded within a gay community.<sup>28</sup>

Desexing provided a particularly important firewall because it excluded certain issues, such as the ethical relationship between sex and publicity, from local government's legitimate terrain. It also forced many lesbian and gay advocates to deny a connection between their identity and a particular arrangement of sex. Closing off this connection and in many cases requiring advocates of lesbian and gay inclusion to sign up to this closing off thus limited and tamed an active citizenship which would not only have made sex (and the public/private) its subject but also its means of penetrating, and establishing new pathways into, local government.

The third instance of local government's circumscribed rationality concerns the case of bisexuality (see also Monro, 2005, 76). The treatment of bisexuality demonstrates, perhaps better than anything, the limited understanding brought to matters of sexual orientation as well as the general reluctance of local government to turn its mind. In the 1980s, municipal categories of sexual orientation did not extend beyond lesbian and gay sexuality; but from the early 1990s onwards many councils widened their brief to include bisexuality and, in some cases, transgender too.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the widespread nature of this practice, and despite the extensive, often fierce, debates within community organisations on this question, almost no deliberation took place within local government.<sup>30</sup> Among council officers we interviewed, almost all indicated that the shift reflected a change of usage within community groups or forums.<sup>31</sup> As organisations in the locality moved from LG to LGB and LGBT, local authorities followed suit. Again, this move reveals the extent to which expertise and authority in relation to sexual orientation

<sup>27</sup> She did add that heterosexual pornography would also be excluded, but this subsequent comment seemed driven by the need to demonstrate parity rather than by the thought of heterosexuality.

<sup>28</sup> Although anxieties about sex were largely linked to men, one interviewee did remark they had to be careful not to advertise for adoptive and fostering parents in "the lesbian magazine with the dildos in it", perhaps because this would suggest the council sanctioned linking non-procreative sexual activity to parenting.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Brighton Council, *Equal Opportunities*, appendix, p. 13, 5 September 1991.

<sup>30</sup> Though, see Humphrey (2002, 221e222) on the debate within lesbian and gay public sector union organising over whether to include bisexuals and transgender minorities.

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, one community organiser described voicing objections at council meetings to the insistence he use the term LGBT, since, in his view, he did not represent this much broader category.

were externalised. One senior Scottish councillor commented, ‘‘We started off using ‘lesbian and gay’, but then we changed to take on LGBT. really because we were advised by the lesbian and gay people we’re working with that that was the accepted wording, to take on a wider definition’’.

What did this category extension mean in practice? Did local authorities integrate the particular discrimination, status or needs of bisexual people? And what would this have entailed?<sup>32</sup>

With the exception of some youth provision which sought to address the experiences and concerns of young people who did not identify (unequivocally) as lesbian or gay, councils added the term ‘‘bisexual’’ without making any visible changes to their practices. Indeed, some policy and service developments, such as in adoption and fostering, maintained a, not only or always implicit, bias against bisexual applicants e read as sexually promiscuous e on the grounds that carers and adoptive parents should be in stable, monogamous, committed relationships (see also [Monro, 2005, 80](#)).<sup>33</sup> One social services manager told us: ‘‘I would struggle with any relationship which was not totally committed. It is about the needs of the child. If you are still in the process of having a number of casual relationships, are you going to meet the needs of a child?’’ Bisexuality, in this way, proved the limit case for local government’s programme of inclusivity. Added to policy texts because community organisations had added it, it nicely illustrates [O’Malley’s \(1996, 313\)](#) suggestion that when governments appropriate indigenous forms through governing at a distance, they can also end up incorporating alienating and contradictory practices and assumptions that then need to be neutralised or eliminated. In this case, neutralisation occurred through failure to address what the extension might mean. At the same time, we can also read the extension as a way of eschewing harder questions about the rationalities underpinning local government’s sexual project, including questions about the socio-sexual identity of subjects coming before it.

In this section, I have suggested that not knowing in some cases, and deploying a limited form of rationality in others, formed an integral part of local government’s self-care and deportment e its carrying off of its self and its relationship to others. While not knowing allowed local government to appear **appropriate** to a spectrum of constituencies, including those for whom sexuality was beyond local government’s legitimate terrain ([Cooper, 1995](#)), it also contributed to municipal self-care, in the context of the late 1990s, by helping to produce and sustain a series of firewalls. In other words, limited thinkability functioned as a firewall for lesbian and gay politics thanks to its capacity to resist the integration of speech throughout the organisation, to maintain ambivalence, incoherence and competing norms without the need for justification, and to avoid ‘real’ engagement with issues of power, intimacy and sexuality.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored how a project of sexual inclusivity, ostensibly intended to extend sexual citizenship, can work simultaneously to dampen down modes of active sexual citizenship. My argument is that active citizenship depends on the capacity for counter-hegemonic

<sup>32</sup> There are parallels here with the treatment of women in the early/mid-1980s. Lesbians were added to early initiatives without proponents or local authorities considering what this extension would mean or whether the agenda, now renamed, inappropriately focused on the needs and lives of its initial proponents only (see [Cooper, 1994b](#)).

<sup>33</sup> I am not suggesting bisexual people are necessarily non-monogamous. However, in local government terms, identification based on a bi-gendered or polymorphous desire held out the prospect of its satisfaction being sought outside the terms of a monogamous relationship.

forces and agendas, seeking to advance political projects unauthorised by the state, to imprint from a distance. However, attempts to ‘imprint’ e to advance new ideas, policies, values, truths, and practices e are not only subject to challenge by countervailing forces within civil society, they are also thwarted by agencies of the state. In this paper, I have explored the technologies state bodies deploy to impede the ability of new agendas to circulate through, and link together, different policy fields and agencies, through the metaphor of local government firewalls. While such firewalls take various forms, from the organisational obstacles created by departmental autonomy to the legal restrictions on what councils as public statutory bodies can do, my analysis has paid particular attention to the firewall of limited thinkability. In centring it, I have also sought to juxtapose thinkability with speakability e to show how the new speech acts of a more progressive sexual citizenship can be undermined by a limited active citizenship. In other words, when local government refuses to think or to think hard, the links and circuits needed to enable forces to pursue a counter-normative politics at a distance fail to be secured. Following Eve Sedgwick’s (1990, 8) proposal that we pluralise irrationality, I have suggested not thinking, in relation to lesbian and gay equality, took several forms. These included the disjunctive rationality of different parts of local government operating with very different sexual ideologies; the explicit refusal of many council actors to engage with sexual orientation, and the limited frameworks drawn upon in their understanding. I want to close by complicating the analysis offered with three final points.

First, limited thinkability is not a coherent and totalising technology of power. While it did work here to stop a more radical sexual politics from circulating, and from circulating more extensively, it also allowed non-hegemonic discourses to enter local government’s terrain. We can see this in the role offered to community activists to define the issues and the ways such issues should be spoken about, and in a discomfort that stopped councils from directly contesting community sexual politics. This discomfort-driven ‘stepping back’, where monitoring required too much proximity and too many questions, enabled lesbian and gay community actors on inter-agency forums e at least sometimes e to use state-mandated gay issues, such as street safety, as a way of advancing other issues as well.

How advisable then is greater governmental thinking? On the one hand, a more ‘rational’ conservative local state e that thought hard about sexuality e might produce greater not less firewalling as councils took steps to ensure no policies of same-sex inclusivity were developed. Conversely, a council thinking hard in progressive ways would create firewalls against opponents; while support for a more extensive programme of activities might appear to defuse the agonistic character of an active citizenship. It therefore seems as though a political agenda either faces firewalls e and hence the impeding of active citizenship e or it faces support, and thus the erasure of an agonistic citizenship. Yet, while this line of argument is persuasive it suggests too great a level of control on the part of local authorities. So, a supportive council that used thinking and reason to permit lesbian and gay work might well augment an active citizenship to the extent that actors exploited this support to push further and deeper, using local government’s willingness to reflect, evaluate and create coherence to enhance the ability of a counter-normative politics to circulate.

Finally, in thinking about limited rationality’s ambivalent role, the relationship between sexual citizenship and the desexing of lesbian and gay equality is centrally important. I suggested that the project of lesbian and gay inclusivity forged an equivocal relationship to sex.

In seeking to treat sexual orientation as analogous to gender and race, the specific relationship to sex came to be both denied and disavowed. Who one had sex with might determine one’s sexual orientation, and hence one’s needs and vulnerability but, once determined, sex had no

further part or place. Local government propriety, through the 1990s, retained a conventional relationship to sexual practices e to what sex happened, where, when and with whom. Excepting ‘with whom’, this sexual propriety largely remained untouched by local government’s new speakability.

And yet, while an active sexual citizenship pursuing a feminist or pro-sex welfare agenda found itself stymied by the new firewalls in place, the turn of the millennium reconfiguration of local government circuits of power and resources has come to generate new possibilities. While some have argued that an active sexual citizenship now works from the new spaces, and with the new tools, an increasingly consumption-based market society makes available, gay consumerism is not the only launch-pad for a new active sexual citizenship. New research is needed, however, to explore the other circuits and pathways being created through local government, pathways that can be used by a counter-normative sexual politics.

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