

THE LEADERSHIP ISSUE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Gerry Stoker

DOES LOCAL POLITICAL LEADERSHIP MATTER ?

When problems arise a call for leadership is often sounded. What we want is someone with vision, a plan of action and an ability to summon people to greater effort. The whole edifice of modern management is built on the assumption that for organisations, at least, leadership matters.

But what of society, does it need leadership? In particular is leadership required to make democracy work? Or is leadership incompatible with democracy? If the public are the masters how can their servants - public officials and politicians - provide leadership?

The answer for most democratic theorists is that political leadership is essential to make democracy work. There are limits to the time, interest and capacity of citizens to engage directly in collective political judgement. We elect representatives to do our politics for us for most of the time. Political leadership is there to ensure that our wishes are translated into action. Political leadership is there to provide a basis for accountability.

Politicians do not act, however, as simple conveyor belts carrying public demands to bureaucracies to ensure they are met. They have to sift through complex messages from the public. They judge the virtues of different demands. They have to ration resources. They have to make choices: that is the essence of government.

Gerry Stoker is a professor in the Department of Government, Strathclyde University. This article is based on a talk to a Consultative Seminar on 8 June 1998 in Glasgow, organised by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities for the Independent Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament.

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Political leaders may go further and actively structure their environment. They may build coalitions of different groups. They may enable people to see common interests where none had been seen previously. They can persuade people - within the public sector and across sectors - to work together for shared ends. Leadership goes to the heart of politics because it is about the capacity of a people to act together on their shared concerns.

Political leaders may go further still and act as public entrepreneurs and chart new directions. The political leader identifies a new way forward for a community or a different way of working. In a democratic society the check on such entrepreneurial activity is the ability to ultimately take the public with you.

All in all political leadership can make a difference; that is its purpose and the key criteria by which it should be judged.

Leadership, then, emerges on an important element in the making of a successful democratic politics, although the way any individual leader undertakes the roles I have identified will vary according to their personality, background and values.

With respect to local government there are a number of possible indicators of good leadership (see Hambleton and Bullock 1996).

- a positive image of the area;
- winning resources (by improved productivity persuading taxpayers, and grantsmanship);
- developing partnerships;
- addressing complex social and economic issues;
- maintaining public support and enhancing the legitimacy of the democratic system.

Good local leadership should display all of these characteristics.

HOW IS THE WORLD OF LOCAL POLITICS CHANGING ?

The environment in which local government is operating has dramatically changed, making even stronger the case for some fundamental rethinking on the organisation of local representative democracy and local political leadership. These changes go back beyond the election of a Labour Government in 1997.

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First, the world of local governance has become populated by a range of other quasi-government agencies. More broadly, to get things done in key areas requires partnership not only with other public sector agencies but also the business community, the voluntary sector and indeed the community. We therefore need systems of local government that can look outward and build partnerships. Local leaders are needed to bring together interests, to develop vision, to intervene in problems of co-ordination, to set performance measures, and to organise the accountability of others. Local leaders are needed to deliver the new style of governance.

Second, councils are under increasing pressure to demonstrate value for money. Neither elite nor more broadly public opinion automatically assumes that raising taxes and spending the proceeds solves problems. Spending money wisely and well, being concerned with impact and outcomes, and focusing on efficiency and effectiveness are not just fads of the 1980s; they are here to stay. Performance, performance, performance are the three priorities in all service areas. We therefore need systems of local government that can engage in effective scrutiny, give a voice to service users and lead a process of modernisation.

Third, the social and economic fabric of our society is experiencing profound change. Communities are more diverse and perhaps more divided. Global economic change and competition create threats and opportunities. We need a system of local government that can both cope with diversity and give expression to leadership, to bring fragments together. We need leadership that can position and promote their localities.

Fourth, the way that people get involved with and understanding politics has changed. The role of the media has increased in importance in the presentation of issues and personalities. Single-issue and cause politics have become more prominent. The public is looking for politicians to reach beyond the boundaries of party politics. Local government needs to be able to participate in the modern form of politics.

The arrival of a Scottish Parliament makes the challenge even greater for local government in Scotland. How can it maintain a place in the public eye?

IS THE CURRENT SYSTEM ADEQUATE IN THE LIGHT OF THESE CHANGES?

There are three types of over-arching leadership that can be found in most local councils.

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Political Leadership

In most (but not Independent-run authorities), this is usually based on leadership of a party group and if that group is in a majority then it is expressed through an informal role as Leader of the Council. Such figures are usually subject to annual re-election by their party group. They have the same formal standing as other councillors, and yet many perform the job 'full-time' supported by 'modest' special responsibility allowances.

Managerial Leadership

This is usually the chief executive, a full-time paid official with a role that has been seen by many as more important since the 1970s to delivering effective local government.

Ceremonial Leadership

This happens often through a provost appointed on an annual or more extended basis. The role normally involves presiding over council meetings and various ceremonial functions. The occupant of the role has very few formal powers.

These over-arching leadership figures are of course surrounded by other leading politicians (committee chairs, group spokespersons etc) and officials (chief officers etc).

Local leadership has evolved and changed in recent years under the impact of the party politicisation of local politics in many areas and the attempt to develop a stronger managerial focus through the chief executive. It is a system with more in-built fragmentation than other local western democracies.

Experience varies considerably between localities. There are examples of successful leadership. Yet these appear to happen despite of rather than because of the system. There are several limitations especially to the political leadership role:

- lack of visibility to the public;
- lack of formal recognition;
- internal focus;
- part-time pay, full-time hours;
- lack of sustainability.

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Within local authorities there are problems about:

- lack of clarity about responsibilities;
- an under-specified relationship between managerial and political leadership;
- an under-use of the capacity of 'ceremonial' leadership.

There are several more general problems with the way the current system works:

1. The dominant formal system of organising the political business of local authorities - the committee system - obscures where decisions are made and consumes a vast amount of councillor and officer time for only limited benefits. In most authorities private party groups provide the key focus for decision, and committees to that extent are a charade. Yet councillors - according to survey evidence - spending about two-thirds of their time in committees or preparing for them. The officer structure too devotes a huge amount of time and resources in this process. The argument is that a restructuring could lead to greater honesty and clarity about decision making and less wasted time and resources.
2. A more visible and formal recognition for local political leadership, it is argued, will help develop or create a political 'class' at the local level. 'The leaders of our major towns and cities deserve to be big players on the national stage' according to the Prime Minister's pamphlet (Blair 1998). Moreover, prominent local leadership will help restore the balance in central-local relations after years of centralisation and could force the pace of decentralisation. Behind these arguments is a recognition of the full-time nature of the leadership task in major authorities (and therefore the case for appropriate salaries) and a view that the media profile and coverage of local government could be extended by the presence of identifiable 'big hitters'.
3. It is argued that stronger local political leadership - even if still selected with party labels - will help to localize local politics and reduce the sense in which national factors determine local elections. Leaving aside the case of the US with its weak party system, a recent paper on 'Local Government in Spain' by Joan Botella (1998) suggests: 'Mayors are increasingly free of control by their parties and more able to conduct local government in a truly local (rather than national) way'. There is evidence of an increasing localism led by mayors in France, Germany and Italy. Agendas are set not on the basis of national partisan

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considerations but on the perceived nature of local realities and problems. Local politics and local issues matter to a greater extent, and national party levels and factors play less of a role. To put the argument more abstractly: part of the challenge facing British local government is similarly to both denationalise and weaken the ties of party politics over local leaders. Localisation restimulates interest and creates an appropriate basis for accountability related to local performance. The reduction in party ties tackles the danger of accountability to the party becoming a substitute for accountability to the public. The danger is rendered more significant by the weak and declining status of local party organisation in politics.

4. It is argued that the clear establishment of a separate political executive opens up substantial opportunities to enable other councillors to fulfil roles neglected or underplayed in the current system. There is a range of 'scrutiny' roles that could be better performed: pre-decision assessment of major policy items, scrutiny of performance, calling to account of other bodies, the placing of neglected or awkward issues on the local political agenda. The representative role could be extended to become more active and more involving of local citizens in exchanges. Finally the establishment of a distinctive 'backbench' set of roles could, if there were appropriate numbers of councillors, cut the amount of time any individual would have to devote to the role. It may then be possible, as the Prime Minister's pamphlet puts it, for 'local people who want to contribute to their local community, by standing for public office' to do so 'without signing half their life away' (Blair, 1998).

ARE BETTER OPTIONS FOR POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AVAILABLE?

Within the existing legislation there are a number of ways in which the internal management of the local authority can be changed. Several local authorities have taken steps to change not only the structure of their committee systems but also their ways of working. Some authorities have tried to provide a new focus and range of roles for councillors in dealing with the public and through representation on various external bodies. Some of these schemes are reported in **Community Leadership and Representation: Unlocking the Potential** (Report of the Working Party 1993) and **Representing the People** (Audit Commission 1997). Both these reports suggest that there is a case for more radical rethinking but they note such changes would require legislation to allow innovation.

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Some of the more radical options for change are described in a short-hand form below. There are other options and choices that can also be considered. It needs to be emphasised that each model gives roles to political leadership, other political representatives, permanent officials and citizens. All contain the same elements but mix them together in a different manner, thereby creating new opportunities and openings especially but not exclusively for political leadership.

Four models can be identified. Each offers a way to enhance political leadership:

- Model 1** rests mostly on measures to formalise existing informal practices in some authorities recognising the role of leading members in the working of the local authority. The role of the chief executive and ceremonial mayor or provost might, in practice, be relatively unchanged under such a system. The creation of a single-party executive or a lead member system are examples of potential reforms under this model.
- Model 2** involves the clear establishment of a separate executive of political leader and cabinet by appointment from the body of councillors. The political leader might be given the title mayor and combine the role of council leader and some of the ceremonial duties of the current mayor, provost or first citizen.
- Model 3** involves the establishment of a separate political executive by way of direct election. The directly elected executive mayor is the option chosen for London. The mayor under this arrangement may appoint a cabinet which in turn may draw from the membership of the separately elected assembly. The mayor might be seen as combining some elements of the leadership roles of council leader, chief executive and ceremonial mayor. The mayor holds the position of head of the executive. However the system usually requires a head of staff who would be a permanent official performing many of the roles of existing chief executives. The ceremonial role in turn is often shared with a deputy or perhaps with the leader or speaker of the separately elected assembly.
- Model 4** involves formal executive authority being vested in the chief executive (as chief local manager) but the establishment of a high-profile policy leader and ceremonial figure by the direct election of a mayor. The directly elected mayor leads policy

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development as a member of the council, represents the locality in intergovernmental relationships and wider negotiations, acts as the voice of the area, and may be given powers to make certain appointments to boards or other bodies as well as other limited tasks.

There are other options and many other issues to be addressed. In any system the broader assembly must approve budget and major policy measures. It will be essential to ensure that any reforms protect the rights of opposition members. There are broader concerns about ensuring that contract-letting, planning and licensing decisions, for example, are dealt with in a way that maintains probity and natural justice. Scope and protection must be given to the representative and scrutiny role of non-executive councillors.

Each of the four models I identify can broadly be observed in operation in other countries. The British system of internal management is relatively unusual. Most systems in other western democracies provide greater scope for a distinctive political leadership. Indeed the trend is towards direct election of political leaders. Model 1 examples could be found in Sweden. Model 2 can be found in operation in larger Nordic cities, France, Spain and many other countries. Model 3 is in operation in Germany, Italy and United States. The main elements of Model 4 could be observed in the United States and New Zealand.

All this is not to suggest that all that is required is to copy other systems. The point is that it is possible to learn from the experiences of others. Given that most other systems provide greater scope for and formal recognition to local political leadership, it is not entirely clear why it can be insisted that our system is right and everyone else is wrong.

CAN THESE CHANGES IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP BE LINKED TO A BROADER PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL ?

It is vital that changes are seen as connected to and indeed part of a broader process of democratic renewal. The creation of a more formal focus for political leaderships opens up opportunities for other political representatives to represent their area or special interests, to scrutinise and monitor the political executive and administration and to challenge other organisations in the locality about their performance. One little understood attraction of

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various reform options is the way they enable so-called 'backbench' councillors to operate in a variety of new and imaginative ways.

They would :

- monitor the performance of the authority;
- review and question past decisions taken by those with executive responsibilities;
- be consulted before decisions are taken or policy is set;
- review the policies and direction of the authority, proposing changes for the future. (DETR, 1998)

Crucially councillors would be encouraged to engage in active representation:

In the past councillors have spent a great deal of time defending their provision of services to the public. Under new models they will be able to promote and defend the public interest to the council. They could spend more time in the local community at residents' meetings or surgeries - a role which is seen by both councillors and the public as being particularly important. The role of councillors would be expanded. They would become, in a much clearer way, the advocate of the local people, channelling their grievances and demands.
(DETR, 1998)

It may be possible to design systems which allow those without immediate leadership responsibilities to have a genuine 'part-time' involvement. Leadership figures could in turn be given modest salaries reflecting their full-time responsibilities. The range and diversity of people attracted to serve in local politics may as a result be extended, although other measures may also be necessary to achieve that end.

The reform of local structures and relationships may act as a stimulus to increase voter interest in and turnout for local elections. Again, though, additional measures may be necessary to increase the turnout for and local focus of local elections.

Further it should not be assumed that by enhancing political leadership the wider processes of increasing citizen involvement and capacity are undermined or necessarily neglected. The key is to balance opportunities for leadership and framework-setting with a commitment to variety, openness and access in terms of participation.

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Finally, of course, political leadership requires some scope for autonomous action and initiative. For local political leadership to achieve its full potential, the capacity and scope for local government action needs to be enhanced. A modernised form of political and democratic leadership is, in turn, part of the argument for ending centralisation whether to London or Edinburgh.

CONCLUSIONS

What I would most like to see is a change to systems which provide directly elected mayors or provosts especially in Scotland's major cities. Why am I attracted to such an option system ?

First it would create a leader with some independence. The legitimacy of direct election would create a figure more confident in their ability to speak and act for the public than under the current system. This is the particular attraction of direct election.

Second, a directly elected executive leader will create a well-known and accountable figure. As the DETR paper on Modernising Local Government puts it :

The Government is therefore very attracted to the model of a strong executive directly elected mayor. Such a mayor would be a highly visible figure. He or she would have been elected by the people rather than the council or party and would therefore focus attention outwards in the direction of the people rather than inwards towards fellow councillors. The mayor would be a strong political and community leader with whom the electorate could identify. Mayors will have to become well known to their electorate which could help increase interest in and understanding of local government.

The assembly or council would also have an enhanced profile, as supporters and opponents of the mayor's actions use it to make their case. This higher profile should make for a greater local dimension to policy-making. It could increase turn-out in local elections. By playing up personality and leadership, nationally oriented party politics will be downgraded. Fun, excitement, and community spirit could be injected into local politics.

Finally, the elected mayor or prominent appointed leader would provide a steering capacity within and beyond the locality. A French mayor or German

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bürgermeister are notable players in their political systems. We need similar 'big-hitters' in our local politics.

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