

Local politics and the public library service

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Notes the trend towards greater political awareness among library managers in public libraries, compared with the attitude of previous years, and the increasing role of the public library as part of a complicated local government framework. Discusses the influences at work within the council and the interplay of forces produced by: overall policies of central government; public opinion; and media coverage. Concludes that a system is needed which is large enough to provide the range of services that a modern society requires and that provides people with a sense of place and represents a commitment to collective needs and values.

A few years ago *The Local Government Chronicle* included on its cover a cartoon depicting various types of local politicians, ranging from the political extremist and the sexpot to the intellectual and the pompous ass. These less than ideal types might just reflect some of the perceptions, even the prejudices of Chief Librarians. Local politics is now very much on the professional agenda, yet not so long ago it was not uncommon for quite senior members of the profession to eschew the idea of politics, local or otherwise. Addressing new councillors, a County Librarian once advised that 'public libraries should be free from political issues and library committees should be free from politics in their work' (Budge, 1971). David Gerard, one time City Librarian of Nottingham admitted, in his entertaining autobiography, that 'generally the world of elected members [i.e., local politicians] was inscrutable to me' (Gerard, 1988), while another County Librarian told his Chair 'that some of his colleagues wouldn't know a politician from Father Christmas and would be likely to ask for a present from either in exactly the same terms' (Munroe, 1987).

How things have changed! It is now part of our collective professional wisdom that public library managers have to be politically sensitive and have an understanding of the world of politics and politicians. The public library service is part of a complicated local government framework which is influenced by central government

regulation, party politics, professional values, pressure groups and a range of other interests. In short local politics is complicated, each local authority has its own particular features and political style and that can make generalizations difficult, if not misleading. However, an analysis of the local government literature and an exploration of the perceptions of politicians (Usherwood, 1993a) has enabled the writer to develop a pictorial representation, model is too grand a word, of the public library in local politics.

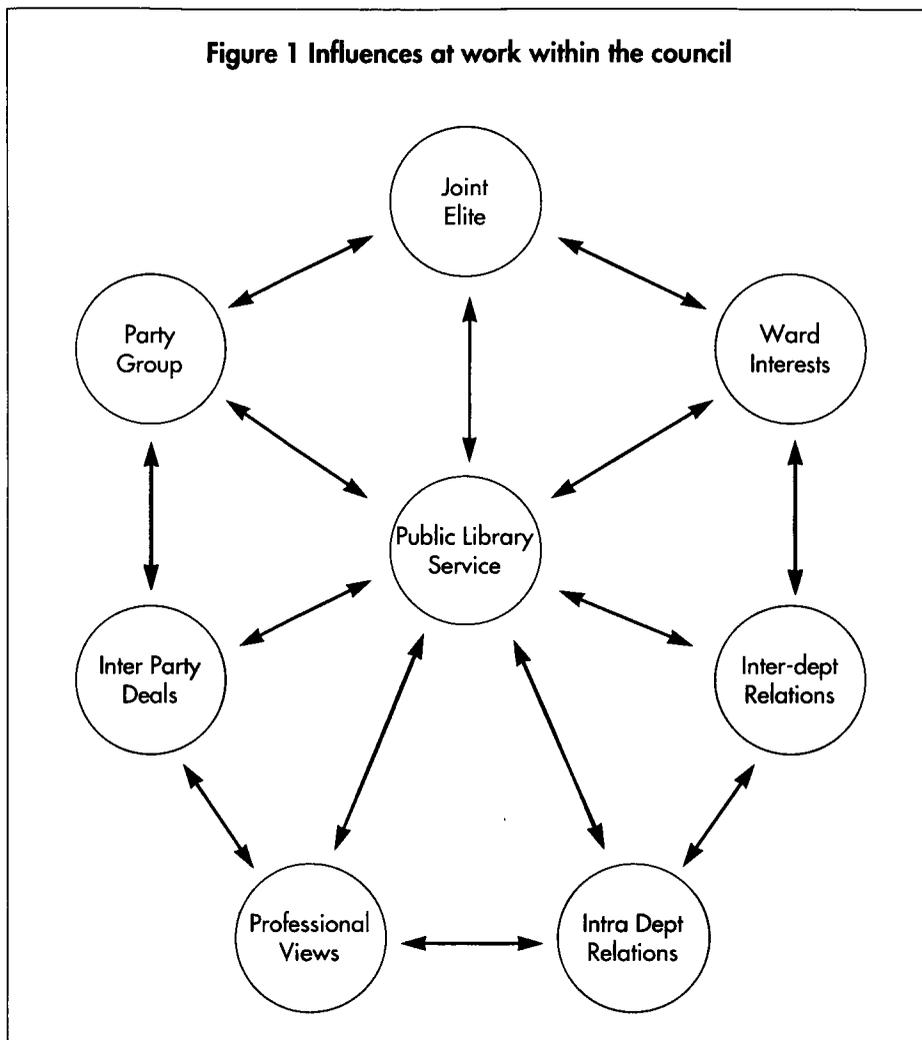
The first diagram (Figure 1) shows the influences at work *within* the council. Public librarians reading this paper may find it unrealistic to put the public library service at the centre of the local government world but as it says on all those city maps 'YOU ARE HERE'. The circles on the outside represent some of the inputs into decisions made about the quality and extent of library services. They not only effect the library service but also each other.

The first of these influences is what Stoker (1988) has called the 'joint elite'. This group will vary from authority to authority but will usually include leading elected members and senior officers, more often than not Chairs and Vice Chairs and Chief Officers and maybe their deputies. This raises a number of important issues such as the amount of access that the Chief Librarian has to the politician who chairs the committee responsible for library services and the Chair/Officer relationship. There is no need to

revisit those debates in this paper. Suffice it to say that the elected member's perception of these various roles may be different from those of the professional librarian. Data suggest (Usherwood, 1993a) that members see the Chair in a role which appears to be closely related to Mintzberg's (1980) analysis of managerial work. They want the Chief Librarian to operate within the general ethos of the Council and to take account of economic and political priorities. He or she is increasingly seen as a manager of human and material resources although some still stress the role of the librarian as a book person.

Some writers (Dearlove, 1973; Saunders, 1979) have placed great emphasis on the role of this joint elite and it may well be true in some authorities that key decisions are still taken by the leading actors in the local government drama. However, it is not so in all councils for a number of reasons. In the first place, in some cases, there is an increasing tension within the elite group itself. This can happen for example where councillors do, or want to, take on a more assertive managerial role. Thus a few years ago in Westminster a Conservative councillor carried out a study of the management of the library service (Davis, 1983). In addition, an elite group can be challenged by some of the other interests represented in Figure 1. These days it can be difficult for a Chair, or indeed a Council Leader, to take a party group in the direction that it does not want to go. Chairs from all three parties, interviewed by the writer, said that they would find it difficult to go against the view of the party group as a whole.

In addition, within the political parties themselves there are further divisions. All three of the major parties have their internal differences. There is, for instance, the traditional Labour approach and that of the Urban Left. The Conservatives also have their traditionalists and their ideologists in the shape of the New Right. The Liberal Democrats also have some interesting divisions. In some areas, as Pinkney (1984) has demonstrated, they favour



public spending on recreation and social services, while in others they favour privatization or alternative forms of provision.

Such divisions can have an impact on the library service. Former Chief Librarian, Tom Featherstone, in his interview with Margaret Evans (1991) commented on the differences between what he termed 'old style' Labour, 'basically traditional trade unionists' and the new Labour Group who he found 'more hostile towards the officers'. In the writer's own interviews with elected members a distinct difference of opinion was found between the traditional Conservatives and the New Right. The interviews were carried out during the Thatcher era and in private conversation the

greatest vehemence towards 'that bloody woman' was often expressed by rather pleasant, if somewhat paternalistic Tory members. The sort of people who the man, said to be behind Bradford Council's short-lived right wing programme, described as, 'blue rinsed old dears who've finished their term running the Women's Institute so turn to local government' (quoted in Rose, 1988). These different positions were reflected in different attitudes towards public library provision, for instance on such issues as contracting out and the introduction of premium services, as suggested in the government's Green Paper entitled *Financing our public library service: four subjects for debate*.

A recent report suggests that at the local level many Conservative

elected members are rejecting the ideological approach. Reporting on 'conversations with disaffected Tories', Farris (1993) observes:

There is belated but increasing awareness of the ramifications of ditching the traditional One Nation approach as policy statements mature through legislation to direct local impact. There is anger and frustration at loony legislation ranging from the poll tax through VAT on heating to the impending privatization of British Rail.

This dissatisfaction was reflected in the recent local government elections in which the Conservative Party received its lowest ever share of the vote.

The resulting change of political control means that members and officers are having to learn a new culture. In a record number of councils no one party has an overall majority. In these 'hung' or 'balanced' councils elected members of different parties have been compelled to work together. Further research needs to be undertaken into the impact of this on library services, but some preliminary studies reveal a variety of approaches. In one authority, for example, there was no one Chair of the library committee; the role being shared by spokespersons for the different parties. Research into the effect of being hung on other services (Temple, 1993) suggests that members from different parties are working together and that opposition groups are having greater influence, and the joint elite rather less. However, the real test of the cross party deals comes during the budget setting process. In recent years this has caused rifts in even the most natural of coalitions, for example between Liberals and Social Democrats who are now meant to be members of one party. The uncertainty of such pacts also means that officers cannot always be sure of the outcomes of debates on policy before such discussion takes place. This is in contrast to the situation where one party has a majority, and debates in

councils and committee can have a ritualistic quality.

Members' local constituency or ward interests can also sometimes influence matters. In the 1970s it was generally thought that attempts by elected members to press ward issues against the wishes of the party group would be largely ineffective. However, more recent evidence suggests that this may no longer be the case. One reason for this may be the increased influence of the Liberal Democrats, many of whom describe themselves as 'community politicians' placing great emphasis on involvement with their local communities. Many elected members feel tension between representing a ward and taking decisions for the general good of the library service. These tensions can become even greater when the member is Chair of the committee responsible for libraries.

Local politics is not confined to the politicians, officers have a part to play too and this can be seen in the final three influences represented in Figure 1: inter-department relationships, intra-department relationships and professional values. Readers will be aware of the rivalries that can exist between local government departments with regard to personnel, budgets, roles and responsibilities. This is perhaps particularly true of library services, which can rightly claim a special knowledge and expertise with regard to the pervasive activities of handling and disseminating information. When developments, such as one stop information points are mooted, steps must be taken to ensure that public librarians obtain their fair share of the action. Similarly, where library services are part of large multi-discipline directorates, which are responsible for a range of services, there is the possibility of administrative divisions and professional rivalries. To some extent this issue was covered by Lomer and Rogers (1983) a decade ago, but with the increased involvement of public libraries in leisure and the proposed changes in the shape of local government, we should perhaps consider once again the best place for the pub-

lic library in the local authority structure. This theme has been dealt with elsewhere (Usherwood, 1993b), so suffice it to say that leisure departments may not always be the most logical place for the use of our professional skills and the promotion of our professional values.

It has, of late, been fashionable to criticize the concept of professionalism, and certainly many writers on local government (see, for example, the Widdicombe Committee, 1986) have questioned the role of professionals and the decisions they take. This attack has come from across the political spectrum and to some extent from within the professions themselves, including librarianship. Amongst the politicians, the New Right would leave everything to market forces while the Urban Left would leave it to the community to decide matters. In addition, there has been an increasing emphasis on management *per se*. Thus, in our own field there has been the appointment of 'Chief Librarians' who do not have professional library qualifications. In addition, the increasing rhetoric about responding to the desires of 'the customer' is in danger of deskilling the professional and also incidentally limiting the role of the elected politicians. All that having been said, research suggests that those elected members serving on library committees have a high regard for the judgement and advice of professional librarians (Usherwood, 1993a).

John Hicks in his humorous and generous review of *Public library politics* (Hicks, 1993) suggested that this might not be the case today and went on to ask if Chief Librarians saw things in the same way as elected members. That specific research remains to be undertaken so far as library services are concerned, but domain theory (Kouses and Mico, 1979) suggests that it would be very surprising if those operating in the policy and management domains had the same perception of events, or indeed the same motivation.

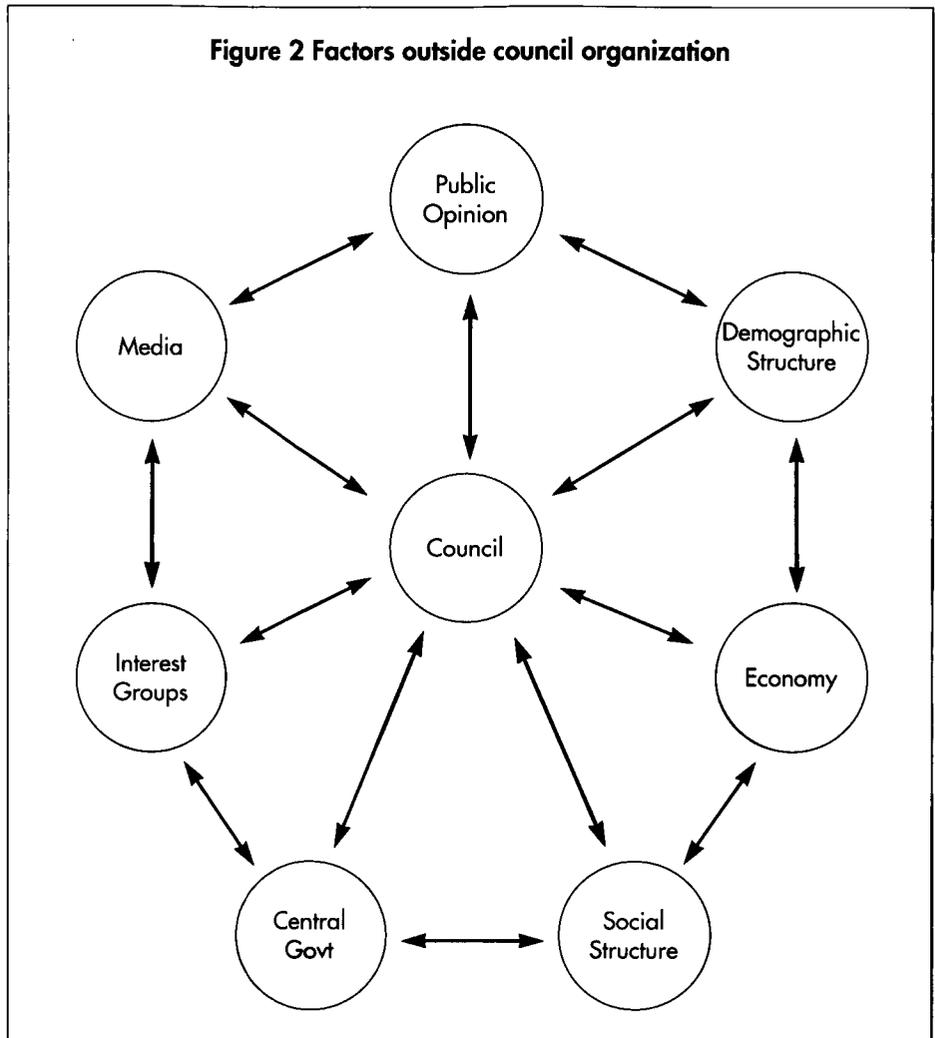
Politicians want to see their policies put into action and expect officers

to understand their purposes. Their frustration at what they may perceive as professional and or bureaucratic stonewalling may be increased by a feeling of their own political mortality. For obvious reasons they want things done quickly. In addition officers may underestimate the politicians' psychological investment in a policy or a project.

Local politics is also influenced by factors outside the council organization. Some of these are represented in Figure 2. In recent years perhaps the biggest change has been in the central/local government relationship. Today even political leaders of Conservative councils criticize the current process of centralization by stealth. Many would argue that Britain is close to having a government that no longer recognizes the legitimacy of political differences between central and local government. The present administration's policies are based on control and direction rather than consultation and negotiation. Enforcement has replaced encouragement. The extremes of this strategy were seen in the abolition of councils, such as the Greater London Council, that did not follow the central government line. There is little doubt that colleagues in Scotland would also argue that the proposed changes to local government there have more to do with delivering a greater number of Conservative councillors than delivering effective local services.

The overall policies of central government have also had an impact on local government in general and library services in particular. Economic policy, educational policy, social policy, or the lack of it have all impacted on the public library service. For example, education policies have meant that some school library services have been forced into wasteful competition. Often the result is that students in those schools that are not commercially viable suffer. Services to special needs children, pupils with learning difficulties and those living in rural areas being but three examples.

Outside of government there are a range of interest groups that seek to



influence library policy. In addition to high profile examples such as the battles over displays by such groups as CND and the Animal Liberation Front there are a range of other organizations who seek to influence library policy. For example, a student of mine unearthed a case where the decision to stock a book had come under a great deal of pressure from a determined and well organized group of parents concerned about a child safety issue. With the increase in public/private partnerships, and the possibility of contracting out services to private companies, the business community is also likely to become increasingly influential.

Public opinion has a part to play too and this in turn is related to media coverage. Dislike of the media appears

to be spread evenly throughout all political parties, although research would tend to suggest that it is councils following equal opportunities policies of various kinds that have been treated the worst. This has sometimes involved the press making up stories about, for instance, the selection or non-selection of children's books by council departments. Readers interested in pursuing these arguments further should search out the BBC film produced by Goldsmith College and a paper by Jolyon Jenkins (1987) ironically titled 'The Green sheep in 'Colonel Gaddafi Drive''. A paper which starts by quoting the *Sun* newspaper's somewhat exaggerated assertion that 'Islington has banned heterosexuals from using all libraries'.

To understand local politics we need not only to consider the dynamics of local authority organizations but also the social and economic context in which they are operating. To quote one writer, 'Running Sheffield in the face of massive de-industrialization is a very different experience to managing the 'high-tech', growth economy of Berkshire' (Stoker, 1988). In some authorities housing or social services will be perceived to be serving greater needs than the library service. It is the role of the librarian to demonstrate how his or her service can contribute to meeting the social and economic needs of the community and improve its quality of life.

The professed political ignorance of some former librarians was quoted at the start of this paper and, while the position is very different today, there are some lessons for library managers in the events of recent years. It is perhaps the dislike of politics that prevented some of our colleagues from responding to the early indications of the kinds of direction an ideological Tory administration might take. As a profession we did not prepare effectively for the onslaught from the so called 'Radical Right'. Yet the warning signs were there even in the halcyon days for local government. For example, in the early seventies Rhodes Boyson, a right wing politician, was complaining that 'the state now decides how half or more of a man's (sic) income shall be spent, how his family should be educated ... [and] what library and ... what cultural provision they should receive' (Boyson, 1971). Just two years later a paper from the Institute for Economic Affairs suggested relating public servant's salaries to their ability to make savings and/or hit budgetary targets (Niskanen, 1973). The present writer was at the best accused of scaremongering and at the worst ignored when, following the 1983 election, with Roy Brown he presented a paper on public libraries and the threat of privatization to a meeting of the Public Libraries Research Group (Usherwood and Brown, 1984).

At the local level all staff, not just the senior managers, need to be aware of, and sensitive to, politics. Politics should be included in staff training programmes so as to provide an opportunity for the open discussion of political questions. Is it too idealistic to suggest that such programmes might involve all levels of staff and elected members? A day spent 'brainstorming' such a group on the future of library services could produce many valuable ideas. Unlike some professional colleagues, the writer believes that many elected members have something to offer the profession. Indeed one can point to many examples where politicians have played significant roles in the development of individual services and local communities. If they are, as is sometimes alleged, ignorant of what libraries can do, perhaps we should ask whose fault is that?

Of course, readers will rightly ask what are the library schools doing to prepare students for the political world of the public library? The answer is 'not enough', indeed they are not doing enough about public libraries. There are reasons for that, as any Head of School will reveal. However, at Sheffield University it has been the practice of recent years to have all public libraries students attend at least one meeting of the Sheffield Libraries and Arts Committee. The Department has also been successful in having local politicians talk to students about the political process. These have included David Blunkett the former Leader of the City Council and now the Shadow Health Minister. In carrying out case studies and similar exercises as part of courses on management or community information, students are also encouraged to consider the political implications of the matter under discussion.

As the above demonstrates, the quality and extent of public library services raises political, economic, financial and managerial issues which in themselves encompass a multiplicity of questions. The one question not yet considered in this contribution, is

whether or not British local government will continue as an accountable and democratic institution. This is to consider more than future structures and possible unitary authorities. In a radio programme broadcast just before his death, the influential Conservative politician Nicholas Ridley looked forward to a time when, 'local councils would meet just once or twice a year to dish out the tenders'. Certainly, if the present government gets its way, local councils are going to look and sound more like commercial organizations. Local government will be replaced by local corporatism. In our own field the possible contracting out of services implies significant changes in the way public libraries will be managed and evaluated. In the new ideology, people who use public services are not voters or citizens but, to quote a recent contributor to a professional conference, 'punters'.

This is, of course, to miss the point. Local government is not a cut price commercial organization and its services and users should not be assessed in the same way. Moreover, while the whole community benefits from services such as libraries, not everyone is an individual 'customer' or 'punter'. Public services have to take account of the concepts of equity and equality and be matched to local needs. Current developments in local education services have demonstrated that always responding to the wants of an individual 'customer' can sometimes disadvantage the community as a whole. The same will happen if library services are run according to market forces. What is to happen to those people who cannot afford to purchase in the market place of ideas?

It may be the case that Britain is destined to spend the next few years without a true local government service. However, with or without a change of government it will soon be seen necessary to reinvent that particular part of the democratic wheel. Indeed, work has already started on developing ways in which local authorities can streamline their decision making procedures whilst still

maintaining effective community representation (Community Leadership and Representation, 1993). When all is said and done it will be seen that we need to have a system that is representative of, and accountable to, the local community.

We need an organization that is big enough to provide the range of services that a modern society requires. We need an organization that provides people with a sense of place and represents a commitment to collective needs and values. We need an organization that will respond to need rather than greed. We need a counterweight to central government in order to limit its political domination. In short, we need local government and local politics, and the politicians, professionals and even the bureaucrats and entrepreneurs it employs. In the words of Professor Stewart 'local politics should be at the heart of library management' (Stewart, 1983). Some Chief Librarians may bemoan the ignorance, bloody-mindedness or other characteristics of local politicians as represented in the cartoon on the cover of *Local Government Chronicle* (1984) but, as the final frame of that suggests, the question remains, 'What other form of democracy do you suggest?'

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NOTE

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