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**Local Government Leadership, the New Public Management,
and Politics in the UK and USA¹**

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Abstract

This paper uses six contrasting case studies of leadership in local government – two involving mayors, three officers in leadership roles, and a discussion of scrutiny leadership in English local government, to raise questions about the nature of political leadership.

The New Public Management, and increasing recognition of the distributed nature of leadership, and therefore the importance of partnerships, has downplayed conventional political leadership and made it more difficult. The paper points to the dangers of raising expectations of leadership that cannot be met, of underestimating the contributions of paid officials, and of assigning too much importance to vision and management of change, at the expense of the challenges of managing large dispersed bureaucracies.

Introduction

Leadership is currently invested with such significance that in many business schools leadership development is replacing management as the focus of training – or more commonly the two are convoluted (as in the title *Management and Leadership Development* - Mabey and Lees 2007; or the discussion in Storey 2004:4). Mostly this relates to the private sector. But there are similar trends in leadership training for executives in the public sector.

This paper focuses on local government, where there is an additional agenda: political leaders elected by the adult population for specified periods of years to represent them and to ensure that local services are provided in their interests. These inherit, or appoint, senior executive officers. So the relationships between elected politicians (Mayors or Leaders) and their executives (Chief Executives, Chief Officers, Council Managers, etc) become critical for successful implementation of any vision.²

¹ I would like to acknowledge the support and practical help I have received from Dr Lesley Prince, without whose knowledge and insights into the nature of leadership and followership this paper could not have been written.

² This bears some comparison to the relationships between the Chief Executive Officer of a PLC and the Chair of the Board – though the CEO of a PLC is almost always also a board member, and the position of non-executive

Local government, in different times and places, provides illustrations of most of the words and situations which have been used to describe leadership and leaders over the years: transactional, transformational, charismatic, contingent, situational, distributed, empowered, even post-transformational (Storey 2004:14). In large local authorities, it involves dealing with (i.e. managing, or leading) some of the largest workforces in the contemporary world, but also with small groups. There are many cultures, not one: for the cultural inheritances of the police, fire, social care, town planning, education management, environmental health, and community development (to take just some of the professions involved) are quite different. It is hardly surprising that local governments are often accused of operating in silos. In addition, for many aspects of local development they deal with external agencies and central government departments in a wide range of “partnerships”.

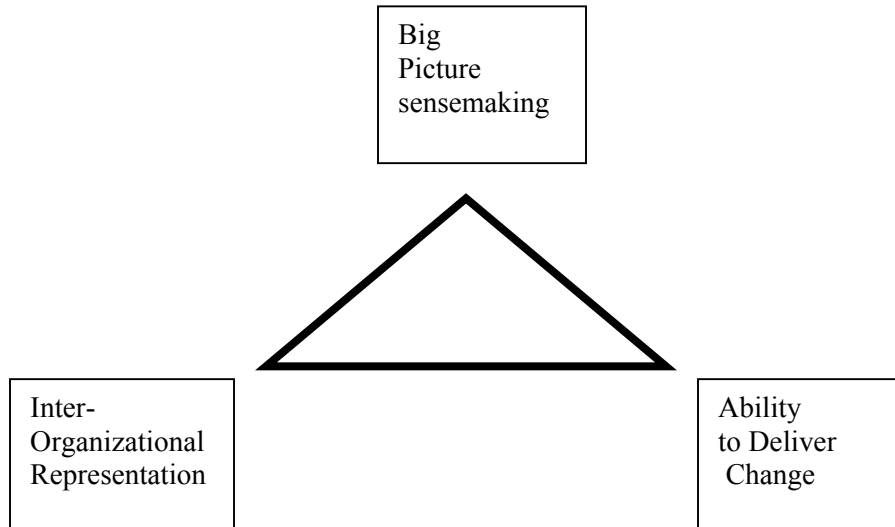
From the late 1970s, fiscal pressures on the public sectors of the main capitalist economies, represented in resistance to increases in tax and labour unrest among public sector workers, became impossible to ignore (O’Connor 1973). From this came the New Public Management: “centrally led efficiency drives ... with ... emphasis on efficiency, introduction of private capital into public services, and the Private Finance Initiative” (Campbell and Coulson 2006:549). It took different forms in different places and times. In the UK in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher it meant compulsory competitive tendering of council services. Twenty years later under Tony Blair, this was refined into the prescriptive, centrally monitored, and bureaucratic regime of *best value*, with associated pressures to transfer services to arms-length organisations, or to the private sector, and for ever larger scales and contracts, which suited the bidding needs of very large international companies. In France, it meant grouping local authorities together into *agglomerations* of various kinds, which commissioned services through increasingly formal contracts (Wollmann, 2006; West 2005). The US approach was more about freeing local authorities from the shackles of oppressive bureaucracy, and giving them the freedom to procure services as they felt best – epitomised by the relatively junior official in Visalia, California, who, in 1984, without any authorisation from his council or any special appropriation, wrote a cheque for \$60,000 for the non-returnable deposit on an Olympic-sized swimming pool (Osborne and Gaebler 1993:2-4).

What does leadership mean in such circumstances? John Storey draws it as three “meta-capabilities” (Figure 1). The first is an ability to “make sense of the big picture” – what Annie Pie, following Smircich and Morgan (1982:259), described as “a shaping of the prevailing definition of reality in which one person, by virtue of his/her institutionalized CE role, is expected or seen to define or embody a definition of reality and indeed will be held to account if s/he is deemed not to be ‘leading effectively’” (Pie 2005:46). The second meta-capability is an ability to bring about change – clearly essential in the contemporary world, which no doubt explains why leadership is so readily conflated with change management when in reality it encompasses much more. The third, inter-organizational representation, is a reflection of the

directors on the board of a PLC is much weaker than that of elected politicians forming the Cabinet or Executive of a local authority.

complex world of partnerships and networks which is a fundamental part of the world we live in (Skelcher, Mathur and Smith 2005).

Figure 1: Meta-capabilities of leaders



Source: Storey 2004:24

This paper uses 5 case studies, four from the UK, one from the US, to see how successful leaders interpreted these metacapabilities. Ahead of that it looks briefly at the way the concept of leadership has been used in recent discussions of local government by UK central government. A sixth, more generic case study looks at the issues raised by leadership of the processes of “overview and scrutiny”, introduced to UK local government in 2000, modelled on UK central government select committees, which themselves draw on the experiences of US congressional committees. The final section of the paper draws conclusions from the case studies about the nature of leadership in local government.

The Term “Leadership” in UK Central Government Discussion of Local Government

The Labour Government elected in Britain in 1997 has produced a succession of policy documents on local government. “Leadership” is used on two ways. First, it is used to “give vision, partnership and quality of life to towns and cities all over Britain”. In 1998 this was a responsibility given to councils as a whole, “using their unique status and authority as directly elected bodies” (DETR 1998a:6), though the same document also stated that

political leadership can be performed most effectively and openly when it is clear who has the power to take the decisions. Both the electorate and any potential partners ... need to be able to identify clearly who is holding the reins. This clarity cannot be delivered by the current committee structure. It requires a separately identifiable executive. These benefits are the greater, the more the representative role

and the executive role are separated. The Government is therefore very attracted to the model of a strong executive directly elected mayor (p.31)

Later the same year, another paper described this as “political management” (DETR 1998b:8), also providing an expression of the role of the chief executive: “he or she will manage [the officer] corps, and ensure that it properly fulfils all its duties to the mayor or leader and all other members of the council in their leadership roles” (p.33), roles spelt out further the next year (DETR 1999:40-1).

But secondly, leadership, or community leadership, is used to refer to “leadership of the locality as a whole”. Councils are required to consult widely, and to produce “community strategies”. The term community is not defined, though it is used to refer to the boundaries of local councils, of any size. Individual ward councillors are expected to be “at the heart of neighbourhood arrangements, stimulating the local voice, listening to it, and representing it at local level. ... Neighbourhood leadership must be a central element of every councillor’s role, which should include being an effective partner in relevant neighbourhood arrangements” (ODPM 2005:18).

This parallel usage of the concept of leadership, on the one hand strong executive leadership, and on the other community or neighbourhood leadership, is apparent in the 2006 White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (DCLG 2006), although this gives greatest emphasis to the delivery of a mainstream set of services. Thus it shows a preference for unitary councils – a single unitary council where at present there are large county councils and below them a number of district councils. A shortlist of possible unitary councils, published in March 2007, includes proposals to turn ten county councils into unitaries, abolishing the district councils in those areas – and sacrificing community representation in return for larger contracts and presumed increases in efficiency. It will mean that many large towns, such as Harrogate, Bridgwater or Crewe, will no longer have their own councils.³

Kevin Orr used discourse theory to demonstrate the limitations and risks of the first conception of leadership:

The core discourse of mayors has been strongly agency-centred. It has revolved around action: the capacity to act, to influence, to provide strong leadership, to mobilise opinion, to insert dynamism into networks, to secure co-operation, to maximise performance, to battle, to confront, to tackle problems, to engage, to be magnificent, and so on. (Orr 2004:338)

Strong leadership is presented in the ‘modernisation’ account as ‘self-evidently’ important, but leadership theory has recognised, for well over 30 years, that understanding the context in which leadership is to be enacted is critical. The policy and academic discourse of mayoralty has consistently made breathtaking assumptions about the scope of ‘agency’ available to these figures. ... Unless space is created for powerful mayors there are limits on how much space mayors can unilaterally create.

³ They may still have town or parish councils, the lowest and often forgotten level of local government in England – but these will only be involved in very minor service delivery unless by the choice of the “principal” council.

Can there be strong local mayors without there being strong local government?
(pp.341-2)

The second conception of leadership is even easier to question. In a system of party politics, when it is difficult to persuade people to stand for local councils, there is very little quality control on the calibre of local councillors, and many will not succeed as local leaders. If leadership is about winning the hearts and minds of followers, and getting them to act in new ways, then many local councillors have little chance of success.

So what is reasonable to expect from leaders in local government? And how can they be effective? The next part of the paper presents summary case studies of local leadership – showing that leadership can come from many sources, not only politicians, and take many forms and styles.

Contrasting Mayors: Middlesbrough and Hartlepool

Middlesbrough and Hartlepool are two neighbouring unitary councils in the North East of England. Both were part of Cleveland County Council, created in 1974 out of parts of Yorkshire and Durham on either side of the river Tees, and abolished in 1996 as an unnecessary extra tier of local government. In 2001, both were among a small group of councils where the people chose, on the basis of local referendums, to be run by directly elected mayors, elected for the first time in 2002.

Middlesbrough, the home of some of the largest steel and chemicals factories in the UK, had been the capital of Cleveland. Its elected mayor, Ray Mallon, a former police officer, nicknamed Robocop for the way he had used blanket policing to drive crime from the streets, campaigned on the basis that he would show no tolerance to crime.⁴ Hartlepool was a fishing port which had fallen on hard times. Its mayor, Stuart Drummond, aged 28, before that a credit controller in a local call centre with a part time job as the mascot of the local football team, and no political involvement, campaigned in the monkey costume of the mascot with the slogan ‘free bananas for schoolchildren’ (later implemented by providing a piece of fruit for all children having school dinners).

Mallon runs Middlesbrough as if it is a branch of the police, with a dictatorial style, feared by leading officials. After standing initially as an Independent, he rapidly developed strong relations to the Labour Party. Drummond, with no previous experience of local government, has drawn heavily on the experience of two able chief executives, and runs a more relaxed regime.⁵ He was re-elected with a huge majority in 2005.

Only 11 (later 12) councils plus London out of 318 councils in England have chosen to have directly elected mayors, with varying degrees of success. These two are among the more successful. Regeneration of both urban centres has continued apace, the councils have scored

⁴ Orr suggests that much of his rhetoric was consciously modelled on that of Mayor Giuliani in New York.

⁵ Interestingly, the first of these was much less successful when he moved to Middlesbrough two years later.

four stars (the highest possible) in the government's league tables of local government performance, they are popular with their people, and unemployment has fallen though it remains amongst the highest in the UK.

It is clear that contrasting leadership styles are possible for successful English Mayors: Mallon is loud, political and on every possible public platform, Drummond quiet, a-political, much more a listener. Copus (2006:122-8) illustrates the contrast in behaviour with the story of the 'ghost ships', redundant US navy vessels which were towed across the Atlantic and anchored in Hartlepool where a local firm had a contract to dismantle them, even though the necessary permissions to do this were not in place. The mayor of Hartlepool opposed their coming, and stressed the risks to the population if they were dismantled in his jurisdiction. The mayor of Middlesbrough spoke on public platforms in favour of the dismantling, no doubt gaining support from central government in the process, even though the dismantling would take place in another mayor's area.

A Charismatic Chief Officer – The Employment Department, Sheffield, England

In May 1989 the blind politician David Blunkett was elected Leader of Sheffield City Council, with a mandate to defend council services and jobs from the cuts implicit in the high interest rates and high value of the pound created by the Conservative government in London (Mrs Thatcher had become Prime Minister two years earlier). One of his first moves was to make two 'political' appointments at the centre of the Council (Alcock and Lee 1981). Those appointed, Geoff Green and Paul Skelton, had backgrounds in the central government funded Community Development Project which pioneered community development in English cities when unemployment first became a serious issue in the 1970s. Blunkett, Green and Skelton decided to create a new department of the city council, the Employment Department, and a new committee, the Employment Committee. The new Department would be headed by John Benington, the former director of research for the Community Development Project, subsequently head of the Coventry Workshop, a research centre and community project funded mainly by the trade unions in Coventry, and one of the main sponsors of social audits and alternative workers' plans to save jobs in manufacturing firms faced by closure (Benington 1986). To do this, they created a job description that Benington could apply for, at a salary substantially lower than any other chief officer in Sheffield (the Coventry Workshop was a co-operative where all the staff, from receptionist to director, were paid equal salaries – which meant that Benington was being paid far less than a senior local government officer).

Benington laid out what such a department could achieve in a 30 page manifesto, eventually published by the council in 1982. It included eight areas of work: a research function closely linked to the trade unions, intended to resource groups of workers in struggles with employers when jobs were threatened, a team working on employment creation from small firms and co-operatives, a group sponsoring the development of new technologies, a team working on new municipal enterprises (i.e. activities within the council), a major projects team, a team running training programmes for young people and unemployed adults, a small group working on women's employment, and a rather unhappy team taken into the new department that promoted

the city. Benington's approach was almost as radical in what it would not do as in what it would: no involvement with inward investment, or the government's enterprise zones (Sheffield turned down the chance to have one), or, in contrast to other left-inclined councils at that time, an enterprise board, or arms-length company, that could take equity shares in local businesses.⁶

Externally, this was highly charismatic leadership. Benington appeared on many platforms, and became well known locally and nationally. Blunkett and Green wrote a Fabian pamphlet extolling the work of the Department – which itself was prolific in its output of published papers⁷. The work was highly controversial as far as the local paper was concerned – and within the council, where it challenged the established professions of town planning and estates management. It was supported by Bill Michie, who chaired the Committee for 1982/3, and then by Helen Jackson who continued to chair until she was elected to parliament in 1992. Blunkett had already been elected to parliament in 1987. Benington left in 1985 – to be succeeded by another political appointee, Dan Sequerra, a trade union official, formerly Chair of the Sheffield Trades Council, and then the diplomatic John Darwin. When faced with the prospect of the imposition of an Urban Development Corporation in 1986, the Department realised that it could not prevent this, so worked successfully to develop partnerships in which its own perspectives and research could be put to use (Lawless 1990).

In 1997 the Department was abruptly closed, with over 100 redundancies. Officers in the planning department and elsewhere proposed this as a cost-saving measure, and the Labour councillors did not prevent the cut taking place. A new Chief Executive of the City Council, Bob Kerslake, commented that had he been in post six months earlier, he would have preserved at least a core of the work. However, nine years after that, in 2006, Helen Jackson, who had just retired from parliament, was able to host a party to celebrate 25 years since the Department was founded, claiming that almost all the policies for which by then Sheffield was being feted by the Labour government were initiatives of the Employment Department: the creation of a cultural and arts quarter, the development of science parks and high technology research and development, means of working with the council's workforces to respond to changing central government initiatives, while retaining the essence of municipal entrepreneurship, and the basis of the land-use plan for the former manufacturing heartland, the Lower Don Valley.

Benington was an entrepreneurial officer – with vision, the charisma to put it across, and at least at the start the support of key politicians. He did not always win the hearts and minds of those who worked for him – and the organisation of the new department was often chaotic (Coulson 1985). His career shows him founding a succession of organisations, and then moving on. It illustrates a type of contingent leadership – appropriate at the start of a new initiative, but needing someone else to consolidate later.

⁶ Benington has subsequently recognised that this was extreme – and that it would have been desirable to attract inward investment, especially in manufacturing.

⁷ There are now two archives including papers from the Employment Department: in Sheffield Archives, and the Progressive Cities and Neighborhood Planning Collection 1969-2005 at Cornell University, the latter compiled by Pierre Clavel.

A Charismatic Chief Officer – Planning in Cleveland, Ohio

For the ten years 1969-1979 Norman Krumholz was planning director for the City of Cleveland. He was appointed by a radical Democrat Mayor, but for most of his time served the two Republican mayors who followed. He left to join the Department of Urban Planning at Cleveland State University, and has been there ever since, keeping a foot in the door of what goes on in City Hall. Eleven years after leaving he collaborated with John Forester to write up his experiences in the book *Making Equity Planning Work: Leadership in the Public Sector*.⁸ Chapters of the book describe key issues in which Krumholz and his team were able to intervene: **The Clark Freeway**: proposals for road building that would have led to the loss of low-income housing, and changed the character of some middle class suburban areas, were successfully delayed, through the development of an alternative plan and mobilisation of every possible source of opposition.

Low and Moderate Income Housing: efforts to get housing for low income residents spread across the city, and to deal with problems of ‘red-lining’ by the banks which made it all but impossible to raise money for housing improvement in the inner city.

Tax Delinquency and Land Banking: dealing with the problem of abandonment of housing in the inner city by getting a change in the law which meant that abandoned properties which could not pay their land taxes passed into the ownership of the City Council.

Regional Transit: critique of proposed expansions of light rapid transit eventually led to subsidised fares on buses and trains for the poor and elderly. And rejection of a proposed elevated ‘Downtown People Mover’ that for many journeys would, it turned out, be slower than existing buses.

The Lakefront Park System: opening up the Lake-shore and developing park-land, from existing parks and the profits realised from the resulting increases in property values. In 1985, six million people visited these parks, and Krumholz comments: “In retrospect, the lakefront park system was one of the most satisfying and rewarding planning efforts in which the city planners had ever been involved. In a sense, these efforts did not involve planning, or organization, or management – they were closer to implementation. It was, in its way, a perfect example of the way real progress is achieved in a urban area – bit by bit, with patience and determination and an openness to opportunity wherever it is found” (op cit: 164-5).

It is clear that land and planning issues in Cleveland would have been resolved differently without Krumholz and his team, who combined intellectual thought and research with a keen instinct for politics, honed in his early years in the city. It provides a demonstration of what a senior official with vision, determination and political savvy can achieve.

Ken Livingstone and the Congestion Charge

Ken Livingstone was elected Mayor of London in 2000. Earlier he was a councillor in the Greater London Council, and its Leader between 1981-6. He hung a very large banner, regularly

⁸ There are also papers from Cleveland in the Progressive Cities and Neighborhood Planning Collection 1969-2005, compiled by Pierre Clavel at Cornell University.

updated, showing the numbers out of work in London on County Hall, just across the River Thames from the House of Commons - allegedly one of the reasons why Mrs Thatcher abolished the Greater London Council in 1986, leaving London without any elected leadership.

In 1987 Livingstone was elected to parliament as a Labour MP, but in 2000, after the incoming Labour government legislated to create a Greater London Assembly to be headed by a directly elected Mayor of London, he resigned from the Labour Party and fought and was elected Mayor as an Independent. It was nearly four years before he was re-admitted to the Labour Party, but by this time he was representing most of what Labour wanted to see in a Mayor: the 3rd or 4th most well known personality in UK politics, speaking his mind, leading from the front, representing London in its successful campaign to host the 2012 Olympic Games. They were prepared to tolerate his excesses: occasional indiscretions, a long and ultimately unsuccessful campaign against the government's proposals to transfer maintenance of the London Underground to two Private Finance consortia, and his dealings with Hugo Chavez of Venezuela to get cheap fuel for London's less well off residents.

Livingstone's biggest success is the congestion charge – now £8 (\$16) for a private car to enter central London in working hours. This has freed up road space, enabled buses to run more efficiently, cycling to become a significant form of travel for commuters, and the centre of London a much more pleasant place. Yet the technology for this was untried, at odds with the long-term development of road-pricing technologies in the UK that had been promoted and funded by the government for many years, and extremely risky. It depends on a network of cameras around the zone covered by congestion charges which read the number plates of vehicles; a computer then checks for each vehicle whether the charge has been paid. Payments can be made through shops, on-line, or by telephone. If the charge has not been received by midnight on the day after the day the cameras record a vehicle, then a £100 bill (discounted to £50 for prompt payment) is sent to its “registered keeper”. The great majority of motorists pay.

The risks are, first, in the IT: it is essential that everyone who has paid is correctly recorded. Secondly in the system used by the cameras, which have to deal with drivers who obscure their registration plates with mud, forge plates, steal plates, lose their plates, or use someone else's plates. It then has to collect the money, and, surprisingly, a victim of its own success, the money collected has been less than forecast, mainly because fewer vehicles are coming into central London. The private company that collects the tolls has at times had trouble with the technology, but not on the scale of most large-scale public sector IT projects in the UK.

No other city in the UK, or indeed the world, has so far copied this system. Instead those who promote road charging either promote collection at tollbooths (feasible on toll motorways, but difficult for cities), or systems in which each vehicle has a device which is activated when it crosses a sensor (more flexible than the London system, because the charge can be varied for time of day, or particular roads, but not an initiative that can be taken by a single city).

The essence of Ken Livingstone's leadership is its brazenness, its preparedness to go where no-one else has trod, even when much of the technical advice is against you, and to use whatever powers and political space are available.

A Different Form of Charisma – Education in Birmingham, England

Tim Brighouse was appointed Director of Education in Birmingham in 1993, responsible for more than 400 schools. The system was in free-fall decline. Exam results were poor. Morale among teachers was low. A number of secondary schools, including the largest in the city, had taken advantage of legislation introduced by the Thatcher government that gave financial advantages to schools that left the local authority system. Others were poised to follow, and the prospects for any form of city-wide education looked bleak.

Brighouse had been Director of Education for Oxfordshire, but had left in frustration at the inability of the hung council that ruled the county to take hard decisions. He took a job as Professor of Education at the University of Keele in Staffordshire, and it was from there that he was persuaded to apply for the job in Birmingham. In the months before he officially started work in Birmingham, he was found dropping in to schools in the late afternoon, on his way back from Keele to his home near Oxford.

In nearly ten years in which he was in charge in Birmingham, education was transformed. The haemorrhage of schools ‘opting out’ ceased. There were unprecedented improvements in exam results. From near the bottom of league tables, the City slowly rose, until it was performing above average for the composition of its intake students. Morale soared: teachers and educationalists wanted to work in Birmingham where before they wanted to leave.

How was this achieved? Firstly, the Director visited schools and talked to heads and teachers – previous directors expected heads to come and see them, and rarely left the oak-panelled splendour of the Council House. Secondly, by creating the slogan “improving on previous best” which enabled schools themselves to work out how to improve – in contrast to externally published league tables which humiliated schools at the bottom of the list, and discouraged parents from sending their children to them. Thirdly, he insisted on, and achieved, a significant increase in funding for education, concentrated on the ‘early years’ – because students who cannot read and write will find it almost impossible to do well in secondary education. Fourthly, by identifying problem schools early, and intervening before difficulties got out of hand, or hit the press. Fifthly, by helping schools to work in groups, so that they could benefit from experiences of others in similar situations, and share talents. And finally by producing check-lists of good practice in leadership, which schools could adopt and develop for their own circumstances. To illustrate this, here are ten “pieces of a jigsaw”:⁹

Piece one: Values, vision and story telling. Each school needs a high degree of ‘shared values’, expressed in a vision statement, and reinforced wherever appropriate – and developed through stories and illustrations.

Piece two: “language maketh the school”. For example use of “we” rather than “you” or “I”, and “learning” instead of “work”.

⁹ *The jigsaw of a successful school*, 2005, www.rm.com/Secondary/InTheNews/Article.asp?cref=MNEWS594924&Printe... Accessed March 2007

Piece three: “creating an environment for learning” – including attention to some of the most unlikely places in a school.

Piece four: “I take my stand on detail” – managing the school well, on the basis of a school handbook which includes all the main policies and practices, who is responsible for each, and is widely available and constantly updated.

Piece five: “Singing from the same song sheet” – consistency in approach

Piece six: Developing all staff

Piece seven: Teaching, Learning and Assessment – the school must be engaged in a process of discovery to understand what really improves practice – with a very wide range of techniques.

Piece eight: using data – to identify individuals who need help – but this means that data must be collected, taken seriously, and used fairly as a management tool.

Piece nine: understanding the processes of complex change

Piece ten: setting an example – teachers and head teachers need to be seen, need to support each other, need to work with their local communities.

This is not complicated, or original. They are actions a good head-teacher can take, which give a positive message even in difficult circumstances. Taken as a whole, however, they provide a severe critique of leadership based on naming and shaming from outside, and of authoritarian top-down leadership within an organisation. Brighouse became a hero-figure for teachers and head-teachers – an example of leadership that inspired others to believe that they could change, and gave them the confidence and support to do so.

The Five Case Studies

The six leaders described above are hardly typical. All are big characters, some almost larger than life, with strong values, and a clarity in what they want to achieve. They all possess communications skills. They are all a little eccentric, in the sense of being prepared to use situations in ways in which those who set them up did not expect. They demonstrate that different kinds of leadership are possible in local government, that it is not confined to politicians, or to chief executives, and that there can at times be great gains from single-minded innovation. There is a need for this kind of leadership, but also for other leadership styles as well. This is demonstrated in our final case study, which is of the development of a new activity in British local government, and the leadership it has engendered.

Scrutiny Leadership

Overview and Scrutiny was made mandatory in the *Local Government Act 2000*. Before then, a few councils had experimented with systems that separated executive and scrutiny roles, but legally all were governed by committees, in which scrutiny came from the questions asked by committee members on the day – and was almost inevitably superficial. In councils with strong party groups, the real decisions were taken in the private meetings of the majority party group before the committee, so that what was seen in public had little meaning.

The new system separated a small group of councillors as the Executive. Most non-Executive councillors were expected to become involved in Overview and Scrutiny. Many found the new

system discouraging and difficult. They felt excluded from decision-making (even if in reality much of their previous involvement had been largely symbolic). They felt that they no longer had an overview of what was happening in their council.

The conditions for successful overview and scrutiny were set out in a government publication (ODPM 2002):

- Member leadership and engagement
- A responsive Executive
- Genuine non-partisan working
- An effective dedicated officer support and management of scrutiny processes
- A supportive senior office culture
- A high level of awareness and understanding of role of Overview and Scrutiny.

It has taken time, but in many councils, especially larger councils, these conditions have been achieved. The two key requirements are, first, to have effective leadership from at least some scrutiny chairs, and second to have effective support from at least one officer who spends all or most of her/his time on scrutiny work. Much depends on the choice of topics for in-depth scrutiny. It is easier to work in association with the Executive, reviewing policy and proposing change where there is general agreement that this is necessary, than it is to work in opposition to the Executive. It is easier to scrutinize outside the council, for example the work of the National Health Service, than to scrutinize inside. It is important to have some “quick wins” which can demonstrate that scrutiny can really make a difference. The councillors need to learn methods of oral questioning that get the best out of witnesses – but also when necessary to be able to be hard and force out the truth.

In the course of teaching, students involved in the scrutiny process have identified the following as skills needed to be a successful scrutiny leader:

- Chairing skills
- Leadership skills [tautological in this context, but interesting nevertheless!]
- Influencing skills
- Diplomatic skills [Les Prince comments that when someone is said to have diplomatic skills it usually an expression of approval!]
- Networking skills
- Questioning skills
- Listening skills
- Project management skills
- Team building skills
- Managing conflict
- Building effective relationships

This list has the well-known problems of trait theory. The skills are clearly based on value judgements, and someone who possessed all of them would be almost super-human. But they do suggest that it is social skills – about relating to people – that matter in this context, and not the hard skills of transformational or charismatic leadership. They are the soft skills of the diplomat who get things done by influence and knowledge. They illustrate a kind of leadership needed in

many situations in the contemporary world, where the leader has to achieve change by winning hearts and minds, reassuring, persuading, deciding the appropriate timing and preparation, and how much can be achieved.

Discussion: Leadership in Local Government

The case studies show that leadership in local government is complex and variegated. Perhaps it becomes clearer why an important Cabinet Office study of leadership in the public sector, while including an excellent literature survey on leadership, did not “aim to contribute to the theory of leadership” or “to define a ‘one size fits all’ template for modern public sector leadership”, although it did argue that “in most cases leaders need more freedom to lead”. (Cabinet Office 2000:7, 31)

It is clearly not confined to elected politicians – Benington, Brighouse and Krumholz were all second tier officers. It is clearly contingent: Krumholz and Benington could have lost their jobs at any time, and both did eventually – while all the politicians are subject to elections. Certain leadership styles are appropriate at one time in one place, but may not be appropriate for another time or another place. Benington was a brilliant creator of ideas and ideology, less a “completer-finisher”; Brighouse was appointed at a time of crisis which allowed him to make certain conditions, in particular that there would be increased budgets for education. What is possible closely relates to cultures, which vary greatly between organisations, but also within large organisations such as a multi-department council.

Leadership in local government is both transactional and transformational. Thus for those responsible for a large bureaucracy, there are inevitably large areas of work where the key is to maintain basic systems and checks, the essence of Weberian bureaucracy or transactional leadership. It is also transformational, and sometimes charismatic (also in a Weberian sense) when new initiatives are needed, or new ways of doing what has always been done. So leadership or management becomes the management of change – and when change is the dominant paradigm, management and leadership easily become conflated.

It is also extremely constrained, in that what is possible may be possible for a brief opening in time, and much of the skill of the leader is in spotting that opening and going through. It is political in that many of the decisions require public support, which often is not apparent initially. Thus decisions have to be presented, and debated, in public arenas. It is certainly more than listening to what the public want (or hiring an opinion polling company to tell you what they want), as UK government rhetoric suggests (e.g. the White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, 2006). Livingstone could never have introduced the congestion charge if he had had to win support for it in a referendum. The politician needs to judge that eventually s/he will be perceived as succeeding, and to take the risk that if this is not so he or she may not be re-

elected.¹⁰ Indeed elected politicians are often the fall-guys – getting the glory when things go well, being cast into outer darkness when they fail.

They also require an understanding of, and relationship to, the technical. In this we do not seem to have moved far from Plato's discussion of the captain of a ship, the owner, and the unruly crew (see Grint 1997:28-9). Plato recognised that the owner could not be the captain, unless he happened to possess the skills of navigation, weather forecasting, and many types of judgement. Nor could the crew be trusted: they might drug the captain, or try and take over his job. Plato could have taken his metaphor farther: the captain will be successful if he can develop a track record, of bringing the ship safely to land and ensuring that the crew are looked after and well paid. (Compare the many discussions about the importance of followers in discussions of leadership, e.g. Prince 1998). But if the captain fails too often, the owner will get restless, and the crew will think that they could do just as well as the captain.

Thus on top of the three meta-capabilities discussed above, there are three angles, or apexes, to leadership in the public sector (as propounded by Baddeley 1998): the political, the professional, and the executive. These may be combined in a variety of ways. Thus when Ken Livingstone introduced the congestion charge, he was taking a stand on a professional basis that an untried technology would work. He was also relating to a range of outside bodies, showing that he could deliver change, and he had a clear story to tell which made sense of what he was doing, even for those who did not like it. When Norman Krumholz tried to negotiate with property developers to create a lake-side park, he was acting as a politician (and initially he failed, because, as a politician, he was naïve, only to succeed much later when developers themselves realised that there was economic – i.e. technical – merit in what he was trying to do). Initially, he had a story to tell, sense to make, but it was not strong enough to prevail against the vested interests of councillors, who traditionally always supported the ward councillor concerned with a particular decision, knowing that when there was a project in their ward, they could count on the support of the others. The Mayor of Hartlepool is more willing to defer to the technical expertise of his senior officials than is the Mayor of Middlesbrough, while maintaining his position as an independent politician. Both, in contrasting ways, make sure that their stories are heard.

Simon Baddeley studied the relationships at the top between successful leaders or committee chairs and their chief executives or chief officers (Baddeley 1998). He showed how the relationships could be extremely intense, depending on trust often built up over long periods of time, while retaining differences of role. Some of his respondents compared their relationship with the other to a marriage. (His study with Andrew Wall even ventures to suggest that at the top of the health service relationships may work well when one of the two – Chair or Chief Executive – is a man and the other a woman, even more like a marriage -Wall and Baddeley 1998).

Research conducted on chief executives in local authorities around the world (e.g. the UDITE studies: Klausen. and Magnier, eds.1998; Dahler-Larsen, ed.2002; Mouritzen and Svava 2002;

¹⁰ A simple example of this is pedestrianisation, often opposed by businesses at the time, but eventually accepted as good for most businesses and bringing about a much improved environment. See Flvbjerg (1998) for a discussion of this in the Danish city of Aalborg.

also Asquith 2002, 2007 and Svava ed.1994) shows that chief executives often have considerable discretion, and can become leaders through their work in partnerships, their technical insights, and their close relationships with politicians who may come and go faster than them. John Stewart, however, in his study of British Local Government in the years before the Local Government Act 2000 found many chief executives taking the lead in their areas, having developed extremely close working relationships with their leading politicians. However, some newly appointed chief executives were finding this difficult and were looking for a leadership role – or, we might say, looking for a story that would make sense of their position (Stewart 2000). In the post-2000 British world of executive Leaders and Mayors, which is being even further strengthened by legislation now before parliament, the external leadership role will be even more contested; some chief executives will be reduced to the transactional role defined by the term “head of paid service” while others take the lead in partnership working with other senior officials with a consequence that their politicians feel marginalised. Chief Executives, like scrutiny leaders, will have to resort to subtlety and diplomacy to get their views heard – but then that is how many chief executives behave anyway, carefully preserving the myth that it is the politicians who make the decisions.

Politicians may think that they can manage the executive role as effectively as many chief executives. But they may easily underestimate what this involves, or overestimate their own abilities. Leadership at the top of large organisations can also be extremely lonely. There is logic behind a more traditional system that separates the political or external role (Mayor, Leader, or for a company Chair of the Board of Directors) from the executive (chief executive, managing director), while both will usually need to look elsewhere for at least some high level technical expertise.

The direct responsibilities of local government are lessening in many parts of the world, as a consequence of the New Public Management, but also a distrust of local government by central governments, exacerbated by low turnouts in local elections (John 2001; Denters and Rose 2005; however Campbell and Coulson [2006] argue that the opposite is the case in Central Europe, where the rights of a municipality to elect its own council and run its own affairs were central to the revolutions of 1989). In a context of contracts and partnerships and dispersal of power between central government, local government and the private and voluntary sectors, a directly elected mayor becomes a symbol of power more than the holder of real power – or a prefect representing central government to local government - and real community leadership almost impossible.

Fashion in management practice in the public sector seems often to run about ten years behind the private. At the time of writing, the UK government is interpreting local government leadership in transformational terms, and looking for charismatic leaders. They may not realise that the private sector, reacting to corporate failures and scandals, has moved on towards *post-transformational leadership*, which emphasises much more soft skills of the type exemplified by Tim Brighouse, or the discussion of scrutiny leadership in our case study.¹¹ There are even

¹¹ A partial exception is the Cabinet Office report (2000) which points out that “parachuting in charismatic super-leaders to solve crisis situations may be necessary in some circumstances, but is not sufficient to deliver a systemic

suggestions, for example in relation to the National Health Service or the Immigration Directorate, that government departments have been so tied up implementing “initiatives” coming down from central government that they have not given sufficient attention to running their mainstream services. So perhaps when Osborne and Gaebler blamed the failures of local government on an excessive devotion to bureaucracy, they were products of their time, and what is needed now is a reinterpretation of Weberian bureaucracy, and a reassessment of the virtues of transactional leadership. Implementation of change is certainly necessary – but not necessarily permanent revolution. There is a strong case, to be made to politicians as well as to administrators, that the skills of leadership most needed in the public services involve winning the trust of very large workforces, and empowering them to use their professional skills for the greater good. The private sector is beginning to reach such conclusions. How long before governments catch up?

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reinvigoration of public sector leadership. Leadership is a complex task – and often depends on organizational or structural change” (p.5).

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